

Public Relations in Public Sector of Bangladesh: Role, Reality and Challenges

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Abstract: *In Bangladesh, Public Relations (PR) is an essential part of public sector offices. Its ultimate goal is to build trustworthy relationship with different stakeholders like general people, organizations, business entities and others, which leads to increase productivity and client's satisfaction. The study attempted to review the roles, reality and challenges of PR in Bangladesh through content analysis and observation methods. It was found that in the country, PR activities are commonly maintained by Public Relations Officer (PRO). Findings indicated that since the government has been trying to play people's friendly pro-active role by reaching with its services to the doorsteps, the PR roles have become more diversified. But reality is that PR role in the country is not dynamic in public sector rather it is still static. Some challenges such as lack of recognized code of conducts and ethics, absentia of PR role in policy level, lack of career path, not recognized as specialized profession and lack of research and training were identified. It is suggested that due attention, career path formulation, proper training, logistics etc. could be ensured in PR profession which are ultimately necessary in the perspectives of 'Digital Bangladesh' and 'Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs).*

Keywords: *Public Relations (PR), Public Relations Officer (PRO), PR Roles and Reality, Challenges.*

Introduction

Public Relations, termed as PR is very essential for any organization both in public and private sector. The US president, Thomas Jefferson (1807) used the phrase 'Public relations' in the place of 'State of thought' while writing his seventh address to the US Congress (Anyijuka, 2016, p. 2). It is considered one of the important components of mass communication. Ideally, PR is the continuous exercise of dealing the flow of information between an organization and the public or other words, its stakeholders. Persuasion of the public, financiers, partners, employees and other stakeholders is the objective of PR to maintain positive notions about the organization, its products and leaderships. It works on internal and external public. Every government, non-government, NGOs and private organization in Bangladesh

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appoints personnel to do its PR functions. The reality is that these personnel have to perform a lot in a troublesome working environment with some challenges. The review article has made an attempt to look into the matter.

Statement of the Problem

Government as an organization is sum total of different offices like ministries, directorates, departments, agencies etc. ranging from central to local. In the 21st century of globalization and Information Communication Technology (ICT), the government machinery has been changing rapidly. In other word, the understanding of government by the people has been shifting due to speedy modification in development activities around the globe. The changes can be termed as ‘paradigm shift’. Democracy, people’s voice and participation, human rights, equality, gender parity etc. are now been voiced all over the world under SDGs. Therefore, government itself has been trying to be closure to the people. The concept of welfare state is alike of it. Realizing the situation, the public sector of Bangladesh also tries to cope with the ‘paradigm shift’ of understanding of people. The government would go to the people but people would not — this is the core vision of the present administration of Bangladesh. As a matter of it, understanding people’s perception or other words, communicating with people is very indispensable for the government offices. PR is one of the major tools in government machinery to communicate with them. Ideally PR builds image and reputation, creates trust, satisfies stakeholders, delivers better services, manages crisis, controls the situation, changes attitudes and perceptions, persuades and after all runs the organization smooth with productivity.

As article-15 of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, some basic needs like food, shelter, clothing, education and medical care would be attained by the government. Ensuring social security of distressed sections of people is also the responsibility of the country (GoB, 2011, p. 5). The core philosophy of the Article leads to the government to be pro-active and pro-people. To attain the basic needs and social security of the people, the government has to provide a number of services. Therefore, informing to people can ensure reliable relationship with the government. PR wings of every public office can perform this role. It is mentioned that the meet-up of communication objectives, reducing the cost of directives, pressure, lawsuit in organization and high satisfaction of job could be ensured if PR is practiced excellently in the actual situation (Castelli, 2007, p. 7). Theoretically it is true, but it is necessary to know the real scenario of the performance of PR in Bangladesh.

Review of Literature

The existing studies on PR focus its definition, functions, organizational implications, PR professional development, PR practices in different development

programs etc. Broom and Smith's (1979) exploratory study identified four roles of PR such as expert prescriber, problem-solving process facilitator, communication process facilitator and communication technician (Broom and Smith: 1979). Dozier and Grunig (2010) in their study complemented on the role of PR and emphasized on importance to link PR function to a wider inquiry of how good PR departments were structured in organizations. But they did not mention in details how PR departments are structured (Dozier and Grunig: 2010 in Anyijuka: 2016). Shaping public opinion is one of the important functions of PR. So for effective favorable public opinion, PR wings must deal with truth since they establish and maintain relationships with internal and external publics. But the thing is that if public opinion is not shaped in favor, dynamic process of PR or any communication and media is questioned and resulting in misunderstanding. In Dozier's (1984) study stated communications manager who servers as PR manager, problem solver, decision-maker and planner, are expected to be knowledgeable, innovators, demonstrate leadership in new approaches to old problems (Dozier: 1984). Broom and Dozier (1986) argued that participation in decision making process is involved in meeting with management about new policies and processes major problems, monitoring and evaluation, new programs etc. (Broom and Dozier: 1986). This would be appropriate in real situation. But in Bangladesh this role of PRO is not like that which could be analyzed in a systematic way. In a study, Prantik highlighted PR process practiced in Bangladesh by focusing on Masthead PR Limited Company (Prantik: no dated). It was argued that PR is complex process in Bangladesh depending upon the journalists and media outlets which is very tough to handle. Media relation through rapport building is the only key to overcome the challenges of PR. Ali and Roy (2012) found negative attitudes which create misunderstanding about the profession of PR in Bangladesh. They also argued that PR has massive importance in our society and it is also a managerial and spokesman position that bridges the gap between the public and the ruling class (Ali and Roy: 2012). Sultana et. al. (2019) disclosed that the performance of PR specially at universities in Bangladesh is largely dependent on infrastructural capabilities, financial allocation, human resource, man expertise and the authority support (Sultana et. al.: 2019). Rahman (2019) stated that PR has opportunity to be an active medium of effective communication with different types of people or stakeholders. PROs have a wide range of role both in the public and private sector in Bangladesh (Rahman: 2019).

The reviews explore the role of PR in the organizations of home and abroad in ideal situation. But it is observed that in Bangladesh perspective of PR role, reality and challenges still are needed to be analyzed more.

Objectives

The objectives were to review critically the functions of PR persons, the reality in PR job and its existing challenges particularly in public sector of Bangladesh.

Methods

The approach of the review study was qualitative in manner. Mainly the secondary sources of data and information had been analyzed with a view to draw the inference. The analyses had been done on the basis of content analysis method. Moreover, indirect observation method was also used to get insight of PR profession in public sector to study. In observation, the researcher observed the PR functions of one public university named Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University, Trishal, Mymensingh, one ministry like Rural Development and Cooperative Division and one government autonomous training and research organization like Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD), Cumilla. This observation also helps develop own ideas to analyze the problem.

Results and Discussion

Public Relations in Public Sector: Search of Roles and Reality

PR in public sector of Bangladesh had inherited from the Pakistan government. The Pakistan government had geared up PR functions under its Ministry of Information and Broadcasting through different tools like radio, print media, press information officers, field publicity and film division. Realizing the importance of PR, the Pakistan government established the Central Information Service (CIS). CIS was formed under the Central Superior Services. CIS got staff from cadre officers those were turned as professional PR person.

It was found that among the public sector organizations, the East Pakistan Water and Power Development Authority established first separate PR wing in 1958 (Mohiuddin, 2016, p. 36). After the independence of Bangladesh, Pakistani CIS officers took charge of the Bangladesh Civil Service (Information) Cadre. Later Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) started to recruit fresh Information Cadre officers. Having professional training, these officials are given the responsibility of PR in the public sector organization including ministry, directorate, department etc. Other organizations in public sector like autonomous body, corporation and semi-government organization appoint PR practitioners under its service rules and regulations.

In early ages after liberation, the various ministries and departments got instructions from the government to takeoff PR programs exploiting the existing media and resources. Keeping in view the socio-economic situations of the country, the different kinds of PR programs are designed. PR wing has communicated to the people with the government plans, programs, activities and policies. At that time, to conduct PR programs, electronic media viz. Bangladesh Television and Radio, traditional and folk media and interpersonal communication like face to face

meeting, discussion etc. were used. Print media was not given emphases because of having insufficiency of access to the media even in urban areas.

But the situations have been changed many folds. The number of print and electronic media has increased rapidly. The penetration in social media and telecommunication is also growing with speedy rates. At present 3,165 print media, 30 private and 4 state-owned television channels, 42 radio stations, including one state-owned Bangladesh Betar, 23 commercial FMs and 18 community radios are functioning in the country (The Independent [online], 20 January 2020). According to BTRC the total number of mobile phone subscribers and internet users have reached respectively 15.75 and 9.14 crore up to January 2019 (GoB, 2020, p. 190). Therefore, the government PR functions have been more dynamic and multi-facet. In every ministry, directorate and offices in public sector PR wings were established. Department of Films and Publications (DFP) and Press Information Department (PID) under the Ministry of Information act as catalysts in favor of the government. Preparing news on daily activities of the government, making documentary on special events etc. are some of its major responsibilities. As a part of public relations, the department prints and publishes special supplementary, posters, booklets, brochures, periodicals, magazines etc. for the wider range of people.

Now-a-days, the government PR contributes to execute of government policy, support to the mass media to give coverage of different government activities, report the public on events of the different agencies, increase and maintain the internal consistency and harmony of the offices, cumulate organization's sensitivity to its stakeholders and mobilize support in favor of the organization itself.

PR Person Having Different Designations

In Bangladesh, the reality is that there is no uniform designation of PR profession. Professionally this is not justifiable. However, PR persons are called in different names and designations. These are as Public Relations Officer (PRO), Information Officer, Media Officer, Media Relations Officer, Communication Officer, Corporate Relations Officer, Public Affairs Officers, External Relations Officer, Public Information Officer, Corporate Communication Officer, Media Advocacy Officer, Liaison Officer etc. (Qader, 2016, p. 45). In some autonomous bodies, Assistant Director (PR) is also existed. Among all these, PRO is common designation in the government offices. In ministry, corporation, autonomous body at least one PRO is appointed who carries out all public communication activities.

Many-fold Duty and Activity

However the designation it is, the work of PR is to properly highlight ministry or organization. The main thing that needs to be done is communication and

networking. It is the responsibility of a PRO to establish communication with different types of people and develop good relations with them. PRO is a journalist, writer, feature writer, some-cases designated officer under Right to Information Act, 2009 and later, he is an information bank, who collects all news, designs and media plans for the offices endlessly. As a source of information, he has to answer queries either telephonic or face to face. To do his job, PR persons' regular activities in the offices comprise of delivering of press releases, preparing write-ups, organizing press conferences and events, doing advertising, formulating speeches and presentation, managing photography, arranging media house visits, documentation of all media exposures to evaluate and monitoring the media coverage as a whole.

Skills Required

PR is the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organization leaders and implementing planned programs of action that serve both the organization's and the public's interest (Dominick, 2010, p. 319). Therefore, he should have to be dedicated and skilled. He should also be full conscious on public sector offices. Apart from this, to manage daily activities like handling executives, attending different meetings, taking notes and preparing minutes, negotiating with media houses and other offices etc. necessary knowledge and skills are mandatory to be required by PR person. As a matter of it, having a clutch of publicity techniques, he has also to be a capable and good communicator.

PRO with Minister

In Bangladesh, the reality of PR persons in public sector is different. He has to work with tremendous pressures with many challenges. In the ministry level, as PRO works directly with minister, so he has to be busy with him. His daily activities mostly depend upon minister rather than the ministry. He prepares press releases mainly covering minister's speeches and visits. He communicates electronic media houses. In many occasions, he has to take care of his protocol as well. He monitors whether press releases are published and video footages gone on air or not. But the reality is that he has to be anxious on amount of media coverage. Even in many occasions, he also has to take care of his personal and political publicity. Because it is commonly practiced that everybody wants to be focused. It is thought that PRO's duty is like that but this is not at all in real sense, it could be one but not ideal. PRO's duty is more than that which is not practiced in the country. So, PRO with minister is hard, a bit far away from its ideal job specification.

'Fire Brigade' Role but 'No Excuse'

PRO is considered as a 'fire brigade' during negative media coverage on corruption, undue activities, irregularities, forgery etc. of ministry, department or any public

office. In such situation, PRO is called for to immediately communicate with media houses and make speeches and counter arguments, negotiate and in some cases do lobby in favor of the authority. But the challenge is that if the media report is truth and significant, then how PRO does for the authority. In this condition, the reality of the country is that the authorities never want to understand the real situation. PRO falls in a fix position. To save first his reputation then job, he tried to overcome the situation by any means including personal contact, humble submission, using political power and other unorthodox ways if necessary. If PRO fails to handle successfully, insincerity and misconduct in job is established and in some cases started to take action under the departmental service rules.

Meet-up Personal Demand for Publicity

It is true that many bosses of the office want to gain personal interest by building image. PRO is ordered or in some cases requested to do publicity or lobby towards the particular person. If the higher authority demands, generally PRO has no alternative in this regard. To minimize the pressure, he has to influence his familiar journalists or media personnel with personal contact for publicity and even in this situation there is possibility to exchange undue facility which is considered as give and take.

Limited Logistics but High Expectation

Lack of necessary logistics of a PRO is very much common in our country. Everybody wants publicity and media coverage on regular basis but doesn't want to engage resources. Rather it is said to work with limited resources. He needs computer, laptop, tab, android cell phone, vehicle, internet, camera etc. But some offices can't realize this. It happens due to having gap in understanding on role of modern public relations by the authority. It is a specialized job which is not recognized in the country. As a matter of it, some irrelevant staff in office always advise to PRO for media coverage which make obstacle to work independently.

Continuous Demand for Electronic and Social Media Coverage

In the boom of electronic and social media in the country, pressure to both the media coverage has been increasing tremendously. But only speeches or daily activities are not enough to make news for the electronic media. Under this situation, PRO has to perform his roles. Not only this, social media management is another area to be performed by PR person. Everyday activities of authority and office are being uploaded and made quick responses and monitored the effectiveness. He prepares trans-media storytelling for various social media platforms. He has to evaluate how much likes, shares, comments etc. placed in the social media platform. In this way his performance runs 24 hours in a day.

Publication Catalyst

In an office, PRO generally involves actively in publication section. Sometimes he performs as a catalyst to publish documents, reports, posters, brochures, leaflets, flyers etc. Therefore, he has to be more careful to prepare printing material correctly within stipulated time.

‘Thankless Job’

Having all the responsibilities of public communication and publicity, at the end PR profession in Bangladesh is considered as ‘thankless job’. Rather if any mistake committed, sharp criticism is passed, even show-cause, departmental proceedings are faced sometimes. Always credit goes to the authority. Of course there are some exceptions but this is reality how PR profession is labeled in the country as a whole.

Busy Vs. Goal

In his office, PRO passes very busy time in whole day under tremendous pressure. As most of the PR office is under control of administration, additional administrative responsibilities have to be performed by PRO like ‘jack of all trades master of none’. PR is the management function of establishing and maintaining mutual benefits between an organization and the publics mentioned by Cutlip and Center (Cutlip et. al., 2000, p. 1) and creating trust and shared understanding and benefits, which are considered as ultimate goals, are hampered and therefore, professionalism goes far away.

Faulty Recruitment

In public sector like government, autonomous, corporation, semi-government offices many unskilled PROs are found due to given less priority of merit and professional excellence. Many cases found in public sector especially in recruiting process, in lieu of the specialist graduates from Mass Communication, Journalism and Media Studies, the general graduates from other disciplines are being recruited for the post of PRO. That type of PRO generally struggles to cope with the newer professional field. So, demotivation takes place. It is observed that PRO sells position, seeks personal gains and practices power of the government machinery and bureaucracy for ill motives. These activities are directly confronted to the professional ethics of public relations and ultimately offices suffer in the long run.

Challenges

PR in public sector has been facing some challenges. Many countries in the west, PR has become an esteemed and challenging job. Many non-government, social, charity and private organizations, even celebrities and political parties appointed PR persons in the western countries. But in Bangladesh, as a profession, PR does not get proper dignity and recognition. Therefore, challenges take place as follows:

Lack of Recognized Code of Conducts and Code of Ethics

In many countries in the world, Code of Conducts and Code of Ethics in PR were introduced long ago. In 1961 International Public Relations Association (IPRA) formulated a Code of Conducts for PR professionals and in 1964 also prepared an international Code of Ethics for PR. Many countries adopted these two codes for PR field. Different offices having PR wings follow the codes. But in Bangladesh these professional codes are totally absent. Though this profession is considered mainly as a crisis minimizer during coverage on corruption and illegal activities of the authority, therefore it is not felt strongly to have professional ethics. As a matter of it, PR person sometimes compels to do some undue publicity favoring authority. PR can't perform to achieve its ultimate goals and objectives.

Absentia of PR Role in Policy Level

It is true that PR works closely with top level management in the public sector such as Minister, Chairman, Director General, Managing Director, Chief Executive and Director etc. But he has no role in any stage of policy formulation. It is very essential in policy to reflect its whole communication pattern relating to the public interest. PR person would be the right man in office who can deal it effectively. In America and Europe, PR is considered as an integral part of policy formulation and management process. Opinion of PR is given more priority in decision making or policy formulation. In USA, PR is directly involved in policy formulation of at least 30% organization and policy formulation bodies (Qader, 2016, p. 45). In Bangladesh, it is still strongly neglected. But as per job specification, the entire image building activities of offices, smooth management, stakeholders' satisfaction, negotiating with media and others organization etc. are given upon PR through which policy reaches to all concerns. Apart from this, PR persuades and does public support towards the employers. It also engineers the public support for an activity, cause, movement or institution (Bernays, 1923, p. 65). But it is unfortunate of absentia of PR role in policy formulation in Bangladesh.

Lack of Career Path

Career planning is very important for a professional. Career path shows the way how a junior professional could reach to upper level with different incentives. Many of the public sector offices, the PR post is blocked which means no ladder for upper position. In University and some other autonomous organizations, PR post has scope for promotion with one or two positions only. Particularly in some offices like autonomous body and corporation, due to pyramid structure, it is too much tough to get promotion of a PR person with other same level employees in the organization. Most of PR persons entered into the profession as PRO and got retired with the same status. Apart from this, multi-fold activities are on the shoulder of PRO in an office.

For this, he has to depend on continuous mobile phone and internet. But he has no incentives like mobile or internet megabyte bill. The aforesaid conditions demotivate the young professional and invite frustration, mal-practices etc. Moreover, in recruitment for the post of PRO, subject specialization is frequently neglected rather it is kept open for all discipline graduates which is not good practice for the PR profession at all.

Unrecognized as Specialized Profession

Academically PR is a specialized discipline since it requires communication and media, journalism, English. PR also requires the skills and knowledge on advertising, publicity, press agency, journalism, communication, writing, speaking, negotiation, lobbying, media management, marketing etc. In western countries, PR persons work in a managerial or administrative role over a team of specialists. In USA, PR and publicity has become specialized profession. Even in UK, many countries in Europe and South America, PR and publicity is an important part of advertising (Seitel, 1984, p. 51). But in Bangladesh, PR profession is still unrecognized as a specialized one. Under the strong efforts of Bangladesh Public Relations Association, in 1982 the then Information Secretary Mr. ABM Golam Mostafa issued a D.O. Letter (D.O. No.-210/82 Secy/IF) mentioning PR as ‘Specialized Profession’ and PRO as ‘Specialist’ for the government recognition. But unfortunately that was not notified in gazette (Qader, 2016, p. 46). Moreover, country oldest public university like The University of Dhaka, Rajshahi, Chittagong and Jahangirnagar along with other public universities such as Jagannath, Khulna, Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam, Begum Rokeya, Cumilla, Barishal University and other private universities have been producing graduates and post graduates for this specialized field. Young, meritorious, encouraged, well-equipped graduates are capable enough to lead PR as specialized profession.

Lack of Research and Training

The whole PR profession in Bangladesh has not been evaluated till now. PR research and training is an integral part for being professional. Adequate skills and knowledge with modern technology can be ensured through training. Research can contribute in SWOT analysis and make suggestions through which professional excellences would be developed. A dedicated PR institute or academy is necessary to establish for research and training activities in public sector. National Institute of Mass Communication (NIMC), Press Institute of Bangladesh (PIB) as public organization and Bangladesh Institute of Journalism and Electronic Media (BIJEM) as private organization organize some training courses on PR. This is not enough. But research activities are very poor rather it is better to say ‘almost absent’. This situation hinders the development of PR profession.

Lack of Expected Professional Skills

Two major factors such as inadequate quality training and faulty recruitment push back PR persons in the professional field. A fresh graduate in starting level of his career is unable to know the profession at field standpoint. At that stage training shows the right ways. On the other hand, faulty recruited PR person, having low merit, loves to perform always 'yes boss' culture in office. Coping with this profession becomes very tough for this kind of PR persons. As a result of these, expected professional skills could not be attained in job situation. PR profession is specialized one where good skills in communication, news and feature written, speaking, listening and reading, media management, languages, ICT devices handling etc. are undoubtedly required. But these expected skills are lacking in the profession.

Limited Understanding on Modern PR Profession

In public sector, many offices don't have clear and depth understanding on the modern profession like PR. Many of them could not realize how much effective and useful tool PR it is. Rather traditional mentality and outlook on PR have been prevailing year after year. Therefore, many PROs trapped in various restrictions and people were deprived from the full right and utilization of information. PR is a sophisticated and dignified profession full of result-based output which is not realized by many of public authorities. Generally they love to think that PRO is only related to the press. According to Google, U.S. News and World Report ranked PR as the No. 3 best creative and media job. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects employment for public relations specialists will grow 6% between 2014 and 2024. PR is also becoming more important to marketing efforts, which opens even more opportunities ('Is PR a good career?', 2 January 2018, [online], Available at: <https://www.google.com>). This prospect is not understood still in the country.

Conclusion and Suggestions

In the era of 'Digital Bangladesh' the government is trying to reach to all sections of people with its different services. As a signatory country of 'Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs) by the United Nations, the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh has also been working to fulfill its core principle of 'No one will be left behind'. Efforts have been taken to establish knowledge based society or information society so that informed people could be able to graduate their livelihoods and access to government facilities as well. PR bridges these government efforts with the people. Apart from this, service delivery to all people, uplift of socio-economic conditions, creating of knowledge based society, participation in policy formulation and implementation etc. are closely related to the relations built with the people to the government. Public relations, media or

communication whatever it is, could be considered as an effective tool or mechanism in this regard. In Bangladesh there is huge potentiality of PR in public sector to satisfy the aforesaid issues in favor of the government. It was observed from the study that PR solves the problems, advises to the organizations and negotiates with the people or stakeholders. The study findings further mentioned that in the country, PR person has to be busy and infested with number of actions in whole day even in off-days. Major functions of PRO in the country are preparing press releases on the daily activities of minister, authority or boss, negotiating with private TV channels to coverage, monitoring the quantity of media coverage and informing to the chief, uploading the events either images or videos or news to social media, managing media houses during negative news coverage, involved in publication etc. Having all these, it is found that PR role in the public sector of Bangladesh is not dynamic rather it is monotype and ordinary of day-to-day affairs relating to the press only. It is further observed that unfortunately many PROs have to be pressurized to serve the personal publicity or interest of the chief of the offices. Therefore, the potentiality of PR could not be engaged fully. As a profession, PR also faces some challenges in the public sector. No Code of Ethics, inadequate training and research, lack of career path with low dignity, not getting recognition as a specialized profession etc. are some of the challenges. These could be minimized to get full benefit of PR profession in the following ways:

- Code of Conducts and Code of Ethics of PR should be adopted and executed for professional excellence.
- Full career path mentioning clear promotion, other incentives and logistics could be formulated. In the career path, it should also be clearly fixed up that only relevant subjects graduates such as Mass Communication and Journalism; Journalism and Media Studies; Film and Media Studies; Television and Film Studies; Mass Communication; Journalism; Television, Film and Photography are allowed to apply for the post of PRO. Before doing this, the organogram of whole public sector PR profession should be reviewed and evaluated by professional research firm.
- Adequate quality training facilities could be ensured for the PR professionals.
- Earlier D.O. Letter by the then Information Secretary for recognition of ‘Specialized Profession’ could be re-visited and executed for the dignity of the PR profession.

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