

# Prospects of Public Relations in India: Insights from the Literature

**Sanjaya Kumar Sahoo**

*Research Scholar, Amity School of Communication,  
Amity University Chhattisgarh, Raipur*

**Prof. (Dr.) Suresh Chandra Nayak,**

*Director, Amity School of Communication,  
Amity University Chhattisgarh, Raipur*

*Corresponding authors Email: [sanjaysahoo@outlook.com](mailto:sanjaysahoo@outlook.com)*

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**Abstract:** The modern public relations practice in India was started during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The leaders of the Indian Freedom struggle, colonial government and some corporate organisations adopted various communication methods to reach out to media, the public and other stakeholders. However, it got professional recognition after the independence of India. Post economic liberalisation in the Country, the public relations industry in India witnessed a surge in demand. It is a growing and fast-evolving professional practice in India with several global firms. Though it is an emerging professional area, it is still an under-researched subject. This review paper presents consolidated information about the opportunities for the public relations industry in India while listing some critical issues to be addressed for the industry's growth. The study finds that the Indian public relations sector is fast evolving, and most scholars are optimistic about a bright future of the profession in the country. Talent development, an intra-industry collaboration between industry players, measurement and better relationships with other functions are critical factors that need to be addressed for the industry's growth. The study can be helpful for both the industry and academia to initiate necessary action and contribute to the development of the profession in India.

**Key Words:** Indian Public Relations, Public Relations Practice, Literature Review, Corporate Communication Management, Public Relations Research

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## 1. Introduction

Public Relations is described as the management of communication with its stakeholders. It involves anticipating, analysing, and interpreting the opinion of and engagement with stakeholders. "Public relations is a decision-making management practice tasked with building relationships and interests between organisations and their publics based on the delivery of information through trusted and ethical communication methods," according to (IPRA, 2020).

The practice of Public Relations (PR), in other forms, in India dates back to the Indus Valley civilisation. From Indus Valley Civilisation to the era of Ashoka the Great, one can find evidence of

deliberate communication practice to propagate and promote various messages and precepts (Sriramesh, 2013). Similar practices continued until Moguls (Vil'Anilam, 2014) and even British rulers.

The modern public relations practice in India was started during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. With the presence of all the major global Public Relations consultancies, Public Relations Industry in India touched Rs. 16 billion in FY 19 (PRCAI, 2019). There are also hundreds of public relations service firms of various sizes employing thousands of people. Almost all the leading corporate organisations in the country have a dedicated team of professionals offering public relations and communication services.

While the industry has grown significantly, it remains an under-researched subject in India. J M Kaul, former public relations head of Indian Oxygen, is one of the first authors in Indian Public Relations. Kaul presents a comprehensive description of Indian public relations, including its growth, in his book published in 1988 (Krishnamurthy Sriramesh, 1992). CVN Reddi, another early author on Indian Public Relations, has also described the development of the profession in India since the ages of Ashoka.

Various scholars have studied public relations in India, primarily focused on the practice aspect. In their research, most of them highlighted the challenges and opportunities for the public relations profession in India. However, there is hardly any study that presents consolidated information about the possibilities for the public relations industry in India. This review paper aims to give consolidated knowledge prospects of the public relations profession in India through a review of various existing academic literature on the subject.

After the introduction, the methodology adopted for the study is elaborated. This is followed by the presentation of key findings and discussion. The paper ends with a description of the further scope of research and then the limitations of the study.

## 2. Methodology

The authors used the Literature Review method following clearly defined criteria to identify and analyse available literature to present an informative and unbiased answer to the specific research question (Boland et al., 2017; Dempster, 2011). With a methodological approach, the present work aims to answer the following research question:

- i. How does the existing literature depict the future of the Public Relations profession in India?
- ii. According to the existing literature, what factors can contribute to the growth of the Public Relations profession in India?

### 2.1 Search Process for Literature Identification

Scopus was searched using pre-decided keywords to identify the relevant literature for the study credible academic database. This was further expanded by searching other important databases such as Web of Science, Taylor & Francis and EBSCO Business Source Complete. Searching various databases generated a list of 95 literature considered for further screening. The details of the search term and the number of records generated by multiple databases are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

*Database and Search Queries*

Sl.	Database	Search String	No. of Records Generated	Remark
1	SCOPUS	ALL ( "Public Relations in India" ) OR ALL ( "Indian public relations" ) OR ALL ( "Corporate Communication in India" ) OR ALL ( "Indian Corporate Communication" )	59	Search in All Fields
2	EBSCO BSC	TX "Public Relations in India" OR TX "Indian Public Relations" OR TX "Corporate Communication in India" OR TX "Indian Corporate Communication"	14	limited to Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals
3	Taylor & Francis	[All: "public relations in India"] OR [All: "Indian public relations"] OR [All: "corporate communication in India"] OR [All: "Indian corporate communication"]	18	Search in All Fields
4	Web of Science	ALL=("Public Relations in India" OR "Indian Public Relations" OR "Corporate Communication in India" OR "Indian Corporate Communication")	4	Search in All Fields

A list of 95 records was prepared in the process, out of which 13 were duplicates. In addition, revised versions of two literatures were published, and hence they were excluded, taking the latest publication. Total 82 literature were finally selected for further study.

### *2.2 Screening of Literature for Inclusion / Exclusion in the Study*

In the list of the 95 literature found, 14 were repeated, and three were Book Review articles; hence 16 literature were removed from the list. All other literature in the list were retrieved, except two, for further screening. All the 76 literature, retrieved in the process, were read and screened for inclusion or exclusion in the study based on the literature covering the area of study. After screening, it was found that 20 literature did not cover the research topic adequately, 24 literature had the search term in the reference only, and one literature was not a research paper. Thus a total of 45 records in the list were excluded from the study, and only 31 literature were included for extracting data.

### *2.3 Categorisation of Literature and Data Extraction*

The selected literature were grouped as per their bibliographic information. The authors identified two thematic areas as per the research questions, and accordingly, information/data were extracted and grouped into various themes. After data extraction and categorisation, the researchers synthesised the data according to the themes for presentation.

Out of 31 literature selected for the study, 25 were published as articles in various academic journals, five as book chapters and one as a book. Amongst the identified literature, seven research articles were published in *Public Relations Review*, five in *Journal of Communication Management*, three in the *Journal of Public Relations Review*. *Journal of Creative Communications and Media Asia* published two research articles each. Similarly, the bibliographic analysis also found that most authors were affiliated with institutions/organisations outside India.

Also, the result revealed that all the identified literature had been published during the last three decades. Out of 31, nine literature were published in the previous decade of the twentieth century. A total of 11 literature were published during the first decade of the twenty-first century, and the same number of literature were also published in the second decade.

### 3. Key Findings

The literature suggests that the practice of communication to influence dates back to the Indus Valley civilisation. Several scholars agree that public relations like activities have been found throughout Indian history. During the earlier practices, the communication activities mainly were meant to propagate and promote religious and governance messages (Kaul, 1992; Reddi, 2019; K. Sriramesh, 2013). However, modern public relations practice started during the British Government in the early twentieth century.

During the initial phases, public relations focused on publicity and press agency (Reddi, 1990). It continued for a long time, and after independence, the practitioners made attempts to professionalise the practice. The government of India, after independence, established the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, which became the nodal agency for publicity and public information dissemination. The government established several public sector units. These units set up with taxpayers' money were answerable to the public, which created the need for separate public relations departments. Most of the public sector units had dedicated public relations departments involved in press relations, house journal publication, and communication with external and internal publics. Though few corporate organisations used to have separate public relations wings in their organisations, the Government of India was the key player in the public relations industry during the first three decades after independence (Halff & Gregory, 2014). The dominance of public relations professionals from public sector units also created a distinct style called the Public Sector Style of Public Relations (Bardhan, 2003 and Bardhan & Shriramesh, 2006).

The attempt to professionalise the practice started when the practitioners organised themselves under the umbrella of the Public Relations Society of India (PRSI) in 1958 (Newsom & Carrell, 1994). In 1968 the first all India public relations Conference was organised, and a Code of Ethics for Public Relations was adopted at the conference. Therefore this conference is considered the commencement of professional public relations practice in India (Kaul, 1988, as cited by Reddi, 1990; K. Sriramesh, 2000).

Economic Liberalisation policy started a new phase in the Indian Public Relations Industry, accelerating the profession's growth. Changing market conditions, increasing competition and entry of global companies created a surge in demand for public relations services. This helped the industry to get improved professional status as well as grow.

Gupta (2011) observes that the profession is still in evolving phase and has lesser positioning in Indian organisations than other functions like finance, marketing and corporate strategy. "While optimism

about public relations in India is high, deeper challenges face the industry” (Patwardhan & Bardhan, 2014, p. 410).

The literature suggests that public relations in India has evolved as one of the emerging professional disciplines with increasing demand for the profession. Professional standards in high in several areas, including roles and responsibilities of PR practitioners, strategic planning, the importance of research, measurement and evaluation and gender equality (Gupta, 2007; Koul, 2009). Koul (2009) finds that though the public relations department is yet to develop fully in several government-controlled organisations in India, it is streamlined with the organisation’s vision in some PSUs. The function gets 1 to 3 per cent of the organisation’s annual budget (Koul, 2009). The functioning of Indian public relations is on the transition from the public-sector style to a professional style, keeping pace with the global changes and simultaneously developing locally (Patwardhan & Bardhan, 2014).

Based on their research, various scholars have made multiple recommendations to take public relations in India forward. The recommendations can be summarised as:

*Talent Development:* Considering the crisis for quality manpower in public relations, various scholars have stressed public relations education and training (N. R. Bardhan & Patwardhan, 2014; Gupta, 2011; Newsom & Carrell, 1994; Reddi, 2004). Quoting one respondent, Newsom & Carrell (1994) suggests that public relations need to be integrated with master-level business education programmes. This will enable the management to know the potential of PR function. Gupta (2011) suggests that PR professionals need to understand the industry and the economy in which the organisation/client operate. For this, the professionals need to have or be skilled in general management expertise to understand and support the organisation’s strategy. In addition, PR leaders should “continue to provide strong mentorship internally to the next generation of leaders” (Patwardhan, 2015, p. 272).

*Collaboration across Industry:* As discussed, professional public relations in India are much weaker than their western counterparts (Reddi, 2004). Scholars have recommended stronger professional organisations and more collective effort (N. R. Bardhan & Patwardhan, 2014; Patwardhan, 2015; Reddi, 2004). While Reddi (2004) calls for a more robust professional body in Public Relations Society of India (PRSI) to drive the public relations profession in India, N. Bardhan & Sri Ramesh (2006) argue for better coordination among the existing professional associations like PRSI and Public Relations Consultants Association of India (PRCAI). “The future challenge remains in strengthening and better coordinating the profession’s infrastructure and resolving the differences between the different ideological approaches to practising public relations” (N. Bardhan & Sriramesh, 2006, p. 44)

Practitioners and leaders from various public relations subcultures in India should find ways to dialogue and jointly build a more cohesive professional industry structure. This would provide future focus and serve as a platform for systematic training and professional development for practitioners, including leaders. It would also lead to better information sharing across industry and provide a united front for diverse forms of public relations practice within India. (N. R. Bardhan & Patwardhan, 2014, p. 168).

Also, for balancing the theory and professional practise of public relations, the industry and academia should work in collaboration. The industry also needs to facilitate students’ internship and shadowing opportunities (N. R. Bardhan & Patwardhan, 2014). The scholars also suggest more guest lectures by the PR leaders and professionals at academic institutions. Public relations leaders also need to work

together and “create networking and relationship building opportunities at an industry level” (N. R. Bardhan & Patwardhan, 2014, p. 168).

*Better Relationship with other functions:* Public Relations should have a cordial relationship and work in close coordination with other departments like marketing, human resources, finance. (Gupta, 2011; Reddi, 2004). PR needs to help other departments facilitate communication between other departments and their respective public. At the same time, PR also needs support from other departments to discharge its responsibilities effectively. Reddi (2004) suggests integrated public relations communications which combine the organisation’s departmental communications efforts to reach their respective publics on the one hand and building a public relations culture both within and beyond the company on the other. As a support function, public relations can assist other departments by updating changes in the external environment and help them to respond effectively (Gupta, 2011). The scholar has argued for a service-oriented approach by PR while dealing with other organisation functions.

*Measurement of PR Effectiveness:* Emphasizing research on public relations, Reddi (2004) suggests that measurement and evaluation of the effectiveness of PR programmes can contribute to improving the credibility of the profession. Public relations / corporate communication must identify metrics aligned to business performance (Gupta, 2011, p. 127). Data on how activities affect corporate performance and strategic success, rather than operational efficiency, can assist in securing a place in the strategy table (Gupta, 2011).

In addition to the recommendations discussed above, the other actions proposed by the scholars for enhancing professionalism PR are Building build corporate reputation and brand, instead of managing it licensing the profession (Gupta, 2011) and focusing on people living beyond cities and towns (Singh, 2000). Furthermore, corporate communication / public relations “must communicate the meaning of the corporate brand and interpret it for the stakeholders to ensure that consistent image is formed and thus impact reputation across geographies and stakeholders” (Gupta, 2011, p. 126). This will improve the function's reputation and facilitate a more strategic role for the PR professionals in the organisation.

Singh (2000), in her study, argues for a robust rural and grassroots PR to reach out to the larger public living in villages. “Aspects of strategic PR programs must be restructured and adapted to meet the needs of villagers and the rural population. Message design, language, culture, and channels of communication should be researched to effectively communicate with target publics in these areas” (Singh, 2000, p. 308).

#### **4. Discussion & Conclusion**

Public relations in India has evolved as one of the emerging professional disciplines with increasing demand. Several scholars have expressed strong optimism for a brighter future of public relations as a profession in India. The scholars have also made various recommendations for strengthening the profession in India.

Developing skilled talent and leaders in public relations is key to taking the industry forward. The literature has suggested more facilities for education and training in Public relations and mentoring by existing leaders.

Collaboration between the industry players such as professional organisations, industry professionals and academics is sought to take Indian public relations forwards. Scholars have argued for synergy

between existing professional bodies such as PRSI and PRCAI. Also, more industry-academia partnerships in educating and training aspiring PR professionals are needed.

Besides, the literature also recommends public relations to work in close collaboration with other functions in an organisation for its growth and efficiency. PR departments need to support other functions with a service-oriented approach (Gupta, 2011). The scholars also recommend developing a system for measurement of PR effectiveness to improve accountability and credibility of the profession.

This paper presents a comprehensive overview of prospects of public relations practice in India, based on an analysis of existing literature. It also identifies the key factors contributing to the profession's growth in India. This can be helpful for both the industry and academia to initiate necessary action and take the profession forward.

### 5. Scope for Further Research

The present study also identifies gaps for further research on the Indian Public Relations Profession. The following gaps may be of interest to the academicians for further research:

- a) Opportunities for Regional Public Relations Profession.
- b) Factors affecting public relations education
- c) Challenges and opportunities for smaller public relations firms and individual practitioners

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## Prospects of Public Relations in India: Insights from the Literature

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