

Nov 04, 2016 by *Madhurjya Kotoky*

Communicating the Idea of India ^[1]

There has been a flurry of activity on the public diplomacy front in India recently. With bigger economic clout in the international stage, India now feels the need to be seen, heard and engaged. From international conferences to social media campaigns, the Public Diplomacy Division of the Government of India is in overdrive to shape a desired perception of India across the world.

In this context it is worth noting that Professor Philip Seib, from the University of Southern California, observed at the international conference “Public Diplomacy in the Information Age” organized by India’s Public Diplomacy Division in December 2010, that India lacked “a consistent profile that it could present to the world.” This was highlighted earlier by India’s former Minister of State for External Affairs, Mr Shashi Tharoor in his speech -“Why Foreign Policy Matters - An Indian Perspective,” – who talked about the need for developing a coherent public diplomacy strategy by India. Incidentally, the Government of India’s Public Diplomacy Division of the Ministry of External Affairs, set up in 2006, has the following mandate:

- Projecting power in its sphere of influence & across the world with the immediate aim to secure a permanent seat in UN security council
- Build a more "nuanced understanding of the government's stance on tricky issues"
- Maintain the current "perception momentum" of a rising power
- Build a favorable opinion of India as a "rising power"

India has consistently projected itself as a land of rich culture, history, art, “Bollywood,” and a must visit tourist destination. It’s debatable as to how much influence it has garnered for India internationally. On the other hand, international media never loses an opportunity to portray India’s widespread poverty, corruption, and stories of underdevelopment. With the recent economic growth, such stories tend to become all the more attractive because of the element of conflict it represents. Interestingly, Joseph Nye had once stated that India adopted a foreign policy that made it more attractive in the eyes of others, but have not been able to leverage its soft power resources like the U.S., or Europe. Historically, India sought the moral high ground in international relations through non-aligned movement, the Panchasheel principles, Bandung Conference, membership of the Commonwealth and generated considerable goodwill towards itself, projecting the image of a pacifist nation. However, as a resurgent India becomes more conscious of its image & influence, it is important for the country to ask itself what it stands for, define its basic attributes, and assert the values it represents at various international forums.

To overcome mixed perceptions, India can and should move towards communicating values and build a consistent profile. What does India stand for? What do India’s culture, people,

polity and economy represent? More importantly, what is the idea of India?

From my point of view as a communications consultant view, it is worth noting that a country which has managed to do it very well is the United States. The United States projects itself as the land of freedom, choice, and opportunity. All of which are values that connect across class, geographies, and ideologies. Its political and business rhetoric including elements of culture consistently resonate with these values. It establishes what communicators call the 'emotional connect' – so very important in generating influence. As India works towards a coherent public diplomacy strategy, MEA's policy wonks would do well to think of the larger theme that India represents on which to project India's image, idea and influence.

With the media and information revolution in the 21st century, communications and conversations will play a bigger role in international relations and the battle for "mindshare" will decide many issues. A thematic value based strategy will give structure and direction to the Indian government in integrating all elements of promotion, perception, projection and building influence.
