

Nov 04, 2016 by *Madhurjya Kotoky*

U.S. engagement in India becomes meaningful and mature ^[1]

Last week, the American Center in New Delhi organized an interactive session for a young group of professionals and students from India with Ms. Heather Smith, President of the American non-profit, *Rock the Vote*. This was a unique opportunity for the participants to interact via digital video conferencing with Ms. Smith to learn about RTV's "Democracy program" that uses music, popular culture, new technologies and grassroots mobilization to motivate young people to participate in election, with the goal of seizing the power of the youth vote for political and social change.

The Indian cities of Kolkata and New Delhi were connected via digital video conferencing to Washington, DC and what followed was a stimulating discussion with lots of questions for Ms. Smith from the young Indian audience on how the non-profit works to how such initiatives can be replicated in India, which has one of the youngest demographics in the world. In fact, the 90 minute session was not enough for the highly participative and interactive audience and many questions went unanswered for the paucity of time. This was also an effective demonstration of how new technology, and the simplest versions of it that too, can be effectively leveraged for meaningful results, meaningful dialogue and creating conversations.

Over the past few years it is really interesting to see how the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi has stepped up its efforts to reach out to diverse groups in India with a host of initiatives. The American Center itself has been at the forefront with lot of activities, and a recent one that I thought was interesting, was a discussion with Allan Lichtman of *The Keys to the White House*. From discussions, cultural activities to the formation of a Youth Advisory Council (YAC) in India there have been a flurry of activity which wasn't seen in India until recently. Another element of this recent outreach has been a strong focus by the U.S. to strengthen ties with the India that exists beyond the metropolitan cities of New Delhi or Mumbai, with universities in different Indian states, in underdeveloped regions like India's Northeast (Guwahati currently has an 'American Corner') through culture, information and exchange. In fact in a recent Fulbright seminar I attended it was clearly stated that the Fulbright Commission actively looks for applications from scholars and students in India's Tier II, Tier III cities and remote regions. Another novel experiment was Ambassador Nancy Powell's video introduction to Indian audiences. There seems to be a clear focus to broaden engagement with India and build generational ties with a country that is so similar to the U.S. in being a multiethnic and diverse society with a strong political and institutional commitment to freedom and democracy.

If we look at the broader picture, all these initiatives and a host of others seems to be at the core of what the media loves to call the "Asia pivot" of U.S. foreign policy – stemming from the belief that the future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States has to be right at the center of the action. If one is in Asia, India can no longer be ignored and an increased allocation of diplomatic and military resources to the region

becomes critical. The key points, I believe, are:

- A demonstration of the fact that intelligently planned communication outreach and public diplomacy programs can complement or even drive policy
 - An approach of creating a “network of influencers/evangelists” doesn’t necessarily have to be resource intensive rather is more about exploring common interests and leveraging technology
 - A flexible attitude amongst diplomatic corps can go a long way in creating opportunities of engagement and participation
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