

Nov 04, 2016 by *Madhurjya Kotoky*

Rhetoric of Power ^[1]

According to a recently released report, India is among the top-10 most powerful countries in the world. This is a first-of-its-kind study of "national power" by leading strategic experts and scholars from the Foundation for National Security Research (FSNR) in New Delhi. The study placed India at the eighth position among a group of the 27 most powerful countries in the world.

The report measures "national power" by indices like energy security, population, technological and military capability, soft power, etc. Per the report, the United States is the most powerful nation followed by China. Interestingly, this report comes at a time when India is trying to deal with a severe battering of its national image following the gang rape in New Delhi in December and other instances of sexual assault that occurred subsequently, including that of a 5-year old girl a few days ago. The report also comes at a time when corruption of mega-proportions are being reported, which now allegedly include the armed forces too, as reported in the incident of the scam-tainted purchase of Augusta Westland attack helicopters from Italy. The laundry list of such 'negative perception shapers' are many and I wonder what does 'power' mean to India and I question the disturbing rhetoric of power that exists in India's public discourse. It poses a unique challenge to public diplomacy practitioners not only in what to communicate, but also how and who to engage. More importantly, as a student of public diplomacy, I often wonder if PD is worth it at all.

HOW THE WORLD SEES US

Let's not play the Ostrich.

Shortly after the Delhi gang rape, a Chinese foreign student was allegedly raped in Delhi sometime in February. China tagged Delhi as the rape capital of the world and issued a travel advisory to its citizens in India that, among other things, asked its citizens to avoid going out of their houses alone.

Italy's former premier Silvio Berlusconi defended paying commissions to Indian officials to secure the AugustaWestland deal with the following statement, "Bribes are a phenomenon that exists and it's useless to deny the existence of these necessary situations... These are not crimes. We're talking about paying a commission to someone in that country. **Why? Because those are the rules in that country.**"

Damaging indeed! Just a few months before, Transparency International ranked India 94th in Corruption Perception Index.

Not many years ago, in 2010, the Global Burden of Disease Study stated that India had 620,000 premature deaths because of outdoor air pollution. Just last week, the World Bank stated that India alone accounts for 33% of the world's poor.

Can a country with one-third of the world's poor be powerful? Aspire to be powerful? The list

of abysmal perception shapers about India abounds, and there are many more which a simple Google search will show. Unfortunately, the political rhetoric in the country still seems to focus on a rising India, an India that is destined for greatness. As a citizen of the country I will stand more reassured in knowing that we have the capacity, systems, resources and people to deal with our problems – power is rooted here.

A DEEPER MALAISE

A keen observer of cultures and societies will notice that developed economies – and hence powerful within one or more parameters – are relatively classless with considerable avenues of mobility.

While it's much better now, In India, dynasties still rule politics, professions, business and even art, including popular forms like Bollywood. Our ruling party is dominated by a dynasty, entrenched all the more by the elevation of Rahul Gandhi to the party's top post recently. Most of our big businesses are family-owned.

India's information technology industry is overwhelmingly service-focused rather than innovation-focused, hampered primarily by rates of piracy that the Business Software Alliance (BSA) estimates at 64%.

The transition from a feudal to a modern society is far from complete in India and to imagine such a society as one of the most powerful countries in the world is not a very pleasing thought. In such a skewed internal power dynamic, instability is inherent—a reality that does not bode well for the world.

WHITHER PUBLIC DIPLOMACY?

Why do states undertake public diplomacy? To promote national image, build influence, and participate in the competing marketplace of ideas. Now if we consider the situations above, PD for India is indeed a mammoth task.

What can the nation communicate that is not a cliché?

Who would want to engage with us?

What can we showcase that is not negated by a contradictory counter narrative?

I don't think I have answers but I believe we need to balance marketing approaches and communication approaches—nation branding and meaningful engagement.

While a great campaign with a catchy slogan and great tradeshow or activations does have its merits, considering India's problems, it would be trying too hard.

To counter perceptions created by policy deficiencies or aspects of developmental history, Indian public diplomacy needs to be rooted in an intellectual tradition and rigor that has always been India's forte. This is the shift from being a marketer who 'promotes' to a communicator who 'articulates'.

Joseph Stiglitz, in his blog for The New York Times – "Equal Opportunity, Our National Myth"- states, "Americans are coming to realize that their cherished narrative of social and economic

mobility is a myth. Grand deceptions of this magnitude are hard to maintain for long — and the country has already been through a couple of decades of self-deception. Without substantial policy changes, our self-image, and the image we project to the world, will diminish — and so will our economic standing and stability.” If we supplant the word American with Indian, situations are very similar in both countries - of political rhetoric contributing to a false sense of reality.

INDIA’S HOPE (?)

In the immediate aftermath of the gang rape in New Delhi, I got a message on my Blackberry Messenger asking to join a group of protesters at New Delhi’s India Gate. I went to find hundreds of angry protesters, led by an overwhelmingly young group – college students, professionals – with the audacity to climb the walls of the Presidential Palace demanding to meet the President. I had never seen anything like that before. At the risk of being called an anarchist, I felt there was hope in their actions. The young and free were in action, a group with value systems starkly different from the entrenched political and power elite were shaking up the older structure.

The report I mentioned above had India’s demographic dividend as one of the indices of power; however, the fine print doesn’t mention that it can quickly become a liability if inequality and disparity is not reversed in a highly unequal society. We will become a great power, like we were for the major part of human history, provided rhetoric does not intoxicate us.
