

## Regional Public Relations: A New Frontier of Growth in India's Public Relations Landscape

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### Abstract

*India - a land of vast cultural & linguistic diversity, where 'word of mouth' plays a crucial role in building brands. Public Relations have strongly emerged as an indispensable function for protecting and enhancing reputation. With 70% population of the nation living within the rural or semi-urban geographies, and nearly 34% of the same, annually migrating to urban cities in search of a better livelihood and employment, the role of regional Public Relations becomes more intrinsic to "Integrated Communications and Marketing strategies" for brands.*

*The research paper attempts to understand the following:*

- a) Evolution of consumer consumption and engagement through the lens of regional Public Relations in India.*
- b) Introduction of the concept of G-LO-RI: Global – Local-Regional.*
- c) Challenges faced by professionals/ agencies.*

*The research aims to emphasize the need and importance of regional Public Relations. With the help of in-depth interviews and secondary data, the research will deduce the opportunities and scope to grow in this unorganized and untapped regional territories pan India.*

*The research paper has considered variables - demographic factors, purchasing power, access and dissemination of information and news, effects of social channels and influencers, regional content consumption patterns, and urbanization. The qualitative study of these factors aims to share an outlook and future of regional Public Relations in India.*

*As per existing information available at the time of drafting this research paper, there was no such material or reporting evidence in the context of the role and relevance of regional Public Relations in India. This research paper aims to highlight the current ecosystem, gaps, and key findings and showcase the importance, growth, and challenges of regional Public Relations in India.*

*Interpretations/Implications: This study found that the Regional Public Relations industry has grown multi-folds in the past two decades. There have been many contributing factors instrumental towards this growth size, scale, and reach.*

*This study included a mix of national public relations agency professionals and regional Public Relations agency owners/founders. They shared their journey and explained the concept, growth and evolution, agency revenue model, team size, opportunities, and challenges on the whole.*

*The level of growth is varied region-wise, while Western, Northern, and Southern regions are hot spots of growth of regional Public Relations business, Eastern and North-East region remain a potential growth market.*

*It was also observed that the affiliate model or the associate model of business is prevalent in the industry. The upcoming trends and practices were also discussed with the participants. The agencies have relied heavily on traditional media for a long time, but there is a gradual shift towards creating more digital content, which is data-driven.*

*In due course of the study, it was evident that industry spending differed from one region to another. FMCG, followed by Automobile and Telecom, were the front runners in spends on regional Public Relations, Government and Education sectors have also caught up. The variation is observed due to the general demand and supply rule and socio-cultural factors, including language, customs, lifestyles & values, playing a crucial role.*

*The researcher also came across some looming challenges that the industry currently faces, and recommendations have also been shared at the end of this paper.*

**Keywords:** Public Relations, India, Regional Public Relations Agency, Global, Growth Market.

## **1. Introduction**

*“Today brands are born, not made. A new brand must be capable of generating favorable publicity in the media, or it will not have a chance in the marketplace.”- “Al Ries (1998)”.* Public Relations includes crafting communication narratives and implementing activities that help brands stand out and includes anticipating, analyzing, and interpreting public opinion of a brand and/or organization and its engagement with its stakeholders [1].

As an unorganized industry, Regional Public Relations in India has grown rapidly over the last two decades; however, not much information is available or shared about its current operational model, mechanism, evolution, and future opportunities [2]. Brands continue to explore new horizons to untapped market potential and engage national-level Public Relations agencies; however, smaller cities and market places are more dynamic, and their socio-cultural nuances have their own unique identity. Local stringers and agencies hence play a crucial role in bridging this gap [3].

Through this paper, we try to showcase factors that have accelerated the growth and expansion of regional Public Relations agencies, along with scope & challenges, and highlight a few aspects to raise understanding and insights for the overall Public Relations industry in India [4].

## **2. Purpose**

The purpose of the paper is as follows:

- To highlight the evolution, importance, scope, challenges of regional Public Relations agencies.
- If any, to observe upcoming trends in the domain of the Regional "Public Relations" industry.
- To understand the operational structure of regional Public Relations agencies; Key sectors that continue to engage and invest in regional markets and regions in India that are most responsive to such effort/s [5].

### **3. Evolution of Public Relations in India**

Public Relations has emerged as an extremely critical function for national and local brands who are constantly looking at reach, engagement, and growth in India – a land of billion people and complex socio-economic structures [6].

1990's liberalization policies gave the Public Relations profession its formal leeway into the country. As the economy opened, it was natural for multinational brands to tap the potential of India as a market. Delhi and Mumbai emerged as the operational centers and Chennai, and Calcutta offered a pan India footprint [7].

With the emergence of the IT revolution in the early 2000s, the Public Relations industry accelerated its growth pan India. The rapid telecom and internet access, coupled with consumer-centric policies, burgeoning aspiring middle class, and media growth – in print and television, and rise of newer digital platforms for content dissemination and consumption, also led to a surge in growth of the Public Relations industry [8].

The Public Relations industry in these three decades has experienced a steady growth curve. Currently, it stands at a value of INR 1,600 crores (USD 2.7 billion) and is growing at the CAGR of 12.5% (PRCAI report, 2019) and is expected to reach INR 1,800 crores by 2020. Out of more than 1,100 Public Relations consultancies, 45 are registered with PRCAI, and the top four firms contribute more than INR 85 crores (each) of revenue per annum, respectively [9].

### **4. Organizational Structure of Regional Public Relations Firm**

The organizational structure (Figure 1) & hierarchy (Figure 2) of an independent Public Relations agency at the national level is as follows.

Figure 1 - Organizational Structured

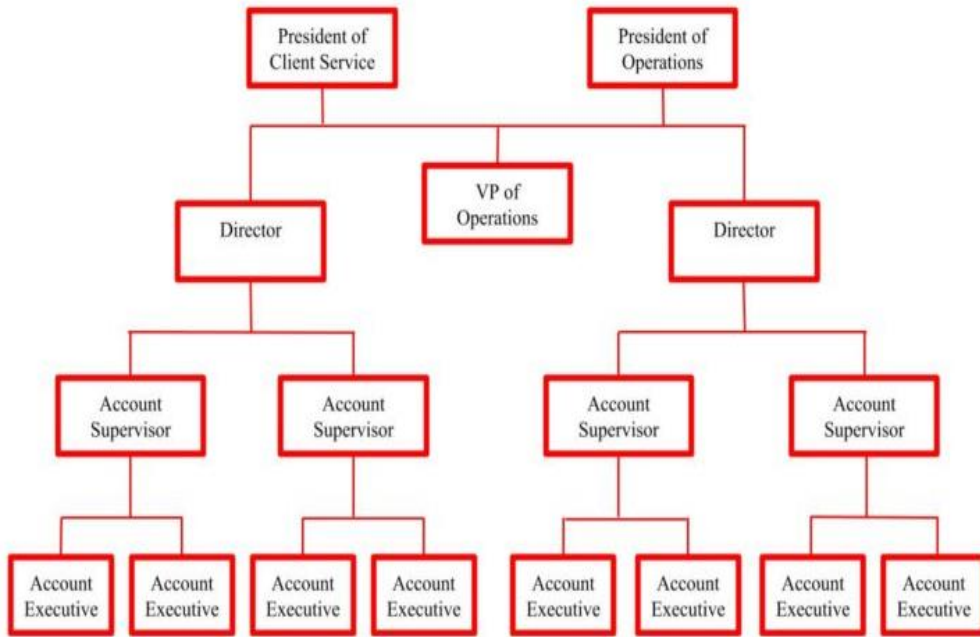
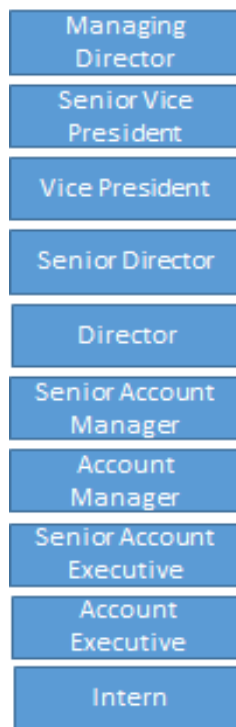


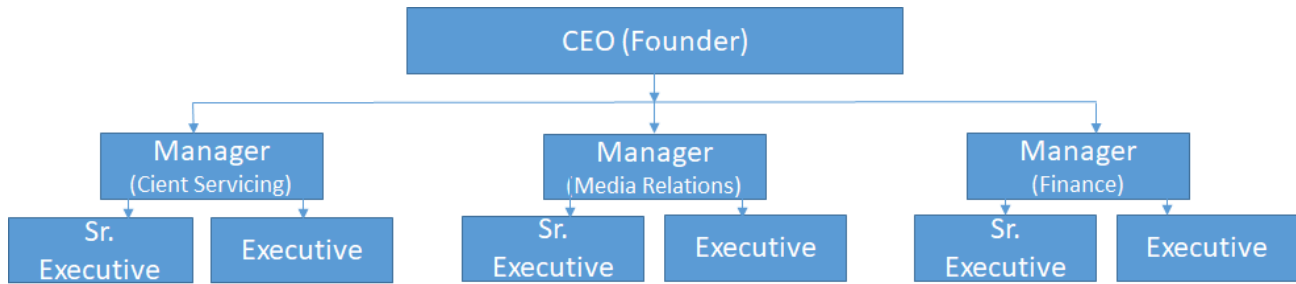
Figure 2 - Hierarchy



The operations are typically divided into various domains or practices based on the clients' business and their requirements. For example, Corporate, Government and Consumer, etc [10].

In the case of a Regional Public Relations, the structure is often flat and fluid. The Regional agencies are often small in size with fewer team members (Figure 3).

Figure 3 - Team Members



#### 4.1. Regional the New National

A recent analysis done by the PRCAL, 2019 report explains of the top 25 firms that earned a total revenue of INR 1000 (US\$ 146 million), around 12% was from public relation activities at the regional level with the help of affiliates and stringers [11]. The next 25 firms contribute around INR 18-20 crores (US\$ 2.7 million) to the regional public relations industry, thereby making the total regional Public Relation revenue for the year 2019 INR 150-180 crores (US\$ 24 million), i.e., around 15% of overall Public Relations business in India [12].

56% of the nation's income comes from rural regions, where the majority (58%) depends on agrarian activities. A total of almost 64% of the total national expenditure is done in rural areas. At present, there are almost 47,000 permanent *haats* and 7,165 *mandis* in the country registering sales of INR 50,000 crores (US\$ 6,680 million) annually [13].

Although 64% of business revenue (IBEF 2017) still come from the metros, there is no doubt that the emergence of Tier 3-4-5 cities and business thereof have pushed Public Relations agencies and professionals to be more inclusive to tap masses across the country. The average CAGR for rural areas (6.2% as per IBEF 2019) is more than urban areas (4% as per IBEF 2019), and 65% of brands are now targeting their marketing strategies towards these less explored and high growth [14].

#### 4.2. GLORI: Intrinsic Element of Global and Local Brand

Global brands are now aware that without deeper understanding, insights, and on-ground support of regional stakeholders, they cannot expect further growth in the Indian landscape [15]. All global brands have been incorporating the best of local insights & know-how, and global characteristics in their products & services and their business operations at large. Respective Communications function and strategies have also evolved to cater to the dynamic business priorities and challenges [16].

In this research paper, we introduce a *G L O R I*: Global- Local - Regional, where global brands are striving to reach the local consumers while focusing on their region-specific needs and those of their stakeholders. [17].

Regional Public relations professionals are like the last mile connectors that help brands realize the persisting sentiment as they use the credibility of local influencers in different regions to tap the potential [18]. They assess the needs, analyze public opinion, and formulate the right set of communication strategies to address the current context and be prepared for future challenges [19].

#### **4.2.1. The Scope/Need of Regional PR is as Follows**

##### 1) Regionally and culturally appropriate communications:

There are about 210 million monetizable internet users in India consuming vernacular content. Brands collaborate with local actors and influencers to persuade the regional audiences, as Colgate Vedshakti partnered with Alekhya Harika, a Telugu actress, to communicate with its regional consumers [20].

##### 2) Highlight regional Issues:

While brands are alluring the locals to ensure higher sales, they also try to understand the challenges consumers are facing [21]. ITC and HUL, under their community outreach program like Domex Toilet academy, Project Ankur, Project Shakti, and e-Choupals, have received great recognition and support from the regional public [22].

##### 3) Policy/Advocacy needs:

In its pursuit to engage with the community, brands must bring the attention of the policymakers and think tanks towards issues at the grass-root level [23]. A national agency can help strategize - using widely available information/details related to a region. Still, the implementation is only possible under local supervision and expert, someone who has a much better network and understands how to approach, connect and engage with relevant stakeholders. Futerra (2018) showed that 80% of the consumers look forward to seeing brands taking initiatives [24].

##### 4) Efficient Crisis Management:

It is often observed that the small incident/s at the local level may take the form of a bigger crisis for brands. In 2006, beverage giants PepsiCo and Coca-Cola had to bear the wrath of the local

campaigners when local Members of Parliament tried to prove that their drinks consisted of a high amount of pesticides. Such events could be avoided with a much-focused regional strategy by curtailing the news spread from the very start [25].

5) Assist the national and international agencies:

Often the global brands assign their Public Relations mandates to national-level agencies. Out of these, only a few have their regional offices across the country. Most of them rely on regional agencies or stringers for their operations in any specific location. These regional agencies help in implementation and assist the national agencies in understanding the local nuances of the region [26].

#### **4.2.2. Regional Public Relations: Opportunities**

1) Penetration of traditional media

As per the MHRD report 2018, 64.7% of the rural population is literate. At present, 100,000 copies are sold in the country daily, and the readership of regional readership of 245 million, the largest being Anand Patrika with a circulation of 11 18,440 (RNI Report 2019) [27]. Non-metros readers contribute 64% of the total print media revenue. As per the FICCI EY report 2019, the Hindi newspaper accounted for 37% of the total ad volumes, 25% from English publications, and the remaining 62% from regional language publications [28].

2) Rising vernacular content in traditional and new age (digital) media

The 2019 Ernst & Young report shared that total regional viewership is 33% of total TV viewership, with Tamil channels occupying the largest chunk in the regional pie, 25.7%, followed by Telugu 24.4%. The vernacular videos on platforms like YouTube and TikTok are also on the rise. Google estimated that digital media would grow at 26%, with vernacular users poised to grow at 18%.

3) Deeper rural pockets

The per capita income in rural regions has seen tremendous growth; the average household income in 26 smaller cities (non-metros) will cross INR 400 billion by 2020. With increased income, these untapped territories become more attractive and offer the brands lucrative opportunities to establish themselves. As per IBEF, rural FMCG markets account for 40% of total demand. The rural

market segment has experienced a healthy growth pace of 8-10% per annum and is expected to reach US \$100 billion by 2025 [29].

#### 4) Technological advancements and digitization

“Digital in India, (IAMAI, 2019)”, shared that there were more than two hundred and 30 million active internet users in rural and semi-rural parts, which is 10% more than 200 million in urban India. The internet penetration is at 500 and 74 million, with a hike of 24% in 2019. ICUBE, a report by Kantar, shows that 264 million active users in rural India with a growth rate of 45% [30].

#### 5) Efficient Crisis Management at the local level

Often, big crisis issues arise at a local level, resulting in a scar on the brands' reputation if not handled efficiently and promptly. A regional Public Relations expert with local understanding, insights, and network and on-ground local experience with civic bodies can help brands with speed and efficacy in times of crisis [31].

## 5. Literature Review

### 5.1. Definition & Evolution

PR means building trust in the minds of the stakeholders by enhancing reputation to establish a favorable opinion. It is the strategic management of communication by conducting research, defining problems/needs of the public & meticulously communicating solutions to address the same. A “public” is “any group that has an actual or potential interest in or impact on a company's ability to achieve its objectives.” [32]

PR as a persuasion business & a finer version of propaganda was described by Edward Bernays. After combining 472 definitions, Rex Harlow called it "a distinctive function of developing communications by bringing change in the way the business is being done." The most cited definition considered for this paper was expounded by James Grunig “*management of communication between an organization and its publics*. J. Grunig & Todd Hunt gave four models of communication “Press Agency Model, Public Information Model, Two-way asymmetrical Model & Two-way symmetrical Model.” [33]

"In a two-way model, emphasis shifts from disseminating information to persuading and creating understanding, with changing attitudes, awareness, and behavior.”



“PR is informing, persuading & adjusting to engage public support for any activity, cause, movement or institution.” The dissemination of information is done to establish credibility. This credibility is earned against the other marketing tactics like advertising, which has to be paid for, thereby making it a cost-effective function [34].

The literature establishes that storytelling is a powerful tool to inform, persuade, evoke emotional reactions, and form provision for associations and initiatives. In building mutually beneficial relationships between the organization & its core audience, effective storytelling adds value by enabling brands to communicate in a relatable manner [35].

Literature indicates PR is a social function. Cutlip, Centre & Broom note that the audience form opinions about the organization according to their self-interest, which suggests that if the self-interest of the targeted audience is not served well, efforts of persuasion will go in vain.

Literature suggests PR should comprehend the demands of the key stakeholders. For this purpose, rudimentary research must be conducted to test, clarify, and acknowledge the public's environmental factors. After that, the implementation and activation of strategies are done to reap the maximum benefits by establishing a favorable opinion utilizing the earned media sources and third-party influencers (word of mouth) [36].

## **5.2. India and PR**

### **The Era of Publicity**

PR as a profession is relative; however, the concept is not new in India.

The review suggests that the origin of Indian Public Relations extends deep into Hindu Mythology. It can be witnessed in the fables like Ramayana & Mahabharata, inscribed by great saints. These scriptures are intended to establish a positive image of the protagonist in the readers' minds & propagate the Dharma [37]. Through his creative tactics, Sage Narada disseminated rulers and gods "with the motive of establishing 'Lok Kalyan' - the universal peace and prosperity." The literature establishes that communication strategies and the stunts used in the epic narrations of these moral lores are none different from those used under Public Relations [38].

### **5.3. Ancient Era: State of Propaganda**

During 1500 BC-1858 AD, the state of propaganda model was prominent. The kings and the religious leaders practiced propaganda techniques, disciples, and subjects. The most famous evidence

present in physical form is the Ashoka Stambhs, inscribed with edicts for the spread of Buddhism [39].

Literature shows that the famous Bhakti and Sufi movement during the 14th and 16th centuries featured saints who spread the religion, were considered the master communicators & took up local dialects for easy propagation. It is fascinating to observe how in the eras, when the medium of disseminating the information was almost zilch word of mouth or influential Public relations helped the cultural heritage remain intact. The versions may have altered over the period, but the ultimate message remains the same, and the learning's stand viable even in the present day.

#### **5.4. Modern India: "Two-Way Asymmetrical Model" to "Two-Way Symmetrical."**

As India moved into the modern era & experienced oppression under the English rulers, glimpses of the Press Agency model could be observed. The rulers made efforts to convince the subjects that they worked for their welfare to continue with their RAJ. They adopted communication approaches to achieve this objective & gave India its first newspaper, Bengal Gazette, or Hicky's Gazette (1780). Soon more newspapers originated and instilled the feeling of breaking through the shackles of prolonged slavery in their readers. The print played a crucial role in the triumph of the Civil Disobedience movement & alike; consequently, under the leadership of the master communicator Mahatma Gandhi, India achieved Independence.

TATA made significant contributions to the upliftment of the general public and set up India's first Public Relations office in 1943. Many PSUs like HMT, BHEL, BHILAI, and NTPC & Indian Oil also made remarkable contributions in this field.

In 1958 Public Relations Society of India (PRSI, New Delhi) was set up to promote Public Relations as an essential element of management. Later, PRSI in 1989 established the "Foundation for Public Research and Education" to help the professionals by providing useful insights [40].

#### **5.5. Present State of the Industry**

At present, the industry is worth INR. 1600 crores, with more than 1100 consultancies operating in the country with a YoY growth rate of 12% (*PRCAI-SOI-2019\_20.pdf*). As per the State of Industry Survey 2019, the revenue of non-media Public Relations services stood at 53%, with three service lines (media relations, public affairs, and digital) contributing 73% to the total revenue.

“Among sectors, fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), Information Technology (IT), travel, and government (both central and state) have contributed 44% to the revenues.”

## **5.6. Go Regional**

The literature suggests that the brands concentrated their Public Relations efforts in the urban Indian pockets. These Tiers 1-2 markets, due to extreme competition, became cluttered and not yielding profitable results. In contrast, the regional pockets are offering a vast pool of potential opportunities. With almost 70% (627 million) of the population residing in these locations, these markets account for

almost 50% of our national income. These untapped markets are now becoming a preferred spot for the organization. Thus, there is an intrinsic demand for regional PR that has been felt. As per literature, a regional market is any geographical location with a population not exceeding 25-lakh people, and there is homogeneity in terms of culture and language. It comprises smaller clusters of rural markets with a population of 2,500-30,000. "NSSO (Census 2011) defined "rural market as a Market with a population density less than 400 sq km., 75% of the male working population is engaged in agriculture and no Municipal Corporation/board".

Regional Public Relations are different from the standard urban Public relations. There is a huge diversity in terms of region-specific public needs, especially in India, where every four-mile the water changes and every two miles the dialect. There are 28 states, 65,000 villages, 179 languages, and 544 dialects. Around 96.71% of the national population use one of the Scheduled languages as their mother tongue [41].

## **5.7. Need and Significance**

As per the IBEF reports, these local markets are growing at a very rapid rate of 8-10% and are expected to contribute \$100 billion in consumption by 2025. The need for adequate PR measures to be implemented has become almost binding. These markets account for almost 40% of the total FMCG produced in India. NCAER report shows that for 30,000 supermarkets in the USA, there are 50,000 haats (local bazaars), out of which 40,000 are permanent. The literature expounds that these markets are not the only abode to the majority Indian population but also witness a considerable rise in brand recognition due to many other elements like enhanced literacy levels, access to media and information, increased income standards, and aspirational youth.

The literacy level as per the NSSO 2015 survey is 71% in rural India. Due to this increased level, mass media consumption has also increased drastically. “Profiling the changing media consumption patterns in the small town of Chanderi in Madhya Pradesh in November 2013, the daily e-paper Mint writes that in contrast to how evenings were spent by its inhabitants in the town square, chatting a decade ago, residents now spend their evenings watching television or surfing the internet.” National Sample Survey's data suggests that rural spending on non-food products, services, mobile phones, television sets, and monthly mobile and cable TV bills has increased by more than 50% of the expenditure.

The literature shows that the demand for vernacular content has increased manifold as far as content consumption is concerned. The rural areas account for almost 45% of the total active users in the country. “Although most of regional India’s workforce remains primarily involved in agriculture, a cumulative process of diversification through increasing importance of non-farm activities has been taking place in recent decades.” The Government has been successfully running schemes to generate sustainable earnings and increase demand generation. The rural areas have greater CAGR than the urban towns, which is another indicator to estimate the growing size of regional markets [42].

The per capita income in these rural regions has seen tremendous growth; the average household income in 26 smaller cities will cross 400 billion by 2020. The availability of disposable income has given rise to the consumption levels of this population. As per IBEF rural FMCG markets account for 40% of total demand. According to *MART*, in 2018, rural sales accounted for 46% of all soft drinks, 49% of the total motorcycles, and 59% of all the cigarettes sold in the country. This trend is not limited to just utilitarian products. “Soft drink giant Coca-Cola is growing at 40% in rural markets, compared with 24% in an urban area.”

The psychographic factors are impacting the demand for the branded commodities. “In 2030, 40% of the population will be under 25, compared to just 26% in developed nations. This fact will have a profound influence on consumption patterns”.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>[https://www.hindustantimes.com/business/rural-india-buys-brands/story\\_o7FuHG904V2vKOaGW2iAzO.html](https://www.hindustantimes.com/business/rural-india-buys-brands/story_o7FuHG904V2vKOaGW2iAzO.html)

The review observes the available evidence that with the increase in the income and easy availability of information, the regional public's aspiration has grown tremendously. The regional PR assists the organizations in understanding the needs of these regional consumers and crafting the strategies accordingly [43].

Managing the environment protests, legal complexities, meeting the local needs, and running advocacy programs are some of the complex functions that need to be taken care of by any regional PR agency.

While the regional PR encompasses the diverse cultural & linguistic barriers, the availability of a qualified talent pool is a huge challenge. Another widespread issue with the global organizations is that they cannot gauge the fact that in a country like India, "one size does not fit all." It becomes extremely challenging for the Regional PR agencies to address this issue.

In the absence of literature on the concept of regional PR, we will resort to the interviews and provide in-depth insights on the industry.

## **6. Methodology**

### **6.1. Qualitative Research Approach**

"Qualitative methods are especially useful in discovering the meaning that people give to events that they experience." The Grounded theory or constant comparative method has been used to analyze the statistics and determine the conclusion. The methods included for this study included open-ended one-on-one interviews, organized and synchronized data gathering, and data analysis techniques.

### **6.2. Research Design**

#### **Sample**

The selection of participants was done based on experience, understanding, insights related to the industry and specific to regional Public Relations in India. The final respondents were selected basis their representation of a certain state/region, type of work, size of business, and most importantly, their voluntary willingness to participate.

- Owners/Founders of Regional Public Relations agencies (19)
- National level Public Relations agency professionals (4)
- Academicians of Mass Communications (2)

## **7. Data Collection Methods**

The primary source of data for this study was telephonic and e-mail interviews. All interviews were conducted using a mobile phone. Secondary sources were limited materials available on the web about the understanding of regional public relations in India.

### **7.1. Procedure**

- a) Participants have advised the purpose of the study, research procedure, expected benefits, and protection of confidentiality.
- b) The researcher identified herself as a communications student specializing in Public Relations at Symbiosis International University.
- c) Handwritten and typed notes were jotted down during each interview, which enabled the researcher to track key points to be used during data analysis. All highlights were eventually shared with each participant to confirm in writing on either a mail or text.
- d) The interview time ranged from 30 minutes to 2 hours.

### **7.2. Limitations**

- The respondents were not comfortable quoting their revenues, and thus, the study cannot quote numbers to compare the growth.
- The one-to-one interviews were done through the telephone; therefore, the study of body language was not possible.

## **8. Result**

The primary objective of this paper is to understand the role of Regional Public Relations or brands in India and the factors that have contributed towards the growth, existing scope, challenges, and trends.

Participants' know-hows and responses added valuable insights to the questions posed in this research paper. After a thorough analysis of the valuable information and experiences gained during the conversations with the participants, it helped the researcher conclude this research paper.

## 8.1. Research Questions

- 1) The present position of the Regional PR industry -its growth, operational model, opportunities, and future scope and trends.
- 2) What are the challenges hampering the growth of regional Public Relations?
- 3) Region-wise growth of the industry and sectors investing in regional Public Relations?

## Analysis

During the analysis of the responses, five well-defined themes emerged.

Themes 1, 2 and 3 answered the First research question.

Theme 4 was used to answer the second research question.

Theme 5 answered the Third question.

## 8.2. Theme 1: Growth, Operational Model, and Scope

- 84% of respondents shared that the growth has been exponential and revenues have increased year-on-year; the growth rate has been more than 100% in the past two decades.
- 75% of respondents shared that the best growth witnessed by the industry was during the year 2008 and the period 2015-2019. In 2008, when the financial crisis hit the global economy, more brands wanted to build a reputation and reinforce their stakeholder relations. In 2016-19, the brands' expenditure was more than in the past.
- 95% of respondents shared their optimism about the growth prospects of the industry in coming years. Contradictory to this, 20% of the participants were worried about the grave challenges the industry is facing, due to which the scope appears bleak.
- 76% said the regional agencies get the 70-90% of work as an affiliate to national agencies and the rest as stand-alone.
- It was also explained that the majority of the smaller local, regional level agencies get the mandate of a client owing to good relationships either with the brands or the national agencies with whom they have worked and delivered in the past, which is also indicative that they usually do not pitch for any brand's regional Public Relations mandate.
- 80% agreed on the promising future of the industry.

- 24% shared, only 25% of the total untapped regional territory has been explored so far, and hence there are a lot of scopes [44].
- The reasons quoted include more and more brands are waking up to the demand for regional content, and awareness is growing amongst the locals. In the opinion of one of the participants, *“Regional public relations have become a practice in itself.”*

### **8.3. Theme 2: Growth Factors**

- 100% of the respondents said that brands are experiencing saturation in the urban markets. 50% of the respondents believe that due to higher literacy rate, availability of disposable income, brand awareness, vernacular content demand, and easy access to information/news.
- 16% also shared media relations remain the forte of regional Public Relations agencies for its deliverables.
- 32% also shared that Government and Civic bodies have increased their spending on this front.
- 12% said that investments from start-up firms and local brands are also picking up.
- As per 24% of the respondents, the regional content and translation requirements have become higher than ever before. 12% of the respondents also shared that crisis-related public relations have also become a need of the hour.

### **8.4. Theme 3: Upcoming Trends**

- 76% of respondents shared that there has been a shift towards digital solutions sought by the clients. Although traditional media coverage in regional newspapers remains the main task, the brands are mandating coverage in local languages across digital platforms.
- Bloggers and local influencers are coming up.
- 48% of respondents are now offering more integrated solutions to their clients, where traditional media coverage is done, but creative and content delivery is provided with a regional flair. 20% agreed on the personalized solutions gaining traction.
- 16% of respondents agreed that Crisis Management had become a major requirement by both Government and brands.



## 8.5. Theme 4: Challenges

- 60% of the respondents shared that there is a lack of trained professionals in the regional agencies.
- 16% believed that undercutting the fees offered by new entrants and stringers impacts the standard of the work.
- 28% of the respondents stated a lack of awareness about the regional Public Relations agencies and their scope of work.
- 36% said there are huge budgetary constraints imposed by brands and national agencies in regional Public Relations.
- 24% shared the media houses are asking for paid coverage instead of providing them with earned coverage. This practice is killing the whole concept of earned media.
- 52% believe an urgent need to organize the Public Relations sector. Under-reporting growth is one of the biggest concerns expressed by respondents.
- 24% of the participants feel that national agencies are imposing a huge threat to regional agencies by expanding their functions by opening more regional offices.
- 10% of the respondents expressed that one major challenge is the lack of innovative techniques used by the Regional Public Relations agencies.

## 8.6. Theme 5: Regions and Industry

There is a major regional disparity related to the growth of the regional industry.

Western, Northern, and Southern regions in India have proved to be the most fertile grounds for the industry, and the Eastern region is yet to attain its peak. The situation is extremely difficult in the North-Eastern region, owing to the prevalent political unrest.

75% of the respondents shared that the North and West regions are getting extremely competitive, but the southern part remains dominated by a handful of agencies.

85% of clientele who invest in regional Public Relations are from the FMCG sector, followed by Automobile, Telecom, IT, Healthcare, and Government. The education sector, healthcare, sports, and entertainment are few other significant investors, based on the participants' responses. NGOs and digital platforms have also been investing in the regional public relations industry.

West and South regions considered the hospitality industry as the biggest revenue generators.

Beverage (alcoholic) and Luxury brands have been spending more on regional Public Relations in the North.

## **9. Conclusion**

The paper explains how regional Public Relations has proved to be a gateway to India's overall Public Relations industry to grow beyond the cluttered and chaotic tier 1-2 markets. With brands shifting their focus towards the regional markets and their stakeholders, the industry's exponential growth is being experienced.

This paper is the first-ever study attempted on this topic and has provided readers with insights, trends, and analysis about the practice, opportunities, and challenges of regional Public Relations in India. The knowledge gained from the domain experts has helped showcase the industry evolutions and factors responsible for the same.

The paper has been able to throw light on elements of disparity in terms of industry growth across different regions and challenges experienced by the East and North East region, correlating to the speed of business, commerce, and industries compared to other parts of the country.

The regional Public Relations industry has also been experiencing some grave challenges for the past few years, which primarily includes a lack of a professional talent pool and budgetary constraints. As per the research's findings, the unorganized nature of the Public Relations industry can be cited as the main reason for the under-reporting of industry revenues. Therefore, the inability to accurately measure the growth is extremely difficult. Another emerging trend is paid coverage in media and digital channels growing across regional markets in India.

The paper exhibits how regional flair in brand communication is getting more and more important across mediums. The major trends discussed in this paper include digital media taking over the conventional media, asking for integrated and personalized solutions, increased requests for data-driven and crisis management solutions, and last and but not least, rising demand for local and regional content.

The regional agencies are now turning into one-stop communications providers. They offer full 360-degree data-driven solutions to their clients, covering everything from a press release to event management. The research observed that various sectors had been increasingly investing in the regional Public Relations; FMCG being the largest, followed by Automobile, IT, Telecom,

Healthcare, Education and Hospitality sector in West and South markets; Government bodies - both at the central and state level, is also investing more in regional Public Relations.

The paper concludes that the regional Public Relations industry has immense scope. As rightly said by one of the respondents the regional *Public Relations have now become a practice*.

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