

Public Diplomacy a specialized dimension in diplomacy

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The term 'diplomacy' generally connotes an idea where the government, government officials or its representatives of one country formally communicate, exchange ideas, deal with matters of national or international interest, perform important functions of mutual benefit with the equivalent body of another country or international organization or its members. Such activities are termed as 'Traditional Diplomacy' or 'Elite Diplomacy'. In the modern world, when there is a wind of change in all sectors, new dimensions of diplomacy are also being explored; as a result of which 'diplomacy' is no longer confined to the files and official letters of the foreign office of any country. Especially in democratic countries where the power of the people is widely recognized and people's representatives are the policy makers, there is no opportunity to deny the influence of 'people' or 'public' in any issue. From this, the concept of 'public diplomacy' has originated.

Let's discuss what public diplomacy means. As the word implies, involvement of common people in diplomatic activities is, in a word, public diplomacy. It shifts the foreign policy issues from the official documents and formal letters to the tea-table discussions and the thought process of common people, which practices the citizens' influence in shaping a country's foreign policy or stance. As a result, on the one hand, it is possible to convey various foreign policies of the government to the voters or citizens; on the other hand, the government also gets to know the citizens' opinion from time to time. The way of protecting public interest or implementing the agenda of the elected government have been widening through these activities. In addition to strengthening public support for various measures taken by the government on foreign affairs, the government is able to take into account their objections on specific issues. Another aspect of this is to influence the opinions and thoughts of common people of outer world or global citizens for the benefit, welfare or progress of a country. In current age of readily available information and unfettered means of expression, the concept of public diplomacy can be called the democratization and modernization of diplomacy. Any initiative for public engagement in diplomacy can be defined as 'public diplomacy'. As such, engaging the citizens as well as the expatriates through publicity initiatives, student exchange programs, organizing cultural events and cultural exchange, facilitating of learning foreign language, inviting and hosting foreign media personnel or eminent people, programs on diplomacy in radio-television-internet, positive branding – all are parts of public diplomacy.

It would be a mistake to consider public diplomacy as an ultra-modern theory. During ancient period, when king of one state went to war against another, it was also a strategy of public diplomacy to turn the common people of the country against the enemy state or king. The term 'public diplomacy' probably was first used in the London Times in 1856. American diplomat Edward Galleon used this term in his write-up in 1860. In the 1950s, the European Coal and Steel Community (which later became the European Union) successfully applied the concept of 'public diplomacy' to bind the economies of Europe as a whole and unite Europeans for this purpose. It was also used during the US-Soviet Cold War to garner support from the people on the respective sides. The application of public diplomacy had directly contributed to our great liberation war. The brutality of the occupying forces and the basis and ideals of our liberation struggle was highlighted to the Bengalis in UK, USA and other parts of the world. These expatriate Bengalis have inspired conscious freedom-seeking people in different parts of the world to raise a strong voice in favor of the liberation of Bangladesh and the oppressed Bengalis. As proof of this we see initiatives like George Harrison and Ravi Shankar concerts.

In those times when communication was very limited without internet, such 'public diplomacy' related initiatives of Bangladeshi diplomats and expatriate Bangladeshis were really praiseworthy.

Hence, are the days of 'elite diplomacy' or 'professional diplomacy' coming to an end? Not at all. Rather, public diplomacy is adding new dimensions to strengthen a strategic field like diplomacy. Diplomacy is considered as unarmed strategic battle. The mark of a skilled diplomat is to employ all means or tactics possible or practicable in this field. In this age of readily available internet facility, when people are getting all the information on their screens, when strong public opinion in favor of strengthening democracy is being developed in every country, the people-oriented government are giving priority to public opinion in its policy-making. The citizens should be given the impression that there is transparency between the government and them to promote the interests of the country on the multilateral platform and their views are being considered in all matters.

Broadly, the field of public diplomacy can be divided into two parts – internal and external. Within the country, public diplomacy is primarily focused on the citizens or voters of the country. Newspapers, TV channels, online media, social media act as connectors in this case. Ensuring good governance or the right to information by regularly informing the public about diplomatic issues is a hallmark of a democratic government. In this case, there are basically three stakeholders – the government (mainly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), the media and the people; and the role of each of them is significant. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs will explain the actions and position of the government, the media will convey the statement of the Ministry objectively to the people, and the people will utilize their own wit for rational criticism. The entire system will be weakened if one party does not responsibly perform its part. The part of public diplomacy in the outer world is focused at the citizens of other countries (apart from the government). Here, the role of the international media and the Embassy of a country in abroad is vital. News and factual information in international media and Embassies in abroad through various promotional activities (books translated into foreign languages, documentaries in foreign languages, various socio-cultural events, branding) can positively engage global citizens with that country.

With a view to building a modern smart Bangladesh and to bring dynamism in the field of diplomacy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bangladesh has put emphasis on public diplomacy. The Public Diplomacy Wing of this Ministry is working relentlessly to convey the actions of the government to the people.

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