

American Behavioral Scientist

<http://abs.sagepub.com>

A Snapshot of a Successful Public Relations Strategy

K. Sai Prasaad and Ramya Raghupathy
American Behavioral Scientist 2005; 49; 629
DOI: 10.1177/0002764205280923

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://abs.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/49/4/629>

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *American Behavioral Scientist* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://abs.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://abs.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

A Snapshot of a Successful Public Relations Strategy

K. Sai Prasaad

Convergence Institute of Media Management and Information Technology Studies, India

Ramya Raghupathy

Bangalore, India

Legislative elections are held in India every 5 years; and in 2004, the election was held in four phases between April 20 and May 10. More than 670 million people were eligible to vote, electing 543 members of the 14th Lok Sabha and seven state legislatures. This case study is a chronological outline of the public relations activities that a politician, Raghuvendra Reddy, undertook in his quest for a seat in the legislative assembly during the general election of 2004. He was successfully elected and is currently the minister for agriculture in the government of Andhra Pradesh. A deep analysis reveals that in India, like in any other part of the world, playing on people's emotions and invoking the caste factor plays a significant role in electoral success.

Keywords: *public relations; political PR; PR in India; election PR*

Elections in India are at best an elaborate festival and at worst a chaotic democratic exercise. The Election Commission of India, an independent statutory body set up under the Indian Constitution, reports to the highest political executive and oversees the elections. Legislative elections were held in India, the world's largest democracy, in four phases between April 20 and May 10, 2004.

More than 670 million people were eligible to vote, electing 543 members of the 14th Lok Sabha (the House of the People, the lower house of the Indian legislature). On May 13, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party conceded defeat after an unexpectedly strong showing by the Indian National Congress Party (INC), which although not winning a majority outright, was able to put together a majority under the direction of the Gandhi family matriarch, Sonia Gandhi, the Italian-born widow of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.

However, Gandhi surprised almost all observers by declining to become the new prime minister, citing the division that her rule would bring. Instead, she asked former Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, a Western-educated and well-respected international economist, to take control of the new government. Singh had previously served

under INC Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao in the early 1990s, when he was the architect of India's first economic liberalization plan that staved off an impending national monetary crisis.

Along with the parliamentary elections, seven legislatures held elections to state governments. This case study is a chronological outline of the public relations activities that a politician, Raghuvveera Reddy, undertook in his quest for a seat in the legislative assembly of the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh during the general elections of 2004.

On January 2, Raghuvveera Reddy's public relations activities started with the prelaunch of a walkathon through his constituency of 336 villages. The prelaunch preparations included posters, announcements on local radio and community loud-speakers, media relations, and interaction for coverage and preevent activities.

On January 10, the walkathon started with extensive print and electronic media coverage. The main goal of this walkathon was to position the INC as a farmer-friendly political party by listening to farmers' grievances and noting their problems. This walkathon helped in building a positive public image for the INC because it was planned and executed prior to the peak campaign season in the hopes of convincing voters that the INC not only approaches its public at the time of elections but also is always positioned as a party whose primary concern is people welfare, not party welfare. The walkathon also helped highlight the problems faced by people in this constituency, which was the groundwork for creating the party agenda for the elections. Based on these problems, promises were made. The walkathon ended on a high note on February 10.

From February 12 to 15, the candidate started a fasting program to oppose the policies of the previous government, run by the Telugu Desam Party, that supposedly affected the living of farmers. The fast was a big success, and the candidate's actions received maximum print media coverage.

On February 17, Raghuvveera Reddy began a series of *Panchayat Raj* (local self-government) meetings in the five *mandals* (districts) of his constituency of Madakasira. The districts include Agali (15 panchayats), Amarapuram (14 panchayats), Rolla (19 panchayats), Gudibanda (21 panchayats), and Madakasira (25 panchayats). The candidate also undertook village-focused campaigns during which every panchayat was met and *sarpanchs* (village executive officers) gave their petitions to the candidate; both their problems and party goals were discussed in these meetings. Because the village panchayat is at the grassroots level of our democracy, this activity was performed to reach every citizen in the constituency. Assurances and promises were made and all this, again, received a lot of media (local print) coverage.

The candidate embarked on a caste-focused campaign in every village as well, during which the head and prominent members of every caste and religion were met and their demands were noted. Once this was done, their support and the support of the members of their caste and community were promised to the candidate. Thus, they now had to campaign to all their caste members and to their community so that all their votes would be diverted toward the INC. This also received media coverage, which in

general terms portrayed Raghuveera Reddy as interested in not only the welfare of his own community but also the general uplifting of all communities.

In March, a youth congress activists meeting was held, during which all of their demands and petitions were discussed. The youth congress working committee submitted its report on March 5, which consisted of an agenda for the elections.

The agenda included organizing sports events—the Sriram Reddy Memorial Tournament (the candidate's father and an ex-member of Parliament)—and distributing mementos; cricket sets for college students were also undertaken. There were road shows and street walk campaigns for the INC, as well as music releases—audiocassettes about Raghuveera Reddy, songs praising him and the party, and songs criticizing the Telugu Desam government. The youth working committee managed all cassette lyrics, music composition, recording, production and performance, and distribution.

Street plays were arranged, allowing talented youth to capture the attention of voters and spread the message of the INC. Folk music and folklore were used extensively as well, with folk songs sung by the Lambani (tribes of Andhra Pradesh) in praise of the candidate and his family and the social service that the family performs in the constituency. These were the highlight of the songs. Because such music is a simple, effective, and known medium of the localities, it was very effective. In addition, election materials (flags, banners, caps, etc.) were distributed by members of the youth congress working committee.

The committee also organized a bike rally; 10,000 bike riders went to each village, making an impact on the voters. This was done to show the kind of support the candidate had and it was hoped would, thus, have a positive impact on the voters' minds. Members of Raghuveera Reddy's family took part in this rally, including the candidate himself riding a bike, which made the headlines in the next day's newspapers.

The popular film director, actor, and comedian Dasari Narayan Rao as well as the film actress Nagma were asked to entertain the crowd and address the gathering in public rallies throughout the constituency.

Hari katha (discourse and singing about God) is another effective medium to reach voters and, thus, they too were coordinated by the youth committees. Mythological stories and stories about the candidate and his family's contribution toward society were narrated in a musical manner.

Raghuveera Reddy's family also assisted in promoting his candidacy. Health camps, including a free health camp for the aged and sick, along with social services were organized by the candidates' family (many of whom are doctors). Free medicine and treatment were given to the poor and needy. This was done in response to the health clinic opened by the candidate's rival and in the hope of recapturing voters' attention. These received tremendous media coverage.

The family tradition of the candidate is to perform a 3-day festival—Sri Rama Navami Celebrations—in the constituency. Raghuveera Reddy's family owns the Neelakantapuram group of temples where these festivities take place, and people from throughout the constituency participate in them. On the first day of the event, the fam-

ily performs free mass marriages in the constituency; this time nearly 500 couples were married. Gold *Mangalsuthras* (sacred threads), new clothes for the couples, and food were provided. Although this is a major event in the constituency and occurs annually, in 2004 it was held during the time of the elections and, thus, tremendous mileage was added because of the media coverage. Apart from this there was an addition to the group of temples. A Saraswathi temple (Goddess of Learning) was inaugurated by the family, which again received coverage from the press and electronic media. The family undertook many charity activities during the 3-day festival.

By mid-March it was time for filing the nomination, and loud speakers were used to spread the news of the candidate's nomination. Everyone was invited to join him for filing his nomination on March 15 and pamphlets and bills were distributed. Raghuvēera Reddy lives in Neelakantapuram, a hamlet in Madakasira constituency. He has both a political and a rural background. So, keeping his background in mind, the youth committee organized a very different nomination ceremony. He had to travel nearly 30 km to file his nomination. This he did on a bullock cart. Thousands of such carts from throughout the constituency followed him, and the crowd was uncontrollable at the Regional Mandal office. Such a scene was very unique and, thus, the candidate garnered a lot of coverage for this event.

Madakasira is situated in the Rayalaseema area of the state, in the heart of hardcore Naxal violence in Andhra Pradesh. There is a lot of violence during elections too. Opposition party workers attacked the houses of the INC workers, killing them and burning their houses. With each event, the candidate's reaction to the violence was seen on the front page of the major newspapers almost every day. Raghuvēera Reddy went on a Satyagraha near the police station in Madakasira, seeking justice for all the people who were affected by the election violence.

By April there was also an all-women's meeting at which the candidate addressed women in each constituency; this too was highlighted by the media. Various organizations, associations, clubs, teachers associations, lawyers bar councils, sports clubs, nongovernmental organizations, and self-help groups were met by the candidate individually; and he requested their support. These meetings received excellent media coverage. Dinners and picnics were also arranged for these people.

When the chief ministerial aspirant, Y. S. Rajashekar Reddy's walkathon reached Madakasira, the candidate joined this *yatra* (spiritual journal). This was made special by arranging a white-colored convoy of 336 cars that traveled through the 336 villages across the constituency. This was a very impressive sight and afforded ample media coverage.

People in this constituency are also devotees of Sri Sathya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi. So an event was organized by the candidate where Baba's message was given to the people.

The candidate visited Tirupathi and other major South Indian temples, and during his *darshan* (to see) of the deity, flowers offered to the statue of the god fell. This was considered a good omen, and what had transpired spread by word of mouth like wild-fire, with many people believing that even the local deities had blessed Raghuvēera

Reddy, that even God was on his side, and that he could not be defeated. This made major news in the local press and had a positive impact on the voters.

There is a superstition in Andhra Pradesh that people with skin problems should not rule the state because this brings famine and bad luck. The then-incumbent chief minister, Chandra Babu Naidu, suffers from a pigmentation problem; and in his two terms of rule, there had been no rains, only famine. The day he resigned from his post there were showers throughout the state. The candidate highlighted and publicized this in the constituency and, thus, received press attention.

When Telugu Desam Party President Chandrababu Naidu came to visit Madakasira, supporters of the INC candidate did not allow him entry into the town. From his air base to the place where he was scheduled to address a rally, people slept on the ground so that his car could not pass. He had no choice but to leave. Even the police could not help him to address his rally. This was, again, a major event that got full coverage in the media and was on the front pages for nearly 3 days in local newspapers.

Because the State Assembly and Parliament elections were held together, Nizamuddin, the parliamentary candidate, campaigned jointly with Raghuvveera Reddy. This campaign was called the Hindu-Muslim *bahi-bhai* campaign and became a major media event.

Apart from all this, there were hundreds of press conferences where the press was given “gossip news” about the opposition party.

When the results of the May elections were announced, Raghuvveera Reddy had won by a handsome margin, defeating the nearest rival by more than 1 lakh (100,000) votes. He is currently the minister for agriculture in the state of Andhra Pradesh.

K. Sai Prasaad is currently professor of marketing and management communications at Convergence Institute of Media, Management and Information Technology Studies, Bangalore, India. A management graduate and an experienced journalist, he is an expert in curriculum design and consults with several corporate groups on communication matters. He undertakes internal communication audits for companies and communication training and development program for faculty of management colleges. He believes in balancing professional requirements with human values and is currently working on a synopsis for a Ph.D. program in customer relationship management.

Ramya Raghupathy is currently exploring opportunities to be an independent filmmaker of offbeat films in English and Hindi. After graduating from Convergence Institute of Media, Management and Information Technology Studies with a specialization in public relations and corporate communications, she was an independent communications consultant before she entered the world of film. She has a political background, with her family active in politics.