# Engaging worldviews, cultures, and structures through dialogue: The culture-centred approach to public relations

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## Abstract

*Noting the role of power in the context of the globalisation politics of increasing consolidation of resources in the hands of the resource-rich, this article advances the culture-centred approach for public relations scholarship and practice. Drawing from postcolonial and subaltern studies theories, the culture-centred approach advances the concepts of contextual meanings and theorising from below that dialogically engage the voices of the grassroots, resisting the top-down Eurocentric production of knowledge that underlies the conceptualisations of democracy, capitalism, and civil society, three key conceptual threads constituting the theorising and practice of public relations.*

*Our culturally centred theorising calls for a journey in solidarity for the researcher/practitioner with marginalised publics to co-construct meanings that challenge the hegemony of dominant structures, seeking to invert the top-down logics of power that perpetuate neoliberal hegemony, albeit under the name of democracy promotion, nation building, civil society promotion, etc. Culturally centred readings of public relations de-centre the taken-for-granted assumptions of Eurocentric practices and the power embodied in these practices, which are often framed in the language of altruism.*

*Espousing participatory research and practice rooted in the knowledge-producing capacity of the global margins, this article challenges the dominant paradigm of public relations and its corporate agenda through resistive strategies that work in collaboration with the margins, actively seeking to invert the agendas of power that are carried out by the practices of public relations. Power is resisted through the participation of subaltern communities in discursive spaces that have served as and continue to serve as instruments of subaltern oppression.*

## Introduction

Public relations has been broadly conceived as a strategic function that manages relationships and forwards the organisational agenda (Gandy, 1992; Hodges & McGrath, 2011; Pal & Dutta, 2008a). Inherent in the theoretical frameworks of public relations are value-laden assumptions about the nature of organisations, the nature of capitalist societies within which public relations is practiced, the nature of democracies encompassing public relations, and the communicative practices that constitute public relations, shaped within conceptual assumptions of liberal governance (Dutta, 2011; Pal & Dutta, 2008a, 2008b).

As a modernist tool, public relations is conceptualised within the narrow terrains of capitalism and its agendas of consolidating power in the hands of the owners of capital, intertwined with the theorisations of democracy, civil society, and corporate interests, and framed amid the interests of powerful political, social, and economic actors in governing society (Dutta, in press; Miller & Dinan, 2003, 2007; Pal & Dutta, 2008a, 2008b). Simultaneously, what have been ignored in much of public relations theorising are the voices of the different publics and

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stakeholder groups that often exist at the peripheries of dominant organisational practices and powerful stakeholders (Berger, 1999, 2001, 2005; Pal & Dutta, 2008a, 2008b; Weaver, 2011), the alternative practices that resist dominant public relations frameworks and provide new meanings for what counts as public relations as understood from the worldview of resistive publics at the margins seeking to transform the very principles of organising that constitute the terrain of public relations (Dutta, 2011), and the theorising of public relations practices as they relate to resisting the positions of power within liberal/neoliberal configurations (Dutta, 2011; Miller & Dinan, 2003, 2007; Munshi & Kurian, 2005, 2007; Pal & Dutta, 2008a, 2008b). Also absent are systematic interrogations of Euro and US-centric articulations of 'god terms' such as democracy, civil society, and public sphere, which are themselves culturally rooted constructs embedded in dominant structures of power and are often public relations instruments that paradoxically serve the agendas of imperialism (Dutta-Bergman, 2005a, 2005b).

Acknowledging the bias in public relations scholarship toward organisational-level theories and a managerial focus in the mainstream literature that treats public relations as a communicative exercise that consolidates power in the hands of the owners of capital, public relations scholars have increasingly issued the call for critical and cultural approaches to public relations that deconstruct the interplay of power and control in public relations practices (Munshi & Kurian, 2005, 2007), systematically expose the role of public relations as an instrument of the "neoliberal revolution" (Miller & Dinan, 2007, p. 302), and create new openings for theorising communicative practices among marginalised stakeholders and organisations that are directed toward social change and structural transformation through active participation of the margins in processes of change (Dutta, 2011; in press; Pal & Dutta, 2008a, 2008b). Critical theorists challenge the dominant models of public relations by

uncovering issues of power played out by public relations practice through the privileging the interests of capitalism (see Dutta & Pal, 2011; Miller & Dinan, 2003, 2007; Motion & Weaver, 2005; L'Etang, 2006; Pieczka, 2006). This emphasis on interrogation of power in critical theory is embodied in the following observation by L'Etang (2006, p. 524): "critical scholars should feel free to push back the boundaries of knowledge, explore and define the boundaries of the field, engage with methodological debates, engage with contemporary intellectual thought more broadly with a view to considering the implications for public relations".

The value of a critical perspective is that it interrogates the ideological and economic basis of public relations, thus rupturing the consolidation of power embodied in public relations theorising, and opening up a discursive and resistive space for articulating new ways of thinking about public relations. More specifically, critical approaches foreground the role of public relations in a democratic society, especially as it relates to interrogating the ways in which democracy itself becomes a rhetorical device for the perpetration of oppressions globally (see Dutta-Bergman, 2005a, 2005b). However, one of the critiques of critical scholarship in public relations is the inadequacy of critical scholars to go beyond criticising (Grunig, 2001). In other words, there is a need for critical scholars to contribute to theory, research, and practice, especially in the context of envisioning strategies for disrupting the hegemonic spaces of power (see Motion & Weaver, 2005). This essay responds to this call and envisions addressing this gap in critical scholarship in public relations by proposing entry points for dialogue, reflexivity, and resistance to dominant power structures (Dutta, 2011; Dutta & Pal, 2011; Pal & Dutta, 2008a, 2008b). Drawing upon Subaltern Studies theory (Guha, 1982a, 1982b, 1983, 1987, 2001; Spivak, 1988), it deconstructs the erasures that are continually written into the public relations functions of social, economic, and cultural power structures, embodied in public relations practices ranging from lobbying to propaganda

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to democracy promotions and civil society building. However, the recognition of erasure becomes an entry point for organising for change (see Dutta, 2011 for examples of communicative processes of social change driven by grassroots participation in resistance to the mainstream structures). Acknowledging the impossibility of recognition and representation for the subaltern voice within mainstream discursive spaces, it seeks to chart a terrain for co-participation on the basis of journeys of solidarity in local contexts that resist the co-optive and oppressive impetus of neoliberal governance (Dutta, 2007).

Responding to the call for more theorising of public relations from alternative frameworks and the necessity to deconstruct the dominant theories and practices of public relations, this article advances the culture-centred approach (Dutta-Bergman, 2005a, 2005b; Dutta, 2007, 2011; Pal & Dutta, 2008a, 2008b) as a basis for public relations scholarship and practice. Aligned with other streams of critical scholarship, the culture-centred approach critically theorises issues of power, ideology, and economy by engaging voices at the margins, and articulates possibilities of resistance through journeys of solidarity that foreground subaltern centres of knowledge production. The resistive stance of culture-centred public relations lies precisely in actively inverting the Euro-centric locus of public relations knowledge and its seeming altruistic veneer (Dutta, 2007, 2011; Dutta-Bergman, 2005a, 2005b). In doing so, the culture-centred approach makes a connection between theory and praxis that can be utilised both by the researcher and the practitioner in articulating resistive possibilities for activism that seeks to transform unequal social structures through the recognition and representation of the subaltern voice as a legitimate producer of knowledge (Dutta, 2007, 2011; Pal & Dutta, 2008a, 2008b; Pal, 2008).

Resistance is embodied in the inversion of the dominant structures of power through subaltern participation in discursive spaces (Dutta, 2011). The commitment and potential

of the framework to engage with subaltern voices and address structural issues in the global landscape of public policy is the promise of the culture-centred approach (see for instance the works of Kim, 2008 and Pal, 2008 with grassroots farmers' movements in the global South). Subalternity refers to the conditions of being under or being erased from the discursive space, and the culture-centred approach to public relations explores erasures through deconstruction of global policies, and through journeys of solidarity with the marginalised sectors (Dutta, 2011; Kim, 2008; Pal 2008). Hence, the culture-centred approach also has the potential to address the gap that exists between academic research and practice, by bringing the practice of public relations into the realm of resistive politics that seeks to transform social structures (Dutta, 2011; Pal & Dutta, 2008b). The culture-centred approach is interested in narrating knowledge claims from below, in the production of knowledge from those spaces that have typically been erased from dominant discursive spaces. By interrogating erasures, it explores the epistemic violence embodied in the dominant approaches to knowledge construction. As a deconstructive exercise, it begins with the question, what is missing in dominant knowledge constructions and how we can meaningfully engage with these absences. For instance, in her discussion of postmodern public relations, Holtzhausen (2010) claims that "culture is often used as an argument against challenges on issues of equality, individuality, and democracy" (p. 153). A culturally centred turn begins with the interrogation of the values embodied in the rhetorical uses of terms such as equality, individuality, and democracy, which often become the very instruments of power and control to delegitimise subaltern cultures and to deny voice to cultural participants.

### Deconstructing dominant theorising

From the standpoint of the public relations literature, the culture-centred approach creates an opening for deconstructing dominant theorising of public relations and the ways in which such theorising creates and sustains points of marginalisation through its

uninterrupted circulation of Eurocentric values as universals: How does the dominant approach to public relations create and sustain marginalised spaces? How does the dominant approach to public relations erase the voices of some communities while simultaneously privileging the voices of the dominant coalition? How does the dominant approach to public relations legitimise certain knowledge claims that deny opportunity for participation to the subaltern sectors? Building on each of these questions, which become tools for interrogating power, the culture-centred approach seeks to reverse the erasures by narrating alternative stories shared through co-constructive dialogues with members of marginalised communities that have typically been rendered invisible in the dominant epistemic configurations of public relations (Dutta, 2011). The resistive power of culture-centred public relations lies precisely in the recognition of the capacity of subaltern communities as participants and as producers of knowledge (Dutta, 2011; Dutta & Pal, 2011). In the realm of public relations, the culture-centred approach provides an entry point for alternative definitions of what constitutes public relations, what ought to be studied as public relations, whose voices ought to be included in our discourses of public relations, and the possibilities of resistance that challenge the dominant practices which seek to maintain and reinforce the status quo. In other words, by engaging with the voices of communities that are typically marginalised through the practices of mainstream communicative spaces, the culture-centred approach demonstrates its emancipatory commitment (Dutta, 2007; Munshi & Kurian, 2005; Pal & Dutta, 2008a, 2008b). The essay begins by providing an overview of the dominant paradigm of public relations research, followed by an analysis of the culture-centred approach, before moving on to emphasising the potential contributions of the culture-centred approach to public relations scholarship.

## Culture-centred approach

The culture-centred approach concerns itself with the voices of marginalised groups and explores the interaction between culture and structure that create conditions of marginality (Dutta-Bergman, 2004a, 2004b; Dutta, 2007). The interactions between the continuous and dynamic elements of culture provide the context for cultural meanings that are in flux (Dutta, 2007). In wanting to write theory from below, culture-centred praxis dialogically engages with subaltern classes who have traditionally been marginalised and absent in dominant theories and models (Dutta, 2011). The culture-centred approach engages with the silences and absences in neoliberal discourse (Miller & Dinan, 2007), and generates meanings through a participatory framework. For instance, Pal's 2008 ethnography with the farmers of Singur, West Bengal, explored the resistive practices and spaces of agency enacted by farmers who were threatened with eviction by a car-manufacturing project. The acknowledgment of subaltern agency emerged as an entry point for the politics of social change emerging from below. Similarly, Kim's (2008) co-constructive journey with the farmer activists in Korea demonstrated the active ways in which farmers mobilise locally, nationally, and globally to challenge unfair global policies. In doing so, this approach draws attention to the voices on the periphery and aims to disrupt the Eurocentric notion of what constitutes public relations in the service of neoliberal power structures.

With its emphasis on resistance, this approach provides an alternative understanding of public relations, emergence of issues and policy making that challenge the dominant discourses of public relations, and deconstructs these discourses for the ways in which they erase subaltern voices. The emphasis, therefore, is on interrogating the dominant practices of public relations for the ways in which they create and sustain conditions at the margins, and on creating spaces of transformation by documenting the ways in which these dominant practices are resisted in marginalised communities. The culture-centred approach necessitates working from within, where

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cultural members actively participate in defining problems and developing solutions (Dutta, 2007, 2011). Therefore, from the standpoint of public relations theorising, the culture-centred approach provides an opening for an epistemic shift in our understanding of what counts as public relations and what ought to be studied under the purview of public relations. Through its discursive engagement with subaltern communities that have hitherto been erased, it resists the dominant discourse of public relations by introducing alternative discourses and meaning structures in hegemonic discursive sites and spaces. By bringing forth alternative possibilities that have otherwise been silenced, it creates opportunities for transformative politics, or, more precisely, openings for social change. Central to the participatory process in a culture-centred approach is the interaction between culture, structure, and agency that contributes to the co-construction of meanings by cultural members of a community within the context of broader politics of social change (see also Dutta, 2011; Hodges & McGrath, 2011).

## Culture

In the culture-centred approach, culture is a complex web of meanings that is always in a state of flux (Dutta, 2007, 2011). Dynamic in character, culture is always shifting as it continually interacts with structure, and is constituted through the interactions among cultural participants. The global and local economic and political shifts influence structure, which in turn, informs culture. Culture gets articulated in the local as the cultural members of the community co-construct meanings of their lives within the local contexts (Dutta, 2007; Kim, 2008; Pal, 2008). Hence, culture can be defined as the communicative process by which shared meanings, beliefs, and practices get produced (Geertz, 1973). It is a shared experience that is central to living and communicating for social groups. Culture is the strongest framework for providing the context of life that shapes knowledge creation, perceptions, sharing of meanings, and behaviour changes.

Knowledge therefore is understood through the voices of cultural participants. In public relations, Banks (2000) addresses an important gap in culture by advancing an idea of culture that suggests a "politics of difference" (p. 13). Acknowledging multicultural principles or problems, he establishes a culture-sensitive theory of communication for public relations. Banks' (2000) work is driven by ever increasing diversity of population both within the United States and the rest of the world and the increased demands of communication on organisations brought over by the multicultural publics. However Banks' (2000) treatment of culture does not take into account an understanding of culture with respect to its interaction with structure and the spheres of power. Similarly, when Curtin and Gaither (2005, 2006) acknowledge the role of culture in their discussion of circuits of culture, and yet theorise culture from the vantage point of dominant institutional structures, professional expectations and roles within these structures, and the normative functions played by public relations professionals as cultural intermediaries, they take for granted the culturally rooted notions of democracy and capitalism that underlie their very conceptualisation of public relations practice. Culture-centred public relations forwards the notion of culture as formation of meanings based on co-constructive participatory processes in conversation with structural forces, especially in the context of subaltern participation in processes of change that fundamentally threaten to disrupt the oppressive functions of capitalist enterprises (Dutta, 2011).

Engaging with culturally situated voices creates a discursive opening for interrogating the ways in which organisational public relations strategies are interpreted, co-constructed and resisted by marginalised publics, simultaneously attending to the oppressive effects of dominant public relations practices (Dutta, 2011; Dutta & Pal, 2011; Kim, 2008; Pal, 2008). In this realm, it is particularly relevant to listen to the discursively constituted spaces in which the local contexts are negotiated by cultural members. Power is

embodied in culturally based communicative processes that organise to disrupt the consolidation of power in the hands of transnational hegemony (Dutta, 2011). Such an outlook on publics is quite distinct from the situational theory of publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), which posits that "communication behaviors of publics can best be understood by measuring how members of publics perceive situations in which they are affected by such organizational consequences" (p. 148). Situational theory suggests classifying individuals in relation to the awareness and level of concern about a particular problem. According to Grunig and Hunt (1984), three independent variables – problem recognition, constraint recognition and level of involvement by the publics – can be used to predict the extent to which publics will seek and process information about that particular situation. Though situational theory turns the lens toward the publics, the theory is driven by the emphasis to benefit the organisation, where publics can be predicted and controlled to fulfil the interests of the organisation. But a culture-centred approach departs from the conceptualisation of unidirectional flow of communication and raises critical questions: How do the dominant practices of mainstream organisations within social systems become meaningful to cultural members? What are the ways in which these practices are resisted? How do local contexts inform the meanings articulated in the realm of resistive strategies used by marginalised publics? How do these locally enunciated contexts challenge the dominant national and global structures, and the policies that are promoted by these structures? Attending to locally situated discourses and practices through which marginalised community members challenge dominant discourses and structures creates an alternative entry point for public relations theorising and practice that seeks to disrupt the power embodied in neoliberal governance (Dutta, 2011).

## Structure and agency

Structures refer to the material reality as defined by policies and institutional networks that privilege certain sections of the population and marginalise others by constraining the availability of resources (Dutta, 2007, 2011). Structures define and limit the possibilities that are available to participants as they enact agency to engage in practices that influence their health and wellbeing. At a macro-level, structure refers to resources such as national and international political actors, points of policy formulation, and national and global corporations that work in tandem with the structure at a micro level. The emphasis in the culture-centred approach is to gain a sense of understanding of these structures that limit the possibilities of resources for members of a community. From a public relations standpoint, the emphasis is on understanding the public relations practices that serve the interests of the dominant structures. For instance, a culture-centred examination of public relations theorising and strategising in the wake of Hurricane Katrina would examine the ways in which the public relations strategies of FEMA maintained the status quo, and simultaneously silenced the voices of the displaced people of New Orleans (Kim & Dutta, 2009). A culture-centred analysis of the public relations literature addressing crisis response in the aftermath of 9/11, for instance, would interrogate the ways in which the voices of marginalised communities within the US (such as Muslim minorities) were silenced within the discursive frame.

Similar analysis of public relations messages and campaigns may also be applied to non-profit sectors where efforts are often driven by so-called altruistic reasons. For instance, in the case of the Santalis, an indigenous community that resides in multiple pockets in eastern India, Dutta-Bergman (2004a, 2004b) locates poverty as a barrier to this community's search for and articulations of health, thus challenging the public relations strategies of dominant global social actors in the health arena that frame health risks as products of individual behaviours. The author notes: "Marked by the very essence of poverty, hunger is an integral

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part of Santali life and remains a primary impediment to the achievement of good health" (Dutta-Bergman, 2004a, p. 111). Subsequently, food, or the lack of it, and the overriding need to find food for the family, takes precedence over accessing even the marginal health services available to the communities. Local organisation and communication with various stakeholders then are directed by the localised understanding of needs and resources (Dutta-Bergman, 2004a, 2004b).

Hence, the study among the Santalis indicates that a) it is the structure that determines the meanings for marginalised groups, and b) policies mostly disregard the needs of the marginalised thereby creating structural barriers for them. While structures limit the possibilities of health among Santalis, agency is enacted in its interaction with the structures and embodies communicative actions that negotiate these structures. For instance, the structural barrier of the Santalis informs their culture, where they prioritise accessing food over health. In doing so, Santalis enact agency. Agency is explained as the capacity of human beings to engage with structures that encompass their lives, to make meanings through this engagement, and at the same time, creating discursive openings to transform these structures.

Dutta (2007) locates agency at its interaction with culture and structure. For instance, in the case of Katrina, explorations of agency would co-construct narratives with displaced communities that articulate the ways in which the dominant structures were interpreted and the ways in which the communities mobilised to secure resources and to resist the marginalisation they faced in the wake of the crisis (Kim & Dutta, 2009). Similarly, culture-centred engagement with the Union Carbide crisis in Bhopal engages with the voices of the marginalised people who were affected by the violence of the strategy, and co-constructs the interpretations of the crisis, and the communicative and material practices in response to the crisis that were enacted by marginalised community members (Dutta, 2011). This line of thinking foregrounds the importance of understanding articulations of meanings by engaging participant voices, fostering spaces for those at the margins to define problem configurations and to create solutions that are meaningful to them (Dutta-Bergman, 2004a), which present opportunities for social change by challenging the dominant articulations of social reality and cultural and behavioural norms. It is important to note that structures that frame the lives of marginalised communities operate at multiple levels and that these micro-, meso-, and macro-levels are interdependent and are mutually reifying, concentrating power in the hands of the resource rich. Foregrounding these structural factors as realities in the lives of marginalised people, the culture-centred approach situates structural frameworks as repositories of power directed at maintaining the status quo. Culture-centred organising with the margins therefore seeks to foster social change and transformative politics through the co-creation of spaces of participation through which community voices organise to identify problem configurations and the corresponding solutions (Dutta, 2007, 2011; Dutta-Bergman, 2004a, 2004b; Kim, 2008; Pal, 2008). With this understanding of culture-centred approach against the backdrop of dominant public relations practice and scholarship, the following section explores the contributions of the culture-centred approach to contribute to new ways of thinking of public relations by fundamentally opening up the possibilities of knowledge construction from the global margins.

### Culture-centred approach: Theorising alternatives

The culture-centred approach suggests alternatives to the dominant paradigm of public relations models. By taking into account contextual meanings and theorising from below – the two principles that drive culture-centred approach – this essay elucidates the gaps in mainstream public relations practice and research, and suggests alternative entry points for theorising about public relations.

## Contextual meanings

Contexts connect the local cultural systems with broader social structures. Depending on the allocation of resources, which is determined by structural conditions and the intertwined relationships of power, cultural members actively participate in making meanings of their environments and contextual cues. According to the culture-centred approach, structural conditions are embedded in the state and civil society organisations that perpetuate conditions of marginality precisely through the use of knowledge to retain the positions of power (Dutta, 2007, 2011). For example, structural conditions in India do not allow surveys of public opinion by phone interviews or questionnaires in all parts of the country because more than half the population does not have access to telephones and is illiterate. Hence, public relations professionals resort to the middle class for gauging public opinion, which is far from representing publics at all levels, especially in the marginalised sectors of the country. In such contexts, a culture of communicating with the marginalised section through mobile vans or wall paintings would be more meaningful, thus suggesting the necessity for contextually developing a sense of the platforms that would be productive in reaching out with information resources to certain segments of the population. In other words, public relations scholars and professionals need to take into account the process of communication that is meaningful with respect to the rural contexts of India. At the same time it is important to recognise that it is not a monolithic context that defines rural India. If a mobile van as a communication medium is relevant in one rural context, it could be puppetry for some other context, continually interacting with the structural resources that become available in each context. Localised cultural participation, however, moves beyond the realm of channel selection to more complex processes of localised organising of marginalised publics to enact their agency in the face of the oppressive policies imposed by transnational corporations (TNCs). For instance, in the Niyamgiri Hills of Orissa, India, the Dongria Kondh tribe organised into resistive groups in the face of the public relations, as well as physically violent, practices of the Vedanta mining corporation seeking to build and expand bauxite mines and refineries in the region (see Dutta, in press). In this instance, the localised organising of the indigenous community members and the collective organising in solidarity with various stakeholder groups became strategies for bottom-up grassroots public relations that resisted the top-down public relations practices of Vedanta embodied in corporate social responsibility and greenwashing campaigns (see Dutta, in press).

The contexts are dynamic and shifting as they continually interact with structures. Multiple contexts are intertwined, influencing each other. Take for example, the theme of development – how it plays out differently in different contexts. For transnational agendas, development means sustaining profits on a global scale. For instance, considering the example of dam construction, global policy favours dam construction privileging interests of corporations and financial institutions that will implement the projects. But is it consistent with the local meaning of development where dams will be constructed? For the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA, Save the River Narmada Movement) movement, the meaning of development for local cultural members residing on the Narmada river valley in India is sustaining farming in that particular land where the dam construction has been proposed. However, the international and national policy makers threaten to displace the local villagers on the river valley for the interest of dam construction. In doing so, the global and local meanings of development are in conflict with one another. The following view of the poor and underprivileged is found on the Friends of River Narmada website, http://www.narmada.org/introduction.html, a volunteer-based organisation that is dedicated to the NBA struggle:

> Large numbers of poor and underprivileged communities (mostly tribals and dalits) are being dispossessed of their livelihood and even their ways

of living to make way for dams being built on the basis of incredibly dubious claims of common benefit and "national interest". For us, this is simply immoral and therefore unacceptable. No purported benefits can be used to justify the denial of the fundamental rights of individuals in a democratic society (Third paragraph).

Evident in this case is disavowal of the meaning of development that is relevant for the local context of Narmada valley (Dutta & Pal, 2007). Culture-centred approach demonstrates a) simultaneity of different contexts through the co-existence of the local and global meanings and b) the capitalist agenda as the local gets obscured by the broader ideology of global capitalism. The culture-centred approach brings out this tension between the local and the global, as the local context gets constituted in the realm of globally articulated policies, and also serves as a site of resistance to global policies, thus opening opportunities of global transformation. For instance, the resistance mobilised by the displaced villagers in the Narmada valley forced the World Bank to retreat from the project and impacted national policies around the dam. It also mobilised global support for resisting the broader policy of dam construction.

The multidimensional idea of culture problematises the way culture is conceptualised in dominant public relations research and practice. Traditionally, in public relations, messages or campaigns are crafted and delivered by incorporating certain aspects of culture as a variable. As Curtin & Gaither (2006) point out, culture is typically conceptualised as a set of rigid constructs, where issues of structure and human agency are overlooked. Concepts such as individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, and masculinity-femininity that predominantly define the parameters for cross-cultural comparisons in public relations research (Huang, 2001; Rhee, 2002; Sriramesh, 2003) need to be scrutinised in the face of complex understandings of meanings enacted in contextually embedded

interactions as informed by culture-centred approach (see Pal & Dutta, 2008a; 2008b). Organisations and publics become monolithic entities, where cultural contexts are overlooked and standardised through dominant ideologies of the Western paradigm. Hence, the culture-centred approach also makes it possible to disrupt the Eurocentric approach to public relations by celebrating cultural contexts and human agency. The emphasis on human agency situates the public at the centre of public relations practice, underscoring the potential of the field to theorise from below and to look at practices of marginalised publics as legitimate topics of inquiry in public relations scholarship.

## Theorising from below

The culture-centred approach is committed to understanding the meanings that people make of their lives at the intersection of structure and culture. Such an approach centralises the voice of the marginalised in identifying and articulating problems and solutions. Hence, the culture-centred approach challenges the emphasis on organisational-level theory in dominant public relations research by drawing attention to the publics, especially marginalised publics who have traditionally been silenced, and underscores theorising from below. Its commitment to underserved communities also disrupts the corporate logic of public relations practice and research. The strong corporate association of public relations goes back to the history of public relations that is rooted in the corporate history of the United States (Weaver, Motion & Roper, 2006). A culture-centred approach to public relations disrupts this bias by focusing on the voices of local communities articulated through dialogues with community members. Therefore, in the realm of Katrina, instead of focusing simply on the responses of FEMA and engaging with the management, the culture-centred approach builds on oral testimonies of displaced community members articulated through dialogues.

Rather than thinking of different categories of public at different stages of awareness and capacity to process carefully crafted messages (Hallahan, 2000), the culture-centred approach draws upon the idea of human agency that is

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central to negotiating the structural conditions. For instance, for the NBA movement, the victims of dam construction on the river valley resist the dam construction and participate in activist movements (Dutta & Pal, 2007). In this case, mainstream public relations that views public relations as an organisational responsibility will approach the issue with the goal of serving institutional interest and will resort to messages and actions that will change the attitude and behaviour of the public for the benefit of the organisation. This is because the ultimate goal is to accomplish predictable results, measured by productivity and technical problem solving that privileges an economic and social system defined by accumulation of wealth by corporations and consumption by consumers (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). That is why traditional public relations research is not inclusive of activists' use of public communication because the organisation's self-interest in the dominant understanding of public relations is at odds with broader public's common self-interest (Demetrious, 2006). Different resistive strategies by activists such as hunger strikes and protest marches at the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the Bhopal Survivors' Movement (www.narmada.org, www.bhopal.net) are left outside the purview of public relations.

A culture-centred approach turns the lens toward marginalised publics and recognises their act of resistance against dam construction as a communicative action. In doing so, it attempts to understand the people's experiences from the people's perspectives. By making possible exploration of public relations in the realm of people's interest or activist movements, the culture-centred approach disrupts the modernist view of public relations dominated by narrow industry view and opens up an alternative discursive space for theoretical underpinning of public relations. Hence, a culture-centred approach reverses the flow of communication in public relations by turning the focus on subaltern voices. It broadens the understanding of public relations as a communicative form that advocates not only

organisational interest but also people's interest. Central to this approach is the understanding that cultural members articulate their problems and issues and co-construct the solutions by engaging in dialogue on participatory platforms that challenge dominant structures and practices.

Further extrapolation of the culture-centred approach in the realm of subaltern agency explores the ways in which dominant public relations messages are resisted, and alternative discursive articulations are put forth. This, for instance, is exemplified in how the public relations strategies of Union Carbide are deconstructed and resisted by activist publics who were affected by the Bhopal gas tragedy. The International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal (ICJB) is fighting for compensation for half a million of people in Bhopal, India, who were exposed to poison gas caused by a leak in the Union Carbide plant in 1984 (now owned by Dow Chemical). The following excerpt from the Bhopal Survivors' Movement (BSM) website http://bhopal.net/bhopal.con/statement.html demonstrates one such argument by ICJB that resists Dow Chemical/Union Carbide's claims:

> The emotions Bhopal evokes in Dow/Carbide are fear and contempt: fear of being found guilty in a criminal case they are fugitives from, and contempt for their victims and the law. In the wake of the disaster, Carbide and Warren Anderson worked diligently to delay legal proceedings, misinform doctors, hide assets and deny adequate relief. Civil claims were ended 13 years ago: environmental damages, criminal charges and, potentially, punitive and restitutionary damages, remain pending (BSM, n.d. para 1).

ICJB challenges corporate power and celebrates the agency of subaltern groups in Bhopal in their collective struggles against Union Carbide, local and national governments. Such an approach challenges the dominant top-down models of public relations. For instance, the excellence model of public relations by Grunig (1992) emphasises that an organisation's success depends on its skill to

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manage conflicts across all its stakeholders. It espouses relationship building with different stakeholders to minimise conflict and improve the bottom line. Hence, relationship building in this case is enacted from above by the organisation to fulfil the organisational interest and the broader capitalist interest. The excellence model thus serves to perpetuate the dominant interest by maintaining unequal power relations. Traditionally, researchers and practitioners are aligned with the dominant coalition because, as Hall (1984, p. 68) says, the history of the "sociology of knowledge" is rooted in material production. Building on Hall's argument, Rakow (1989) writes: "These examples from the critical literature suggest that information must be thought of in relation to its production because information is always a particular account. One must know, then, who produces information for what purposes" (p. 166).

Questions of inequality are gradually being addressed by critical cultural scholars of public relations (Berger, 1999; Curtin & Gaither, 2005; Durham, 2002; Durham, 2005; Roper, 2005). A culture-centred approach contributes to the critical trend. By locating expertise within the culture instead of external actors, a culture-centred approach requires a reflexive process of inquiry on the part of the researcher (Dutta, 2007; Beverly, 2004). The change initiative emerges from within the community, where cultural participants co-construct their shared experiences. The researcher becomes one of the co-participants rather than an outside expert emanating knowledge to educate the public in an attempt to change their behaviours. Acknowledging the position of privilege and power on the part of the researcher is the first step toward beginning a journey of solidarity between the researcher and the cultural members of a community. In this process, knowledge is co-constructed and from below.

## Discussion

The goal of this essay is to provide a critical impetus to public relations scholarship and practice and develop an understanding of public relations that challenges the dominant view of public relations as a management function. In this emphasis on the management function, public relations theories serve the status quo by seeking to maintain and manage the reputation and relationships of the organisation. Furthermore, opportunities for transformative politics are co-opted and effectively dealt with by emphasising the ways in which organisations can strategically manage relationships with key stakeholders. The emphasis here is on maintaining organisational structures and practices, and minimising the possibilities of change that challenge the dominant societal structures carried out by mainstream organisations.

To the extent that cultures are acknowledged as points of entry for informing public relations theorising, the emphasis is on categorising cultures into boxes based on systematic categorical systems often imposed by West-centric social scientists. For instance, the literature on cross-cultural comparisons of public relations practices often uses the cultural category of individualism-collectivism, a framework that is used and applied by Western social scientists to classify cultures. Therefore, even in such instances where culture is acknowledged, the theorising of culture and its impact on public relations practices stays limited within the categorising framework of Western social science. The constructs used to define, operationalise and measure cultures are developed by social scientists located in the US academy; cultural categories are extracted and cultures are grouped based on their scores. In this approach of cross-cultural research, culture is static and is treated as an entity that could fit into a box, without attending to the dynamic contexts within which cultures are co-created and continuously negotiated. Such monolithic categorisations of culture are not only superficial, but are also inattentive to the contexts and meanings that are continuously negotiated through communicative practices (including public relations practices).

With the emphasis on the management function and on developing strategies that serve the managerial needs and maintains the status quo, the dominant theorising of public relations

fails to address the structures that create and sustain conditions of marginalisation, and maintain the status quo. Furthermore, the voices of marginalised communities are erased as the emphasis is on achieving the managerial goals of the organisation. To the extent that participatory platforms are made available by public relations strategists, these become co-optive platforms that continue to serve the dominant actors within the social system. The culture-centred approach interrogates this managerial notion of public relations by emphasising discourses of resistance that are co-constructed through dialogues with marginalised community members.

The culture-centred approach guides the arguments of this essay and provides new ways of thinking about public relations. In particular, this article provides theoretical underpinnings for conceptualising culture and the process of theory building by advancing the relevance of contextual meanings and theorising from below. Both concepts underscore public relations as a communicative action that advocates public interest – a view that is overshadowed by the dominant corporate logic of public relations. By introducing this new dimension to public relations, this essay aims to expand the ambit of research and practice and encourage issues that are relevant for the purpose of democratic governance to the field.

The understanding of shifting and multiple contexts underscores the importance of contextually embedded meanings that are to be taken into account for scholarship and practice. This understanding challenges the dominant practice of treating culture as a set of shared values and beliefs by way of instrumentalising people and subordinating social life to the rationality of Western thinking. This treatment of culture is guided by the purpose of developing desirable public opinion by crafting culturally relevant messages that serves to perpetuate the dominant corporate agenda. In other words, centralising meanings co-constructed by the people embedded in cultural contexts ruptures the dominant model of public relations that is

about designing strategies to shape public opinion for the benefit of the organisation.

Issues of power play out through structural inequities. These inequities get obscured in the two-way symmetrical communication of public relations that advances a simplistic idea of equality. An emphasis on cultural contexts informed by a culture-centred approach raises questions such as: What are the issues that are important to the cultural members of a community? What are the structural barriers that are responsible for those issues? What are the solutions that the cultural community feels are meaningful to them? This is not about maintaining harmony between the public and the organisation in the sense that two-way symmetrical communication espouses harmony. For two-way symmetrical communication, maintaining harmony between public and organisation is accomplished by minimising conflict between the public and the organisation with the objective of increasing the organisation's bottom line. On the contrary, the idea of harmony from the perspective of culture-centred approach is driven by the objective of understanding people's experiences from the people's perspectives and addressing human conditions based on popular will. Hence, an emphasis on cultural context celebrates human agency and provides the basis for addressing public interest promoting the idea of true participatory democracy.

The implication of a culture-centred approach in theory and practice calls for a journey of solidarity between researchers and public relations practitioners and the subordinate groups (see for instance Kim, 2008; Pal, 2008). It provides an entry point for scholars and practitioners to be reflexive about their position of privilege and embark on a collaborative journey, where their roles constitute listening to the people and co-constructing meanings of their lives. Hence, theories and issues emerge from below, as articulated by the cultural participants. It opens up a new vista of research and practice for public relations, where people's concerns govern organisational agendas – an approach that creates the space for a socialist ideal over and above capitalist interests that have led to

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wide social disparities. In sum, a culture-centred approach in public relations becomes a resistive act in itself as it a) challenges the dominant top-down model of public relations b) questions the political and economic basis of a profit-driven agenda of present public relations research and practice, and c) disrupts the predominance of Western bias. Finally, espousing a participatory form of research and practice, culture-centred approach creates opening for addressing structural changes.

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