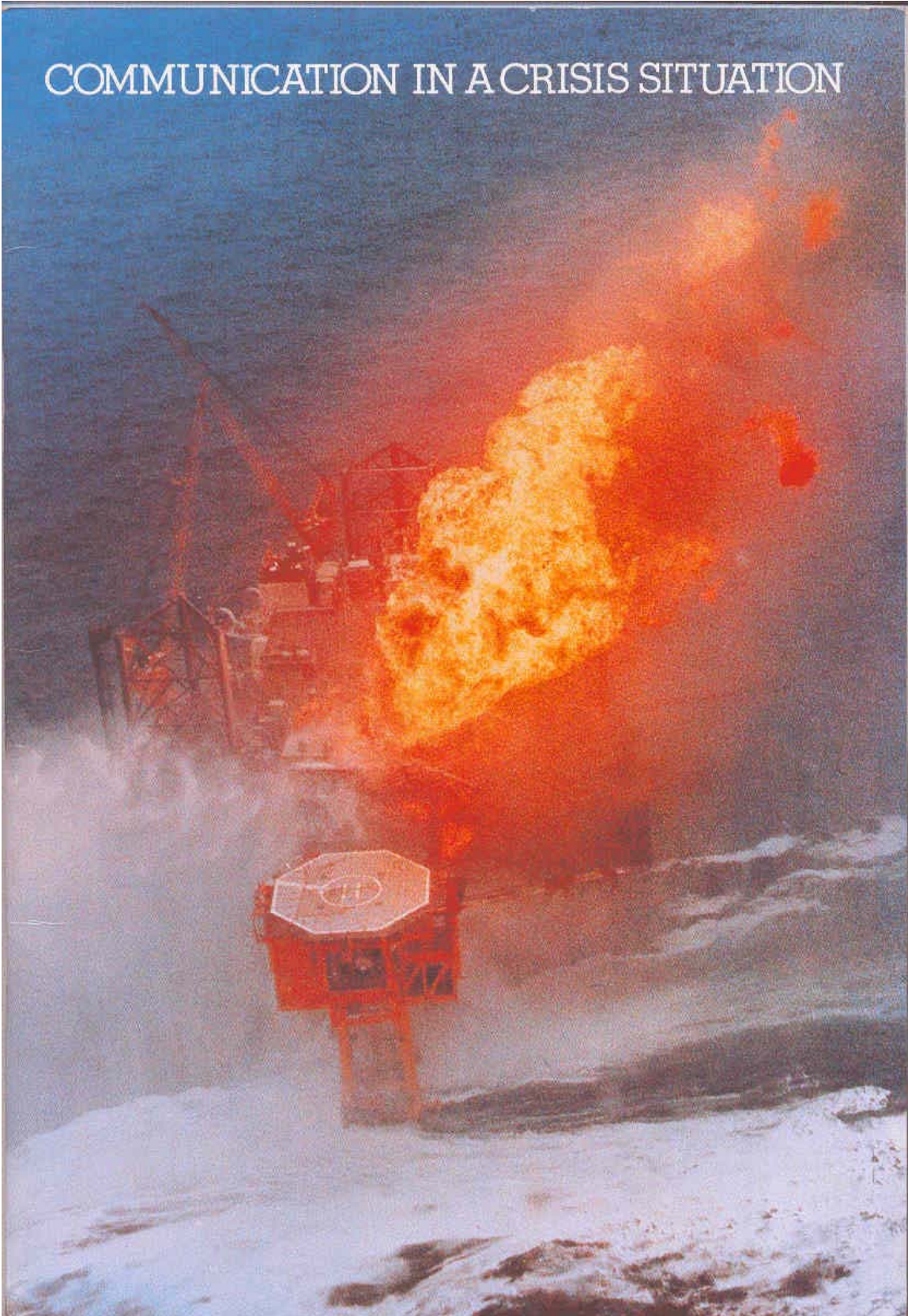


# COMMUNICATION IN A CRISIS SITUATION



**A Public Relations  
Case Study of the  
Bombay High Blow-Out**

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## PREFACE

“... Blow –out is a universal phenomenon in the oil industry, especially offshore. It is always headline news as it involves life, property and valuable economic resources in a generally unfavourable environment at sea. In spite of the best efforts on the part of the companies engaged in oil exploration, it is not generally possible to carry the shareholder in such a situation.”

“It is in this context that the offshore blow-out—the first of its kind in India—stands apart as an example of excellent communication management. Not only the Press and other media but Parliament lent a helping hand in keeping up the morale of ONGC’s valiant men... The deft handling of the media, the open-house policy, the anticipation and upgradation of the basic knowledge of a highly technical phenomenon for the media men covering the accident resulted in a participative style of communication which is worthy of emulation by professionals in the country.. Academic institutions and others interested in the subject will find this case study valuable in the practice of PR in an emergency situation.”

*Editorial, AMBIT, Journal of Bombay Management Association, Vol. XII, NO. 7, July 1983*

## **PRESS RELEASE**

THE ECONOMIC TIMES, AUGUST 2, 1982

### **Blow-Out in Bombay High oil well**

From Our New Delhi Bureau  
NEW DELHI, August 1.

There has been a blow-out in a well being drilled in the Bombay High oilfield. The crew from the jack-up rig 'Sagar Vikas' drilling the well has been evacuated without any mishap.

The blow-out occurred on the night of July 30 at about 9:30 p.m. This has caused an uncontrolled flow of gas with traces of oil.

The rig 'Sagar Vikas' was drilling for the first time into a new formation where available geological and reservoir data suggested the presence of hydrocarbons. The ONGC has mobilized all resources, including those of the navy and the coast guard, to control the situation. International experts have also been called in for assistance.

Two of the experts, both American, are flying to Bombay. They would arrive in Bombay only on Tuesday, sources said.

One of them is Mr. Red Adair, considered to be a legendary figure, having a knack of controlling oilfield disasters.

Col. S.P. Wahi, chairman of the Oil and Natural Gas Commission, told PTI tonight that all precautionary measures including the closing of the emergency generator had been taken following the unexpected blow-out.

The switching-off of the emergency generator was a "dare-devil feat" to avoid any possibility of fire.

### **THE SCOOP:**

"The entire crew of 74 persons on board ONGC's SAGAR VIKAS at South Bombay High was rescued in a matter of minutes when a blow-out occurred in the Well SJ-5 on Friday July 30, 1982 at 9:00 p.m. The wind velocity was 13 knots and swell 15 feet high at the sea..."

It was a Scoop. Confidently scooped by ONGC---the organization directly involved in the blow-out.

The news came as bolt from the blue. Never heard of before. It conjured up a hazy picture of a 'volcano in mid-ocean.' Naturally, reaction ranged from anxiety to doubt.

## **REACTIONS:**

- a) Media became restless for the story beyond the story 'given out'.
- b) Government, worried at the unfortunate accident of this magnitude, sought full details from ONGC.
- c) ONGC family was stunned and gloom cast all over the organization.
- d) Parliament (which was in Session) maintained a dignified clam and waited anxiously for the Petroleum Minister to make the statement.
- e) Ecologists got worried about pollution of the sea.
- f) Public in general wanted to know how did it happen;and enquired "What is this blow-out?"

## **WHAT IS A BLOW-OUT?**

"Blow-out is the most frightfully expensive, disastrously spectacular, and universally dreaded operational hazard in oil exploration. Yet it is a part of the process of hunting for oil, a part of the oil game, a dreaded game indeed.

Blow-out generally occurs when the formation pressure so greatly exceeds the pressure exercised by the drilling gear (and the chemical mud that is pumped in as the hole is drilled) that the formation fluid gushes out with a force that cannot be contained."

## **WHAT HAPPENED AT BOMBAY HIGH?**

On the fateful night of July 30, 1982 at 9:00 p.m., uncontrolled flow of reservoir fluids-gas, muck, traces of oil, stones-was observed from well no.5 at the SJ-Platform, which was being drilled at a depth of 1660 metres by the jack-up rig SAGAR VIKAS.

Location: 78 nautical miles off Juhu coast in the Arabian Sea on Bombay High structure.

Noticing the situation going out of control, the crew of 74 was safely evacuated and ferried to the SAGAR PRAGATI, which was about 5 kms away from the furious VIKAS.

SAGAR VIKAS was ONGC'S latest and second owned drilling rig and was in operation from January 1981. The rig was deployed for drilling 5 wells in May 1982 on SJ-Platform in Bombay High Field. Four wells, SJ-1 to SJ-4, had been successfully drilled to the target depth. It was during drilling of the fifth well that the blow-out occurred. Soon after the radio message reached the Shore-base at Bombay, senior officers rushed to the scene, out at sea, in the dead of the night by helicopters to take command of the situation, and drew up plans to combat the blow-out.

Simultaneously, action was taken to mobilize resources, manpower and expertise available in the world for controlling the well.

In spite of the best efforts, fire broke out in the well in the early morning of August 2, which was put out in the afternoon of August 5. But the blow-out continued. The battle of 'killing' and 'capping' the well lasted on till 15<sup>th</sup> of September. And media continued to report uninterruptedly the 'hell-fighting' saga for 48 days.

## **MEDIA & PUBLIC INTEREST. WHY?**

Media and through it, the public showed a tremendous amount of sustained interest in the crisis that was the blow-out. The reasons were:

- a) The importance of petroleum in the national economy.
- b) ONGC had enviable record of performance and was emerging in India. The blow-out was apprehended as a blow to its progress-therefore the public's anxiety.
- c) Blow-out was altogether a new phenomenon of oil; therefore, a natural curiosity.

## **ONGC'S ROLE IN THE ECONOMY**

With the industrial growth, petroleum requirement of the country is also increasing at a faster pace. While ONGC has been engaged in bridging the oil gap, the country today needs about 34-35 million tonnes of crude oil annually to keep its wheels moving.

ONGC has planned a massive programme for achieving self-sufficiency during the decade under a plan frame of 10 years, which aims at production of 46 million tones and 60 million tones, at an investment of Rs.24,000 crores and Rs.29,000 crores respectively, under 2 variants. ONGC will also need to increase its strength; mainly engineers, scientists and technicians.

ONGC is acquiring the status of a Mother industry in the economic infrastructure of India. It is providing fuel and feed-stock to power plants, mills, refineries, fertilizers, petro-chemicals and other petroleum-based industries, besides domestic gas and LPG.

It has already unleashed a new industrial activity in the construction of offshore platforms, ship-building, manufacture of rigs, pumps and a horde of other engineering equipment, in addition to promoting offshore oil Services and Consultancy.

With this important role in the energy sector and overall development of the country, media and public interest in ONGC, particularly at the time of threat to its vitality was very natural.

## **RESPONSIVE ATTITUDE**

With its position of pre-eminence in the total economic structure of the country, ONGC could not have remained oblivious to its responsibility towards the people, Parliament, Government and the media-of sharing with them the anxiety, determination and triumph. This attitude of responsiveness flows from the philosophy of accountability and the concept of participative management, in which ONGC has abiding faith.

From the very start of the crisis at Bombay High, ONGC management kept its cool and identified its priorities in the following order:

- 1) Contain blow-out, fight fire, mobilize resources, equipment and expertise from all over the world.
- 2) Keep morale of staff high so as to gain internal strength to face the challenge and ensure that operation in other areas continued to be handled with the same speed.
- 3) Ensure participation of the media in the effort to share information with the public and the opinion leaders so as to avert any blow-out of public opinion.

While all energies were applied to the first priority of fighting the blow-out, the ONGC management did find time to attend to the other two priorities.

## **PARTICIPATIVE COMMUNICATION**

For keeping up morale of the staff, it was essential that the news reached ONGC employees at various work-centres all over the country through the media in a correct perspective. Distortion of information could create demoralisation in the rank and file, which would be inimical to interests of the organization at that crucial stage.

As an extension of participative management, it was essential to involve media, particularly the mass media in an effort to share information, not only with in the largely scattered ONGC population but also public in general. It had to be an exercise in 'participative communication'. It was an innovative necessity born of anxiety to hold together situation, both internally as well as externally.

## **COMMUNICATION STRATEGY**

A strategy was thus evolved to achieve broad communication objectives:

- 1) No room to be allowed for rumours.
- 2) Top ONGC management to become the spokesman during the crisis.
- 3) Regular media briefings to be held in the evening at the offshore headquarters in Bombay.
- 4) Press notes to be issued regularly and relayed to all the major centers of work.
- 5) Media to be given full facts and figures as well as any assistance in filing their reports.
- 6) Information label of the eagerly curious mediemen to be upgraded, particularly regarding technicalities involved in the blow-out.
- 7) Media to be taken to site for a 'fly-over' as soon as helicopters became available.
- 8) Public Relation Office to remain in constant touch with the Radio-Room and collect eye-witness accounts of the happenings at the site from those reaching base.
- 9) Provide evidence, as far as possible, to substantiate statements made.
- 10) Monitoring of published media reports, particularly those not based on facts. Immediate clarifications to be given at the evening's media briefing.
- 11) Personal visits by top management to other installations in the area for direct communication of facts.
- 12) Blow-out and subsequent activities to be filmed for future reference, training, and education.

## **IMPLEMENTATION OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGY**

Implementation of this Communication Strategy did not require any elaborate arrangement except reinforcement of available PR talent and experience, and support in abundance from the top management.

## **POSITIVE STANCE**

ONGC achieved a positive stance from its very first message, which stressed the point that all the 74 persons aboard SAGAR VIKAS were evacuated and ferried to safety in a matter of moments. This assured the people within and outside that ONGC's most valuable assets are its workers- which no doubt is its basic management philosophy. It was unique position that generally is not available in a crisis situation like a blow-out.

With its first message carefully worded and sent across ONGC had no need to be defensive or reactive.



## **REPORT TO THE NATION**

A report to the crisis was conceived, in the form of a telecast at the peak-hour-10 o'clock news-which had the blow-out as its main headline. Instead of the newsreader narrating the account, the Chief Executive of ONGC, in an appearance which lasted about 10 minutes, described the blow-out at Bombay High and enumerated the steps being taken to control the blazing well. This had a reassuring effect on the general public.

In Parliament, the Minister for Petroleum made a statement on the blow-out, giving full facts of the accident and steps being taken to control the situation. The Minister's statement was received with sympathy and understanding. The nation was now behind ONGC.

## **MEDIA BRIEFINGS**

The attendance at the daily Media Conference increased day by day. Media were given the latest information being received from the blow-out site. All questions were answered in a free and frank manner. The media really became involved in the common objective of sharing information with the public.

ONGC produced evidence of whatever statements were made at the briefing so that its credibility remained intact. That the steps to contain the blow-out, taken by ONGC on the night of the accident, were correct decisions (as stated earlier) was endorsed by the advance team of the Red Adair Company of USA and then by Mr. Paul 'Red' Adair himself. Similarly, the facts about insurance which were given at the media briefing were endorsed by the representatives of the Insurance Company who came to answer all questions at the briefing. ONGC was thus able to apprise the nation, that the terms of the money, it didn't lose anything as all damages including drilling a new well were fully covered under international insurance.

## **UPGRADING TECHNICAL BACKGROUND OF MEDIA**

As soon as the arrangements for implementation of the contingency plan to combat the blow-out entered the crucial stage, the language of the media briefings became 'technical' in nature. Fearing that it may cause difficulty in the reporting, the media were provided technical appreciation of the blow-out and its containment; raising more question and therefore clamour for more facts and figure. Copies of available literature in respect of blow-outs in the world were provided to the media. Media now saw the Bombay High blow-out, in the context of international record, as excellent. Blow-out is an operational hazard in oil exploration: the message got across. That ONGC is engaged in the hazardous and arduous work of oil exploration was emphatically conveyed.

(Media indeed did yeoman service to ONGC as well as to the public in communicating the nature of work in which ONGC was involved and the great risk that oil exploration is.)

## **EXAMPLE: THE 3<sup>RD</sup> DIMENSION OF COMMUNICATION**

Much needed morale boosting was done by the story that the Chairman of ONGC had volunteered to land on SAGAR VIKAS to switch off emergency generator, left open for evacuation, which was on that day considered a serious fire hazard. Potential of this seemingly small fact was realized by PR, which on its own initiative, informally narrated the story to some of the mediemen who picked it up and published it prominently. It had its positive impact on ONGC. Soon staff associations, in a matching contribution, pledged support to the leadership of ONGC in a resolution which was widely circulated in the national media.

## **SEEING IS BELIEVING**

Mediemen became restive for a visit to Bombay High to witness the 'spectacular over-view' of the raging fire on SAGAR VIKAS in mid-sea. And only then would they allay the fear in ecologists minds about the safety of marine life and possibility of an oil-slick on account of the blow-out. It was impatience all over. Magazines were ready to charter helicopters to catch the blow-out in its fury and colour. It was a difficult situation in which tempers got frayed; 'Right to see and Right to know' were being asserted aggressively. ONGC did not resent this—for the simple reason that a picture of that kind would amply convey what ONGC was engaged in fighting in mid-ocean. But transportation to Bombay High was not that easy and that too for so many of them in the first few days.

Meanwhile, photographs were provided to the media which were splashed all over the country and abroad.

As soon as Air Force helicopters became available, all the media representatives were flown over the still blowing Well SJ-5. Media reported the ravaged scene at Bombay High in touching words. Tributes were paid to SAGAR VIKAS.

The Oil Slick was not noticeable—media reported to the comfort of everyone on shore.

## **TELEGRAM FROM THE MINISTER OF PETROLEUM**

11 2556 ONGC IN  
31 2755 MPCF IN

MPC MSG NO 2238 DATED 2/8/82 TIME 19-25 HRS

FOR COL. S P WAHI CHAIRMAN ONGC BOMBAY

FROM- SHRI P SHIV SHANKAR MINISTER FOR PETROLEUM, CHEMICALS  
SHASTRI BHAVAN NEW DELHI

I MADE STATEMENTS TODAY IN BOTH HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT  
REGARDING THE BLOW-OUT THAT HAS TAKEN PLACE ON THE SJ  
PLATFORM AND JACKUP RIG "SAGAR VIKAS" STOP

BOTH THE HOUSES HAVE EXPRESSED THEIR BEST WISHES  
AND FULL SUPPORT TO THE ONGC IN THEIR EFFORTS TO CONTROL THE  
BLOW-OUT SUCCESSFULLY AND EARLY STOP MY PERSONAL WISHES  
AND SUPPORT ALONG WITH THE VIEW OF THE TWO HOUSES MAY  
PLEASE BE CONVEYED TO ALL CONCERNED IN THE ONGC STOP WISH  
YOU ALL SUCCESS STOP.

### **SIDE-LIGHTS BEAMED**

While the preparations for landing at SAGAR VIKAS were on, the media focussed its attention on sidelights of the blow-out. The legendary 'Red Adair' caught the imagination of most of the younger generation mediemen and women. Requests poured in from periodicals for cover stories and special interviews with the Chief Executive and other officers, as well as with those who were on board SAGAR VIKAS on the fateful night of July 30.

Questions were received from publications, national and international, seeking information of all kinds. ONGC welcomed all and made special effort to satisfy everyone as far as possible. Periodicals, and Sunday Special of some of the national dailies, carried vivid accounts of the blow-out and ONGC's capability to rise to the occasion was repeatedly confirmed.

### **FILMS ON BLOW-OUTS**

As part of the communication strategy, ONGC screened various films on blow-outs including the famous 'HELL FIGHTERS', based on the adventures of Red Adair, for the media as well as ONGC's own staff.

## **MEDIA INTEREST SUSTAINED**

The communication programme, thus charted out, succeeded in sustaining media interest in the blow-out and thereby in ONGC-until the well SJ-5 was finally 'capped' and 'killed' on September 15, 1982.

It was a rewarding experience; dealing with media during the entire period of blow-out and after. What could be more rewarding than the following 2 excerpts which are typical of the press editorials that ONGC has generally received in this hell-fighting saga of Bombay High. One was written in the beginning when the led was off the well, and the other in the end when the well had been capped – the gap in between being 44 days.

## **INDIAN EXPRESS-AUGUST 4, 1982(EDITORIAL)**

"The risk and adventure involved in deep-sea oil exploration has been dramatised by the unfortunate blow-out in an exploratory-cum-development well in the Bombay High structure. ONGC's recently purchased SAGAR VIKAS rig, from which all personnel were safely evacuated and whose generator was subsequently turned off in a daring manoeuvre, later caught fire and has been a raging inferno. This US\$ 30 million rig will probably have to be written off as a total loss. Efforts are to be made with the aid of the American experts to stem the blowout and operations will commence as soon as the men reach Bombay. Meanwhile, emergency equipment has been readied at the site and vigilance is being maintained to prevent the formation of an oil slick that might ignite and drift towards some of ONGC's other rigs and platforms no more than five to seven kilometers away. Simultaneously, an ONGC chartered semi submersible rig is on its way from the Persian Gulf to drill a relief well that only will relieve pressure and help contain the blow-out. All these operations must be conducted in turbulent monsoon seas.

What is reassuring is the quiet confidence with which the country's oilmen have been handling the crisis with assistance from the Navy, the Coast Guard and other agencies.

There is little doubt that the blow-out and the loss of SAGAR VIKAS is a disaster. This however does not detract from the excellent record and achievements of the ONGC. The mishap must certainly be fully investigated so that the causative and other ancillary factors are established. This will provide knowledge and experience on the basis of which further drilling and exploratory work can proceed, both offshore and onshore, with appropriate preventive and safety measures and contingency plans. The movement of the oil-slick will also need to be tracked and countermeasures taken to the extent possible to mitigate, if not eliminate, marine pollution.

The blow-out is going to upset ONGC'S very rigorous and ambitious timetable for augmenting crude production. Production targets for 1982-83 and by 1985, and related import figures may have to be revised unless it is possible to ensure early replacement of the lost rig. Alternatively, there will have to be unexpected new discoveries in areas of promise, both on land and offshore. In any event, ONGC's record is one of which the country can be proud. The present mishap should be a spur to further effort."

## **TIMES OF INDIA- SEPTEMBER 18,1982 (EDITORIAL)**

“The Oil & Natural Gas Commission’s performance in capping the blow-out SJ-5 well at Bombay High has been impressive. Within two hours of the blow-out on July 30, the entire top brass was at the site and the Red Adair Co. had been put on the alert in Houston, Texas. Within 24 hours, two firefighting vessels were training water jets on the well. Another 80 hours later, three Red Adair blow-out fighters had arrived. By all accounts, the ONGC’s oilmen were able to cross bureaucratic hurdles in mobilizing the equipment needed to control the blow-out. Their plans, well –conceived and realistic, have won them international praise. The ONGC was also plainly lucky on two counts. The fire kindled by friction on August 2, went out, probably on its own, three-and-a-half days later, limiting the damage to expensive equipment, and in particular to the four wells that had been drilled before the blow-out. Secondly, the ONGC has been able to cut costs by exploiting the current decline in the world offshore hardware market. On the other hand, it was unlucky with weather. At least 30 days were lost in waiting on it. The blow-out has taken a heavy toll, equivalent to upto 80 million. But, in the oil business, the risks and losses are heavy so are the gains. A typical well in Bombay High can make up the loss in three to five years’ time at the current price of crude. And the life of an average well is 15 to 20 years...”

## **TOOLS USED & GAINS MADE**

Bombay High blow-out was a threat turned into an opportunity by deft handling of an otherwise perplexing situation. Main tools used in containing the likely blow-out of public opinion was an ‘open house’ policy. All baffles were removed. All plans, all developments taking place were shared with the media. Information given was based on truth and frankness. Normal courtesy and helpfulness made things easier. Each turn of the situation was discussed with senior media-men in an objective manner.

Own stress of the crisis taken in stride, PR personnel gave due weightage to media’s compulsive pressures of time and deadlines.

Gains of the blow-out communication strategy have been numerous, some perceptible and some imperceptible; some have been immediate and some far-reaching. Noted perceptible gains have been:

- a) ONGC added another to its image.
- b) Its own people developed a sense of pride and faith, which gave it strength to rise to the occasion.
- c) Capability to deal with the difficult situation made known ONGC’s vitality and potential.
- d) Blow-out received public acceptance as a normal hazard in oil exploration.
- e) Experiment in participative communication proved successful. Media got involved in the entire operation from the start to the end, as they found each day a new day for 48 days.
- f) PR came to be recognized as a key management function within the organization.



# Oil & Natural Gas Commission

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