

Library Diplomacy through Cultural Events & Exchange Programmes

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Abstract:

Libraries have remained a popular source of information since ancient times. They are not only a source of information but they also serve as a strategic diplomatic tool acting as a platform for cultural preservation, forum for community engagement and axis for cultural exchange through their activities and programmes. The main objective of the paper is to study libraries as a diplomatic tool. The discussion has focussed on activities and programmes run by libraries and centres that are helpful for establishing diplomatic or bi-national relations with other countries. The notable examples are countries like the UK, USA, China and France. The diplomacy tools engaged by centres and libraries are language courses, cultural events, fellowships and mobility programmes. Some good examples of Library Diplomacy are created by the Library of Congress, British Council libraries and Confucius Institutes.

Libraries provide a platform to the people from various backgrounds to participate in meaningful conversations that help in bridging cultural divides. It employs various techniques to bring people together like discussion forums, book clubs, festivals based on cultures and traditions of a nation etc. These opportunities are truly valuable in bringing people together that promote empathy, and foster a sense of belonging within a group of people at community level, national and international level. There are many private and governmental bodies that funds fellowships and mobility programmes between two or more countries. The Fulbright-Nehru Fellowships by USIEF, UKIERI mobility programme by British Council, Shastri fellowships and grants by Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute are notable example of exchange and mobility between India and other countries.

Key words: Library Diplomacy, Cultural Preservation, Diplomatic tool, Book Programmes, Cultural Centres, Libraries & Information Centres

1. Introduction

It is quite fascinating to study libraries as a strategic diplomatic tool. Libraries are generally considered repositories of knowledge, tradition and culture, but their role is far more than a knowledge repository. The libraries are carrying out numerous activities that are helpful in establishing good relations with other countries and within country as well. The concept of soft diplomacy through libraries, centres and foundations is relatively new and embryonic phase. Libraries are not storehouse of books; they manifest sentiments of communities and their cultural identity. Libraries deepen the understanding people from diverse backgrounds, provides sense of collective belonging by preserving, promoting, engaging and educating them. Libraries with their diverse collections, cultural offerings, programs and events hold a great promise to strengthen relationships and acts as effective tools in diplomacy. They are great promoters of literacy and digital skills. Through their collections, events, and services, libraries facilitate cultural exchange and foster mutual understanding among diverse communities.

Nations all over the world make use of libraries and centres as a diplomatic tool to promote their national interests. Many researchers have termed or defined such activities as Soft Power (**Beddie, 2014; Bell, 2022; Bell and Kennan, 2022a**) or Public Diplomacy (**Cull, 2008; Maack, 2001a**). This involves means like art, culture, films, and libraries to create a favourable opinion among the common people, intelligentsia, media and public officials of the targeted country.

2. Objectives:

1. To study libraries as diplomatic tool for international relations
2. To know the role of libraries in cultural preservation, promotion and education
3. To learn about programmes and events that libraries offer for cultural engagement

3. Methodology:

The literature published at national and international level has been scanned to get an overview about the topics and aspects covered. The websites of the “Library of Congress”, “American Centre”, “British Council Libraries”, “Alliance Française’s Institut Français”, “the Goethe Institut” and “Confucius Institutes” have been explored to see the services and programmes that they offer to the public in general in their native country or at international level.

4. Literature Survey

The studies on library diplomacy are noteworthy in terms of information libraries being used as diplomatic tools. A thorough review of international literature suggests linkages between libraries and international diplomacy. **Bell & Kennan, (2022b)** narrates the relationship of libraries with soft power concept and public and cultural diplomacy. **Mariano, R (2022)** has made efforts to build a concept and define library diplomacy in context of the 21st-century international environment based on published literature in the library and information science and international relations. **Mariano & Varheim (2022)** has systematically mapped key concepts and identified the types of studies and knowledge gaps in areas of research on libraries, museums and cultural centers in foreign policy.

Maack, M. N. (2001b) has compared British, French, and American book-related programs throughout Africa which were employed as soft diplomacy tool. Another study by **Gutierrez, J.J.P. (2016)** studied “British Council”, “Alliance Française’s Institut Français”, “Goethe Institut” and “Cervantes Institute”, from historical perspective and analysed it numerically to gather information libraries role as a tool for public diplomacy that exceeds remit of social assistance, social services and education. **Gutierrez & Boj (2016)** analysed nearly 2,200 libraries of various cultural organizations and listed thirty largest libraries in the world. Along with traditional services, these libraries offers help and services to local citizens in matters of social issues, education, literacy, cooperation etc. which can be labelled under cultural diplomacy actions. An interesting article by **Yi & Thompson (2015)** has presented a converse scenario where international collaborations supported the physical, intellectual, and social infrastructures of libraries in China during 20th century. In an editorial section of Library Journal, **Berry III, J. N. (2003)** has penned his views on the libraries of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) as tools of public diplomacy and their role in sustaining peace.

Based on the above literature survey, it is evident that libraries and centres are organising activities that promotes and strengthens relations indirectly which is known as soft power. France, Britain and America are the pioneer countries who have utilised library diplomacy as a tool for strengthening international, bi-lateral relations with other countries. Let us study in detail the libraries and centres as a diplomatic tool, culture preservation and community engagement.

5. Libraries: a strategic diplomatic tool

Historically, libraries have supported diplomatic and political relations by facilitating access to information and knowledge. They provide resources for researchers, policymakers, and diplomats to stay informed about global issues and developments. This can aid in the formulation of informed and effective foreign policies. Libraries support diplomatic efforts by providing a neutral space for dialogue and collaboration by hosting international conferences, seminars, and workshops that bring together experts and stakeholders from different countries to discuss common challenges and solutions.

Fig 1: Strategic diplomatic tools



Libraries are an aid to soft power of any country by promoting its culture, language, and values. They help to shape international perceptions and build a positive image of the country (Byrne, 2007; Laugesen, 2019; Lor, 2019). Through soft diplomacy, countries exert and enhance their influence and credibility on the global stage. Most of the countries run exchange programmes with other countries and have set up institutes and centres. “China has used the Confucius Institutes as a tool for its foreign policy and diplomacy (Shivam Kumar, 2024). Libraries address global challenges such as information warfare, disinformation, and unequal access to information.

Some good examples of Library Diplomacy are created by the Library of congress, British Council libraries and Confucius Institutes.

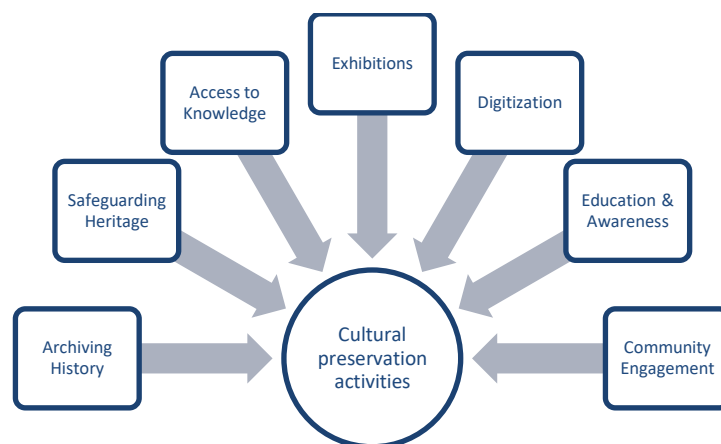
- The “Library of Congress” in the “United States” hosts international exhibitions and cultural events that promote American culture and values.
- British Council libraries around the world offer English language courses, cultural events, and educational resources that promote British culture and strengthen bilateral relations.

- Confucius Institutes are associated with China that promotes Chinese language and culture through libraries and cultural events, fostering cultural exchange and understanding.

6. Platform for cultural preservation & exchange programs

The libraries play a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage, making it accessible, and educating the public. They are vital institutions for conserving history and nurturing community engagement. At organisational level, the soft power can be leveraged through 'information'. **Liu et al. (2017)** has linked cultural soft power of Chinese university libraries to 'information literacy' in Chinese culture and national strategy. Libraries collect and document cultural artifacts, preserving a community's cultural identity and national heritage. The researchers and future generations are greatly benefits with library's collections such as rare books, manuscripts, photographs, newspapers, maps and oral histories. A library ensures long-term preservation and accessibility to digitized and archived materials and facilitates individuals to explore their cultural evolution. Thus, the preserved and digitised material helps in uncovering stories of resilience, creativity, and diversity. By collecting and preserving historical materials, libraries act as custodians of the past.

Fig 2: Cultural preservation activities of libraries and centres



Libraries actively support local artists and authors by organising various activities art exhibitions, book launch, literary readings, and musical performances. These activities of the libraries feature diverse voices and perspectives of entire community which leads to a sense of pride and appreciation among citizens. The promotion of language is also practised to attract people as it gives collective identity to them. Thus, language is an important tool of soft diplomacy that 'cultivated through narrative and aesthetic presentations of collective identity' (**Solomon, 2014; Mattern, 2005**).

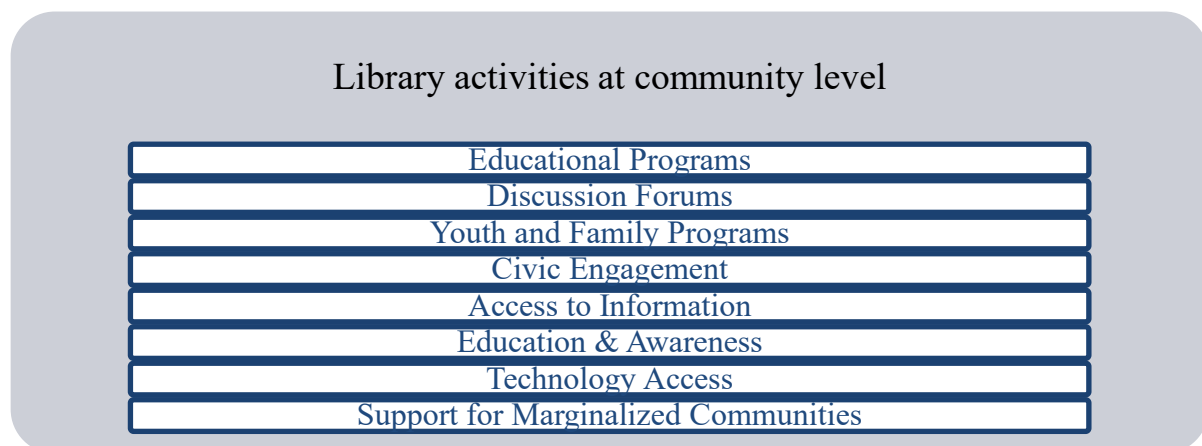
There are many programmes and fellowships that are being run to support cultural exchange. Some of the known examples are Fulbright-Nehru Fellowships, Rhodes Scholarship, IAESTE by cultural vistas etc. Students, scholars, and professionals gain first-hand experience of other's culture and academic environments. In India, the Fulbright-Nehru Fellowships are essence of cultural diplomacy. **Sahoo (2023)** has recognized exchange programs as potent drivers of personal development, global understanding and academic performance.

7. Libraries for Community Engagement and Dialogue

Libraries serve as a valuable platform for community engagement and dialogue through discussion forums, book clubs, cultural festivals, and guest speaker events. These activities create social connections within the community. They create opportunities for lifelong learning by offering varied print and e- resources and programs for everyone in the society. They support continuous learning and skill development for community people. Many public libraries run early literacy programs for children and vocational courses or workshops for elderly and women. Libraries make provision and give access to information in varied forms like “books”, “e-books”, “audiobooks”, “online databases”, and educational materials to pursue educational goals and expand knowledge of individuals.

It is perceived that there is significant community impact of exchange programs. People learn language of other country that creates emotional bond. In a survey carried out by AFS intercultural programmes “73% of respondents accepted it as an opportunity to experience a different culture and way of life; 43% of respondents ranked language learning as one of the main benefits ... (AFS, 2024). This is suggestive of direct connect between linguistic development and exchange programmes. It highlights the potential for acquiring new languages or enhancing their language skills through the exchange programs.

Fig 3: Library activities at Community level



Libraries provide essential resources to the people who aim to expand their knowledge and improve information literacy skills. They run literacy programs to support information literacy among people. Libraries make individuals capable by promoting digital literacy and technological skills. Community people are capacitated through digital literacy programmes so that they make informed decisions in their civic life.

8. Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is clear that libraries are instrumental in soft diplomacy at international level. They engage various tools to promote and support soft diplomacy. They promote different cultures and voices through programs and activities such as, author talks, book clubs, cultural festivals, film screenings, and other events. These activities help uniting individuals from various cultural backgrounds and geographical regions, promoting dialogue and interaction among community members. The “Library of Congress” in the “United States” hosts international exhibitions and cultural events that promote American culture and values. Similarly, British Council libraries around the world offer English language courses,

cultural events, and educational resources that promote British culture and strengthen bilateral relations.

Libraries provide a platform for cultural exchange and expression which essentially promote mutual understanding, empathy, and appreciation for others. Libraries offer resources and services by offering language learning materials, multilingual collections, and culturally relevant programming. Thus, library's collection and programs are powerful tools for promoting cultural understanding, bridging divides, and building a more inclusive and vibrant community. Additionally, libraries enrich collective knowledge by embracing diverse cultures and voices. They preserve and celebrate cultural heritage which foster a sense of belonging among all community members.

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