

Library and its use as a Strategic Diplomatic Tool

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Introduction:

Libraries are popular social and cultural institutions with a wide prevalence across the world. As the store house of knowledge and information, their presence and popularity is seldom matched with other institutions. Since the ancient times, libraries did catch the imagination of people, including the ruling elite and found a place of pride in almost all bigger, developed states and societies. Similar to developments in all other domains of sciences and society, libraries too have evolved and grown and today have moved from a mere physical presence to a digital and even virtual form.

Politics and statecraft too, have evolved and grown over the centuries. New ideas, tactics and strategies have come to supplement political thoughts, works and ideas. To achieve various political and strategic objectives, states have resorted to the use of various tools from diverse fields, such as science, technology, diplomacy and the like. Libraries too, have gradually grown into an important tool to protect and promote the perceived national interests of a state. Though the usage of libraries as a tool of foreign policy and diplomacy is quite limited to a handful of big and powerful countries yet their significance is quite formidable. An analysis of libraries as an important strategic diplomatic tool is certain to reveal insightful and interesting developments that have taken place in this domain and what it entails for a state's diplomatic and foreign policy strategies.

Objectives: A study of libraries as a diplomatic tool is quite an unexplored territory. Very few works have been done on the subject. As a library professional with a deep and passionate interest in foreign and strategic issues, I found the subject very interesting and enlightening one. My objective behind doing this exercise has been to see the diplomatic manageability of nations using library as a social and cultural institution and how far that has helped in shaping and moulding their respective foreign policy options.

Methodology: As stated, not much work has been done in the given domain. Very few researches have dealt in with the use of libraries as a diplomatic tool or the very concept of library diplomacy. While pursuing my work therefore, I preferred to rely mostly on various literature available online on the subject or related materials. I also analysed the impact of libraries on the politics, state and society since ancient times since a lot of material is available on the presence of important libraries and institutions in ancient India. I tried to connect the situation to contemporary times where libraries as popular social, cultural and educational institutions have a big role in influencing popular perception and opinion with a bearing on the policies of sovereign states towards other nations and institutions.

Main Content: Libraries have a pride of place in all societies since ancient times. Specially in the developed civilizations like the Roman, Greek, India, Egyptian, Persian, Chinese one comes across the mention of libraries in big empires and educational institutions run by them. The Library of Aristotle, The Library of Rhodes, Hadrian's Library (Athens) in Greece had

extensive documented collections of various subjects and knowledge branches. The Academy of Gondishapur (Iran) in 3rd-6th century had an enviable collection of 4,00,000 titles. Libraries of the Forum, Atrium Libertatis and The Villa of Papyri (Italy) had used many important techniques in preserving and promoting knowledge and information among the populace, specially the elite ones. Ugarit, Ebla and Mari in Syria had wonderful documentation and archive techniques that helped them preserve old information, knowledge as well as diplomatic communication that occurred between the rulers of the time.

The Royal Library of Alexandria (295 BC) and The Temple of Edfu Archive/Library (237-257 BC) in Egypt were bestowed with numerous engravings and documents of huge historical, mythological, religious and political significance. The ancient Chinese libraries of Qin and Tang dynasties, along with Han Imperial Library had evolved as important repositories of knowledge, information, history and diplomacy.

In Indian subcontinent, Takshsila, Nalanda, Vikramsila had emerged as great places of learning. They too had big libraries that catered to various informational domains, from education, warfare, theology, statecraft to astronomy, language, mathematics and culture and their prominence had attracted travelers and scholars from many other parts of the world. Jagaddal, Vallabh, Mithila, Somapuri, Ujjain and Odantapuri as popular centres of learning in ancient India also had impressive libraries with a great collection of books in myriad forms.

The important point to be noted here is that libraries have been an integral part of socio-political and cultural milieu in most of the advanced societies since ancient times. Libraries there have played a significant role in not only acquisition but also promotion and dissemination of various forms of knowledge. A good number of such libraries in their collections had various forms of diplomatic and political communication among respective sovereigns. The collections also had portrayed the state of economic and political relations between different states. In this way, libraries have been shown to have played a role in diplomatic and political relationship since even ancient times.

Over the centuries, like all other forms of knowledge and communication, libraries too have grown, developed and evolved. Science and technology has helped in changing the educational, social and cultural landscapes and libraries too have been hugely influenced by the developments in this domain. Contemporary libraries have collections of not merely books but a diverse form of documents that include journals, newspapers, maps, atlas, photographs, microfilms, pictorial publications and audio-visual materials. And such diverse range of documents not only present knowledge in different subject forms, they also display collections that deal in with issues of foreign policy, diplomacy and strategic matters.

Talking of Library Diplomacy as a concept, at the outset there seems to be a dichotomy between the two. While as important social-cultural institutions, the primary responsibility of a library is to provide knowledge and disseminate information among its users, diplomacy on the other hand, deals with providing inputs, policies and strategies to deal in with conduct of foreign relations between a sovereign and the other. Such relationships, mostly conducted on a bilateral basis but may also include conduct of relationships on a trilateral, quadrilateral or even multilateral basis.

Whereas a library is organised and run by a professionally qualified Librarian, Diplomacy is run and led by a pool of trained and qualified diplomats. Since the advent of libraries in very ancient times, diplomats and statesmen have used them to acquire and learn knowledge and information for running their kingdoms/states as well as to conduct their bilateral relationships, in terms of politics and economy, with other sovereign states. The highly regarded Arthashastra by Kautilya, is regarded as a masterpiece relevant even to contemporary times. The process has continued in libraries with relevant changes in line with the needs of contemporary foreign policy. They continue to attract diplomats for securing knowledge/information but an important change that has emerged is notice-

able and that is the evolution of libraries as a strategic diplomatic tool.

Diplomacy is used for the purpose of protection and promotion of National Interest, as perceived by the government of the respective sovereign nation. To protect or promote respective national interest, as perceived by the government of the day, a sovereign state resorts to the use of various means as part of its diplomatic process. Bilateral/multilateral discussions, negotiation, back channel diplomacy, summit meets are some of the ways that are used in today's diplomatic process.

Political and economic tools are the primary components in the conduct of modern-day diplomacy. Following a carrot and stick policy, vis-a-vis lesser states are common to promote a state's national interests. And to achieve this aim, mostly political means are employed whereas political leaders, usually the foreign minister or the Head of Government/State or a Special Representative (SR) takes the initiative to carry out the policies formulated by their trusted officials/foreign policy mandarins.

Economic tools are nowadays frequently employed by nations with economic clout to promote their national interests. This method has been in vogue since late 19th century when economic imperialism was adopted as part of the state policy by governments in Great Britain, France, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and a few others. They used trade to promote their economic interests and later on enhanced their political influence, resulting ultimately in the political control and occupation of many nations in Asia and Africa. Subsequent to World War II, a dramatic change in the global economic landscape took place which saw the decline of west European powers becoming secondary and allied powers to the US. All through 1950s till current times, there have been hundreds of instances where economic influence was used by major powers, specially the US and its allies to coerce other nations to fall in line in conformity with their perceived national interests.

Since 2012 however, a new developing imperialist power has risen on the global map. China with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), purportedly initiated to promote infrastructural network specially among the poor, developing countries has used its growing economic clout to further its expansionist designs. By promoting its debt diplomacy, China has within a short span of time enhanced its indirect political, economic and military control over a number of countries in different parts of the world.

Military tool as a diplomatic prowess is usually resorted to as the last option by sovereign nations. However, in the 1940s, the usage of military force by Germany and its allies, Italy and Japan to further their perceived national interests, saw the application of brute force. The constant Chinese threat to take over Taiwan by use of military force or recent Turkish endeavours to promote its proxies in Syria by resorting to military use, are some examples of military tools being used by some countries even when their core interest is not at stake.

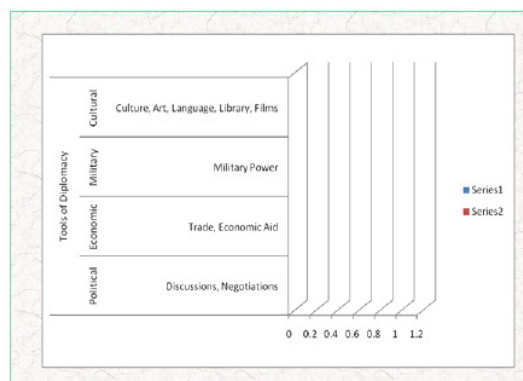
Cultural tools are another significant form of diplomatic method that is also being used to promote the national interests of a state. Part of what many call, Soft Power or Public Diplomacy, it involves means like art, culture, films, libraries to create a favourable opinion among the common people, intelligentsia, media and public officials of the targeted country. When a country uses such tools to promote its art/culture/films, the objectives are implicit.

With their use, the said country first tries to create a positive image of itself in the eyes of people of the host nation. And to do so, varied cultural tools like art/literature/culture are used. Organisation of Cultural/Art festivals, exhibitions of painting/cinema in other countries are popular ways of projecting the positive image of a country abroad. The organisation of Festival of India by India in nations like the UK, Soviet Union, USA in the 1980s played a significant role in projecting a positive image of India in those countries.

Secondly, with the cultural tools of diplomacy, a country can reach out to the remotest parts and

common masses of a country. With the exponential rise in the communication technologies, a country can use it optimally to reach out to the people with its message, in line with its foreign policy objectives.

Thirdly, promotion of ideology is another important aspect of cultural diplomacy. While nations like the US, UK, France, Japan, Germany, India use it to promote a world view of freedom, equality of race/religion/gender, countries like Russia, China and Cuba use culture to promote their own worldview of economic equality.



Fourthly, libraries form an important component of cultural diplomacy for most countries. With almost 1600 foreign mission-supported libraries operating around the world, catering to nearly one million readers in more than 100 countries, their influence on populace of host countries, cannot be underestimated. These spaces may well be categorised as Public Libraries according to IFLA/UNESCO manifestation that provide for promotion of reading habits, inter-cultural dialogue and diversity with equal opportunity for all. They do not merely provide space for books and other documents for knowledge/information but also organise workshops, exhibitions, film shows, talks/discussions and other interactive events that provide an opportunity to showcase the country's own progress in various economic, scientific domains but also project them as important, popular destinations for trade, business, education and tourism.

In the process, the country's image in a positive way is projected to the host country. That can well be used as a good PR exercise by the country and by attracting people from that country, it can enhance its economic benefits and obtain political gains too. Further, these libraries beside providing library services, also help natives in education, social development, literacy, counselling, job, research and new educational opportunities. No wonder, one comes across figures of nearly 70 thousand people in Myanmar and more than 60 thousand citizens in Zimbabwe, visiting one or two British Council Library centres in a year in their countries.

Alliance Francaise (France), USIS Library (USA), British Council Library (UK), Goethe Institut (Germany) are some of the leading global libraries which have a pan-global presence. All of them have been using their centres as educational and reference libraries along with other facilities. But ultimately, they are providing their positive exposure to host countries and consequently helping promote their economic, trade, tourism and educational opportunities. The unprecedented popularity of Hollywood among most of the non-english speaking countries can

also be attributed partly, to the exposure it got at various film shows organised by the USIS Libraries in their centres across the world.

Major Global Libraries Around the World

Nation(s)	Librari(es)	Number of Librari(es)	Presence in Countries
USA	USIS/American Library	319	97
UK	British Council Library	200	110
France	Alliance Francaise	1217	161
Germany	Goethe Institut	160	95
Spain	Cervantes Institute	86	43
Italy	Dante Alighieri Society	--	60
China	Confucius Institute	530	149

Libraries today are not merely used as information/documentation centres but as an important component of foreign policy. As a strategic diplomatic tool, libraries today are being used as soft power, instruments of cultural diplomacy or public diplomacy. This process has continued for many decades now though the emergence of modern technologies has brought about a subtle change in the way libraries now function in other countries. One important example of emerging form of Library Diplomacy has been the Confucius Institute of China. With the gradual politico-strategic movement of China across the world, the number of Confucius Institute that it operates under the garb of Mandarin language training in host countries, has seen a quantum jump across the world. The setting up of more than 530 centres across the world, especially in countries where it has greater politico-economic-strategic stakes, is evident in using this library-cum-cultural centre as an important component of its diplomacy.

Implications: The concept of Library Diplomacy is one in vogue for many decades. However, its usage has increased in a substantial way in the 21st century. Creating a positive perception, irrespective of real intentions has been talked about in ancient classics like Arthashastra (Chanakya) and The Art of War (Sun Tzu). As part of perception management and information warfare (IW), countries have become more conscious of using libraries as part of public diplomacy to enhance its image, secure effective economic and political benefits, project itself as an important tourism or educational hub and earn valuable foreign exchanges by visits or movements of targeted populations from host countries. It is the reason that almost all the major global countries do use some sort of cultural diplomacy or part of its soft power to secure and promote their respective national interests.

Conclusion: Libraries are no longer a mere socio-cultural institution. Currently, they have an economic and political element too which help to promote the implicit objectives of the state. By providing a detailed and targeted socio-economic and political description, it secures a positive image among the host nation. By influencing their intelligentsia, media and policy makers it is able to influence the decisions and policy-making of host state-vis-a-vis itself. By attracting businessmen, tourists and students, it also secures good economic and commercial benefits. And by ensuring their presence in its country, the said state is also able to leverage politico-strategic benefits for itself.

It is no wonder then that libraries have come to be regarded as part of the soft power, cultural diplomacy of a state. There have been instances of shrinking budgets and cost-cutting that has compelled leading global powers like the US, UK, France to reduce their library operations. However, they continue to have a limited presence in many countries and are endeavouring to use them as part of public diplomacy. The advent of internet and fast growing communication

technologies undoubtedly, has reduced the role and importance of physical libraries but one can certainly hope that with all such libraries going online, providing internet-enabled services to users in foreign countries, libraries will continue to work, evolve and grow in various forms while Library Diplomacy will remain an integral part of foreign policy and will flourish in new, innovative and strategic forms.

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