

## Innovations in Public Diplomacy

### *Inovações em Diplomacia Pública*

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**Abstract:** From the author's professional experience, the article discusses alternative ways to think about cultural diplomacy, with a focus not only in the spread of the culture of the native country of the diplomat, but also of the nation where he is serving.

**Keywords:** diplomacy, culture and art.

**Resumo:** A partir da experiência profissional do autor, o artigo discute maneiras alternativas de pensar a diplomacia cultural, tendo como concentração não apenas a divulgação da cultura do país de origem do diplomata, mas também a do país onde está servindo.

**Palavras-chave:** diplomacia, cultura, arte.

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During the past 15 years of my career in the Indian Foreign Service, I have tried to use innovative ways to engage people from the countries I have been posted to viz. Russia, Nepal and Brazil as well as people across the world through Digital Diplomacy. I have succeeded to a certain extent in institutionalizing some of these programmes I started in St. Petersburg, Russia; Kathmandu, Nepal and Brasilia and Sao Paulo in Brazil.

Embassies generally busy themselves promoting their own culture and values, spending a large sum of their financial resources inviting cultural troupes from the countries they represent. What if, in addition to promoting their own culture, they could promote the culture and talent of their host countries without committing major financial resources? Wouldn't it be a masterstroke in the practice of public diplomacy and economy of resources?

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## *Russia and Nepal*

I was posted in St. Petersburg, Russia as Consul from 2007-2010. During this period I invited local artists to exhibit their works at the Consulate premises apart from screening Bollywood films every month. These two events helped the Consulate to build a vast network among the artistic and intellectual community of St. Petersburg, introduced Indian culture to the younger generation of Russians and helped us learn about the great artistic tradition of Russia. Exhibitions of Russian art brought Russian artists, art critics, media persons, writers and diplomats of other countries to the Consulate. I also invited local Russian artists trained in classical Indian music to perform at the Consulate every month. This brought musicians and music lovers to the Consulate regularly. In a short span of time, the Indian Consulate in St. Petersburg became the cultural hot spot in the city without spending Indian Council for Cultural Relations' or Ministry of Culture's precious budget. These events also kept the Consulate in local media limelight and built leverage for us among the influential people in St. Petersburg.

I served in Nepal from 2012-2016 as the Secretary of the B.P. Koirala Nepal-

India Foundation (BPKF)<sup>2</sup> and as the spokesperson for the Embassy of India Kathmandu. As Secretary BPKF I experimented with four innovative initiatives at the Nepal-Bharat Library in Kathmandu, Nepal to expand the horizons of Indian public diplomacy viz. Conversations, Poemandu, Cinemandu and Voices. These four programmes were aimed at promoting Nepalese art, literature, music, and film; they also encouraged and engaged the younger generation of Nepalese to share their ideas, experiences, and stories.

The *Conversations* series began in January 2013. The idea behind *Conversations* was to get two writers, journalists, academics etc to discuss their work and ideas with each other, to get to the very core of their work and dig out their deepest thoughts, philosophies and messages. Conversations between the writers were followed by a Q&A session in which the audience got a chance to ask questions. This monthly programme provided a literary platform for Nepalese writers and readers to learn from each other.

The *Conversations* series hosted eminent Nepali authors such as Krishna Dharawasi and Amar Neupane, both recipients of Nepal's highest literary

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<sup>2</sup> Official site: <http://bpkf.org.np>.

award, prominent artists such as Prakash Sayami and Sanat Kumar Wasti, comedians Haribansh Acharya and Mandan Krishna Shrestha, and best-selling authors and literary figures such as Buddhisagar, Nayanraj Pandey, and Abhi Subedi. *Conversations* received wide media coverage in the mainstream media and became one of the most popular literary events on Kathmandu's calendar attended by the 'who's who' of the Nepalese intellectual world.

*Poemandu*, a monthly poetry recitation program was launched by the B.P. Koirala Foundation in March 2013 on the occasion of the World Poetry Day to provide a platform to the Nepalese poets to recite their poems and meet each other. It was inaugurated by the National Poet of Nepal, Madhav Prasad Ghimire and Chancellor of Nepal Academy, Bairangi Kainla. Over thirty Nepalese poets participated in the inaugural edition of *Poemandu*, reciting their poems in Nepali, Hindi, Newari, Maithili, English, Awadhi, Urdu, Bhojpuri among other languages. Indian poets were also invited from time to time and prominent poets such as Bibhu Padhi from Odisha and Arundhati Subramaniam from Tamilnadu took part in various editions of *Poemandu*. Several editions of *Poemandu* were organized at the Nepal-Bharat Library with participation of prominent poets creating

a culture-based dialogue between Nepalese and Indian poets. The BPKF continues this programme even today, about two and half years since I left Kathmandu.

Riding on the wave of success of *Poemandu*, I tried to create a similar programme for cinema lovers and named it *Cinemandu*. *Cinemandu* became a celebration of the fine Nepalese films. A new generation of Nepalese filmmakers, directors, actors, and actresses were working hard to give Nepalese film industry a niche of its own. At *Cinemandu*, notable Nepalese films were screened, in presence of the cast and crew of the film who interacted with the audience after the screening of the film. *Cinemandu* screened some of the best Nepalese films such as *Loot*, *Highway*, *Sanghuro*, *Shayad*, *Sunghava*, and *Kagbeni*. *Sunghava* was Nepal's entry for the Academy Awards in U.S. in 2013. The programme brought the film community of Nepal closer to India.

*Voices* was the fourth programme in this genre in which Nepalese thinkers, scholars, journalists were invited to give a talk on their areas of expertise. It was inaugurated with participation of two journalists of Nepal, Kunda Dixit and Narayan Wagle. Its later editions had eminent speakers such as Raghu Rai, celebrated Indian photographer, Sudheer

Sharma, Editor of *Kantipur Daily* and Akhilesh Upadhyay Editor of the *Kathmandu Post*, Prateek Pradhan, Editor of *Nagrik* with Gunraj Luitel, editor of *Annapurna Post* among others.

Each of these four programmes was open to the general public and was well advertised on the social media channels of the Embassy and in the local newspapers. These took place at the Nepal-Bharat Library which could accommodate over a hundred people at a time. As a token of appreciation, the Embassy presented relevant books to the speakers at the end of each programme and the audience was offered refreshments such as samosa, coffee, and tea.

These programmes became brands in themselves in Kathmandu. However outside Kathmandu, we did not have any such public diplomacy initiatives. Therefore I combined these into a single one day cultural festival branding it as *Culture Nagari* and started taking it to the five most populous cities of Nepal viz. Pokhara, Nepalgunj, Birgunj, Biratnagar, and Janakpur, one by one. A large number of young people turned up for these events to learn from their elders as well as to share their own ideas, views and feelings with them and each other.

This way I was able to remould the concept and practice of public diplomacy

by promoting the host country's culture alongside Indian culture. These programmes helped in building long lasting people to people contacts between India and Nepal. The Embassy of India in Nepal benefited immensely from these programmes in extending its outreach and influence.

### *Chá com Letras in Brasília*

When I was posted to Brazil in January 2016 as the Deputy Chief of Mission, I built upon my experiences in Kathmandu and started *Chá com Letras*<sup>3</sup> (Tea with Letters), a monthly literary event at the Embassy premises immediately upon my arrival in Brasilia. The purpose of *Chá com Letras* was to bring the writing community of Brazil together by providing them a regular platform to share their poetry, short stories and give them an opportunity to savour Indian cuisine such as chai and samosa.

Since January 2016, 28 editions of *Chá com Letras* have been conducted in Brasilia so far. Besides, 3 editions have been held in Sao Paulo in coordination with the Consulate General of India. Over a 100 prominent Brazilian poets and writers have read their literary works at the monthly event including Brazilian novelist Joao Almino, who is a

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<sup>3</sup> More information on: [http://www.eoibrasilia.gov.in/news\\_detail/?newsid=84](http://www.eoibrasilia.gov.in/news_detail/?newsid=84).

member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, Rio de Janeiro, poets Antonio Miranda (Director of the National Library of Brazil), Nicholas Behr (author of *Brasilia A-Z*), Francisco Alvim, Anderson Braga Horta, Kori Bolivia, Fabio Coutinho Sousa (President of The Writers Association of Brasilia), Criastiane Sobral, Jorge Amancio and Ambassador Ary Quintella among others. Indian poet Makarand Paranjape, Iranian poet Farhad Sasani have also read their works at *Chá Com Letras*.

The event also gives visibility to young writers with talent by inviting them to read their works at the event. The event has also become a platform for book launches and dissemination of Indian literature<sup>4</sup>, intellectual discussions as well as social networking. The Embassy of India in Brasilia has utilized this platform to launch a Portuguese translation of 77 folk tales of Karnataka edited by noted Indian writer A.K. Ramanujan titled *Uma Arvore em Flor* and a publication dedicated to 70 years of India-Brazil diplomatic relations. The visitors to *Chá com Letras* also attend various other events organized by the Mission, thus making Indian Embassy's presence felt in and around Brasilia and in the Brazilian media. The event has

helped us to win many new friends for India in Brazil. During the past two and half years I have not only learnt Portuguese but also translated poems of over a hundred Brazilian poets into English and put together an anthology titled *100 Select Brazilian Poems* to take contemporary Brazilian poetry to India and the world.

During my tenure in Kathmandu I had learnt Yoga from the Yoga teacher at the Indian Cultural Centre there. After arriving in Brasilia in January 2016 I got in touch with prominent Yoga teachers in the city and invited them to conduct pro bono Yoga classes at the Embassy. The classes began with a few participants and at times have reached a peak of around 70 participants. Later in 2017, a class on Wednesday evenings has been added for students. The classes are free and open to all. Mission does not pay any honorarium to the teachers. The participants include local government officials, foreign diplomats, general public, Embassy officials and their family members. As part of the Indian policy to promote Yoga, the Embassy has achieved the objective of promoting Yoga and reached out to a large number of people in Brazil. The people attending Yoga classes have also participated at the IDY 2016 and IDY 2017 organized by the Mission at the Chancery and at venues across the city. The Yoga classes

<sup>4</sup> For example, the Brazilian edition of "100 Grandes Poemas da Índia". Available at: <http://www.revistas.usp.br/clt/article/view/144659>.

organized by the Mission have not only promoted health awareness in and

around Brasilia but has also provided wide publicity to rich Indian culture.

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