

# The Impact of Cultural Appreciation on Conflict Resolution



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Deep inside every human is a yearning for peace. The yearning is sometimes so deep that it appears concealed and paradoxically expresses itself as conflict. We have often heard the statement “this is the war which will end all wars” at global macro levels, and the statement “this is the argument which will close all arguments” at micro inter-personal levels, even among the closest of human relationships – spouses, siblings, parents-children.

In the context of the global conflicts facing mankind today, I explore whether better cultural appreciation or even just acceptance could help in reducing conflicts.

## Cultural Appreciation in the Snowy Hills of Niigata Prefecture

It was mid-winter. True to its distinction of holding the record for having Japan’s heaviest snowfall, the municipality of Toukamachi in Niigata Prefecture was piled with snow gleaming bright in the mild winter sunlight. The town is at the end of the long tunnel made famous by Nobel-laureate Yasunari Kawabata (1899-1972) in his novel *Snow Country*. Ten kilometers up through the surrounding mountains from the nearest railhead is the Mithila Museum, named after the ancient region of Mithila, in present-day Bihar state in eastern India and the adjoining areas of Nepal. The founder and curator of the museum is Tokio Hasegawa.

From an early age, Hasegawa developed a keen interest in nature and culture. He became an art collector with a focus on the unique art of the Mithila region, but also has items from Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin America (*Photo 1*). As a musician himself, he also

explored world folk music traditions. Across the years he has hosted many traditional music groups at his home in Toukamachi and has organized their concerts across Japan to spread cultural awareness and appreciation. He is also a founder of the annual *Namaste India* festival held in Yoyogi Park in Tokyo. This popular event exhibits Indian culture and cuisine.

Keenly interested in nature, Hasegawa made the pristine hills with starry skies around Toukamachi his home. He believes that human bonding happens through mutual acceptance and with being in consonance with nature. His unique annual winter concert exemplifies this, performing as an ensemble out in the open with a small group of like-minded musicians and the snow as their stage (*Photo 2*).

## Beacons of Cross-Cultural Understanding

Father Cyril Veliath is a man of peace. A professor emeritus at Sophia University in Tokyo, he is a champion of inter-faith dialogue and emphasizes the necessity of cross-cultural acceptance to foster a loving and peaceful world. While Father Veliath is an ordained Jesuit priest, he is at equal ease and conviction with Hindu and Buddhist scriptures and Shinto thought as much as he is with the Holy Bible (*Photo 3*).

Father Veliath takes a generous view of the world that while there are indeed frequent aberrations, it is developing positively. Bigotry by-and-large has reduced, and we see a human society where diversity is increasingly accepted. He says India has played a big role in this with its hallowed Vedic tradition of acceptance. He mentions



Photo 1: Kosei Sawada

Mithila Museum artefacts



Photo 2: Author

Toukamachi Snow Orchestra

Photo 3: Author



Father Cyril Veliath

that it was during the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) convened by then Pope John XXIII that the Catholic Church took the revolutionary step of accepting that non-Christian traditions are also paths to the Divine. He recalled with reverence Father Raimon Panicker (1918-2010) who said, “I left Europe [for India] as a Christian, I discovered I was a Hindu and returned as a Buddhist without ever having ceased to be Christian,” and was a vocal supporter of the changes proposed by the Pope at the Council.

Nestling in one of the quaint residential areas in the hills of Zushi, Kanagawa Prefecture, is a simple building which one can mistake for a large traditional Japanese house. This is the headquarters of the Nippon Vedanta Kyokai (The Japan Vedanta Society). It represents The Ramakrishna Matt, a mega spiritual and philanthropic organization headquartered in Kolkata, India, which has had a profound impact in spreading human values in India and other countries. Swami Medhasananda (Swamiji) has led the organization in Japan for a couple of decades. A scholar, educationist and monk of the Ramakrishna Order, Swamiji’s simplicity is only matched by his tireless work to promote cross-cultural understanding and foster a quest for the inner spirit in individuals (Photo 4).

When I sought Swamiji’s opinion on the topic of my article, he said that the basis of all conflicts whether small or big can be traced to the individual – that without purity of heart and intention, all statements of support for cultural appreciation as a tool for conflict resolution remain as nothing more than lip service. It is for this reason that whether it was the League of Nations post-World War I or the United Nations later, the ideals remain lofty only to be easily shattered. Having said

Photo 4: Nippon Vedanta Kyokai



Swami Medhasananda

this, Swamiji added that it does not mean that one should give up and do nothing; calling unequivocally for humanness and cultural acceptance is necessary and inculcating human values through education is required. The key phrase to be mandated across the globe is “unity in diversity” – that is accepting every culture, every tradition with respect, while at the same time recognizing and living by the human values that unite all. Swamiji emphasized that this was not about tolerance – which has a negative connotation – but about acceptance. Swamiji said that a mind free of hatred and anger and which distances itself from physical and material feverishness is something that can be realized through the practice of right living, service and raising the mental state by offering the fruits of any action to the Divine. He mentioned Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), the founder of the Ramakrishna Order, who carried the message of universal acceptance to the West during his participation at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893.

### Symphony of Peace Prayers

In the foothills of Mt. Fuji in Shizuoka Prefecture is a sacred space known as the Fuji Sanctuary. It was established by a Japanese peace organization, *Byakko Shinko Kai*, under the auspices of the Goi Peace Foundation and the chairmanship of Masami Saionji. She leads the world peace prayer movement which was initiated in 1955 by the Japanese mystic and humanitarian Masahisa Goi (fondly known as Goi Sensei) (1916-1980). Goi Sensei spread the simple prayer, *May Peace Prevail on Earth*. With thousands of “peace poles” erected by the movement inspired by Goi Sensei around the world in different languages, it is a plea from the human heart to the universe. Goi Sensei urged people to cultivate universal love and recognize the one-ness of humanity.

It was Masami Saionji’s vision to further enhance the spread and power of the Peace Prayer, and she initiated the Symphony of Peace Prayers (SOPP) in May 2005 as an annual event at the Fuji Sanctuary. The three-hour ceremony has dignitaries from several religious denominations delivering prayers of peace, followed by all assembled chanting together the line “May Peace Prevail on Earth” and praying for peace in every country by name. With Mt. Fuji as a backdrop, the ceremony is indeed magical, with an intangible feeling of joy and one-ness in the gathering (Photos 5 & 6).

The ancient Vedic scripture, the Rig Veda, expounds the Sanskrit verse, *Ā no bhadrāḥ kratavo yantu viśvataḥ*, which roughly translates as “Let noble thoughts come to us from every side.” When the mind is at peace with itself, only noble thoughts abound. Masami Saionji echoes this sentiment in her book *The Golden Key to Happiness*.

“Let us open the door to our hearts – the door that was hidden up till now. Fill the room behind the door with truth, radiance and happy ways of living. When your heart is filled with light, you will naturally be able to envision only good in your mind without force or effort.”

Photo 5: Author



Author with Masami Saionji

Photo 6: Byakko Shinko Kai & Author



Symphony of Peace Prayers at Fuji Sanctuary

## World Cultural Festivals

The founder of the International Art of Living Foundation, global humanitarian His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, consistently espouses the importance of accepting cultural inheritances from all over the world for spreading peace and harmony. With this inspiration, the foundation regularly organizes culture festivals at both global and local levels. Four world culture festivals have been organized between 2006 and 2023 – in Bangalore (2006), Berlin (2011), New Delhi (2016) and Washington DC (2023) – attended by political, business and religious world leaders making clarion calls for peace and with hundreds of artists representing their countries’ music and dance, performing to audiences of millions of people across the three to four days of events. In 2015, an International Happiness Festival was held at the Ryogoku Sumo Stadium in Tokyo with an evening of cultural programs. Music and dance are an integral part of almost all Art of Living events, whether they be small gatherings of a few people or catering to millions.

The primary goal of these festivals is to celebrate “unity in diversity” and promote the philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* – the Vedic concept that the whole world is one family. As mentioned, these events are often staggering in scale, featuring thousands of performers, world leaders, and millions of attendees, and intended to be a bridge between different cultures, religions, and nationalities. The festivals are usually organized to mark significant milestones of the Art of Living Foundation. Key editions of the festival were:

- **2006 – Bangalore:** The first edition, celebrating the silver jubilee

of the Art of Living. It drew an estimated 2.5 million people and featured over 3,800 musicians.

- **2011 – Berlin:** Held at the Olympic Stadium to mark the 30th anniversary. It focused on peace and intercultural dialogue, bringing together about 70,000 people from over 150 countries. It was a remarkable choice of location for it was here in 1936 that the summer Olympics were staged, with undiluted racism, followed by years of genocide and hate.
- **2016 – New Delhi:** Marking the 35th anniversary, this was held on a seven-acre stage constructed for the purpose on the banks of the Yamuna River. It featured over 37,000 artists and was attended by a staggering 3.5 million people.
- **2023 – Washington, DC:** The most recent major edition took place on the National Mall, attracting about 1 million attendees and 17,000 performers over three days.

The events are a vibrant mix of several different elements:

- **Cultural Performances:** Traditional dances and music from almost every corner of the globe (e.g., over 1,000 *Kathak* dancers, Bulgarian folk groups, Hip-Hop tributes, etc.).
- **Mass Meditations:** Large-scale guided meditations led by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar aimed at fostering global peace.
- **Leadership Forums:** Dignitaries, including heads of state and spiritual leaders, speak about peace, sustainability, and human values.
- **Global Cuisine:** “Food villages” that showcase vegetarian cuisines from around the world.

## The Impact of Cultural Appreciation

For ease of understanding, *CHART* shows some terminology used in this section:

The World Culture Festivals (WCF) serve as a premier example of **Soft Power** and **Track Two Diplomacy**, impacting international relations. While traditional diplomacy (Track One) happens between governments, the WCF creates a parallel channel where the people and civil society influence the global political climate.

CHART

**Some terminology used in this section:**

S.No.	Term	Meaning
1.	Soft Power	The ability to influence internationally through attraction (culture, values), rather than coercion (military, money).
2.	Track Two Diplomacy	Unofficial, informal interaction between members of adversarial groups or nations.
3.	Cultural Pluralism	Active participation of diverse groups in a common society while maintaining their unique traditions.
4.	Cosmopolitanism	The concept that all of humanity belongs to a single community, based on a shared values.

Source: Soft Power: Harvard political scientist, **Joseph Nye** (1937-2025)  
 Track Two Diplomacy: **Joseph V. Montville** (1937-2022)  
 Cultural Pluralism: American philosopher, **Horace Kallen** (1882-1974)  
 Cosmopolitanism: Prussian Philosopher, **Immanuel Kant** (1724-1804)

There are several analytical approaches for studying the impact of cultural appreciation on conflict resolution.

Approach 1:

**1. Humanizing the “Other”**

At the core of conflict is often the “othering” of an opponent. By using performing arts – for example, 1,000 Russian and Ukrainian performers on the same stage – the narrative shifts from political tension to shared human expression. Indeed, it is harder to maintain prejudice when music and dance are celebrated together.

**2. The “Neutral Ground” Effect**

Large-scale cultural events act as a neutral space where leaders from conflicting regions can meet without the pressure of formal negotiations. For example, the 2016 festival in Delhi saw leaders from various South Asian nations sharing a platform during a period of high regional tension. Shared cultural experiences lower the “defense cortisol” in participants, making them more open to dialogue later.

**3. Shared Values vs. Specific Dogmas**

Conflict resolution often stalls when specific religious or political dogmas and perceived threats and injustices are held deep within. The Art of Living focuses on **universal human values** (peace, belongingness, kindness, compassion, respect and service). By emphasizing that “the world is one family”, a broader identity is created that allows people to maintain their cultural roots while acknowledging global membership.

Approach 2:

**1. The “Sensory Diplomacy” Angle:** The sights and sounds of a festival bypass the intellectual barriers of conflict and touch people on an emotional level.

**2. Scaling Local to Global:** Showcasing local folk traditions on a

global stage, providing a sense of dignity to marginalized groups, which is often a prerequisite for peace.

**3. The Power of Proximity:** The sheer physical proximity of millions of people from over 150 countries meditating or dancing together acts as “social proof” that co-existence is possible.

Approach 3:

**1. Cultural Diplomacy as “Pre-Negotiation”:** In international relations, formal dialogue often fails because the atmosphere is too “hot” or polarized. Cultural festivals act as a coolant.

• **Case Study:** During the 2016 festival in New Delhi, leaders and representatives from the SAARC nations (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) were present. By centering the interaction on a shared cultural “Grand Musical Symphony” which featured 3,800 musicians on a single stage, the event created a non-threatening environment. This is a classic international relations strategy where cultural immersion serves as a precursor to formal peacebuilding.

**2. Civil Society as a Non-State Diplomatic Actor**

The Art of Living, through the cultural festivals, operates as a “Non-State Actor” that can go where governments cannot.

• **Case Study: FARC (Colombia):** The reputation and soft power generated by these global festivals can be said to have given Sri Sri Ravi Shankar the standing to mediate between the Colombian government and FARC rebels.

Indeed, massive festivals build social capital which has a global reach. When a humanitarian organization can mobilize 180 countries, it gains the “moral authority” to facilitate dialogue in conflict zones.

**3. Countering “Clash of Civilizations” narratives**

American philosopher Samuel P. Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” theory suggests that future conflicts will be fought along cultural and religious lines. The World Culture Festivals are a direct counter-thesis. For example, the “Parade of Nations” and mass meditations involve participants from conflicting states performing in the same space. In terms of international relations, this is **Re-humanization**. By showcasing that cultural identity can be a point of celebration rather than a boundary, the festival undermines the “us vs. them” logic that fuels modern geo-political conflicts.

The World Culture Festivals are “proof of concept” for Non-State Pluralism. In a world often dominated by state-to-state friction, this festival represents a shift toward global civil society as a primary driver of peace. The festivals have the following outcomes:

**1. Transition from “Hard” to “Soft” Power**

The World Culture Festivals serve as a massive platform for Public Diplomacy. When 180 countries participate in a single event

Photo 7: Art of Living



Bird's-eye view of WCF 2016 in Delhi

characterized by united calls for peace, it creates a “global brand” for peace that transcends individual national interests.

## 2. People-to-People Diplomacy (Track Two)

Traditional diplomacy often gets stuck in the “zero-sum” game – where one country’s gain is another’s loss, whereas the festivals bypasses political bureaucracy by connecting citizens directly.

- **Case Example:** The 2023 festival on the National Mall in Washington DC featured Native American land acknowledgments and a 1,000-guitar ensemble. By celebrating indigenous cultures alongside modern global ones, the festival validates the identity of diverse groups. Mutual validation is the antidote to “Identity Politics”, which is a root cause of many modern global conflicts.

## 3. Re-Defining “Security” (Human Security vs. State Security)

It is vital to move from “State Security” (protecting borders) to “Human Security” (protecting the well-being and mental health of individuals). The Art of Living integrates meditation and trauma relief into its cultural missions. A “culture of peace” starts with the individual. If the individuals within a nation are resilient and less prone to stress-induced aggression, the state itself becomes more stable. The festivals are essentially a global demonstration of this psychological stability on a mass scale (*Photo 7*).

## A Call to Action

I had an opportunity to call on Rika Saionji, deputy chair of *Byakko Shinko Kai*, in the Tokyo office of the Goi Peace Foundation. I was pleasantly surprised to be joined by her parents, Masami Saionji and Hiroo Saionji, and elder sister Yuka. Our discussions revolved around the necessity of realizing universality and of helping humankind realize peace and joy. Masami made a fervent call to joint action by all organizations which treasure human values over all else. She envisaged a pyramid formed by all such pillars of love and peace encompassing the whole of mankind.

Swami Medhasananda had reiterated that education in human

values was paramount, not just in schools but across society, while Sri Sri Ravi Shankar consistently stresses the importance of overcoming negativity through meditation and making life a constant celebration.

Cultural appreciation is not just a nice-to-have sideline to hard-core diplomacy, but a functional necessity that builds the social trust required for any peace treaty to last.

## Conclusion

Hoping for a permanent end to all conflicts – whether global, local or personal – is like hoping that no human being should ever want to watch a movie which depicts these. If that were possible, there would be no place at all in daily life for violence even on the screen. Indeed, what we perceive as real may perhaps be just a drama being staged in a bigger consciousness. Having said that, mankind does not want conflicts to be a part of life, not even as a nightmare while asleep. Irrespective of whether philosophical thought is inclined towards just one life, or a place after death or reincarnation, all streams advocate human values.

If conflicts are considered as battles, then the battlefields merely *appear* to be in physical geographies but are really in the mind, in the consciousness. By elevating consciousness, one goes beyond narrow-mindedness. Events like the Symphony of Peace Prayers and the World Culture Festivals do exactly this. They act at the level of consciousness and use cultural appreciation as an amazingly effective weapon for winning the battles by dissolving the desire for conflict before the first shot is even fired.

To quote Sri Sri Ravi Shankar:

“The Creation loves diversity, manifesting in innumerable colours – be it in varieties of flowers, fruit, vegetables, people and places – yet it all comes together as one planet; in Sanskrit this is called *Prakruti*. Just as technology has made our planet into a global village, spirituality has made it into one global family. Culture cuts across all human boundaries, unifies and reflects the primordial ideals of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbhakam* – the ‘One World Family’.

I shall conclude with the ancient Sanskrit peace mantra, “*Lokah samastah sukhino bhavantu, Om Shanti Shanti Shanti*” which translates as: “*May all beings everywhere be happy and free, Peace, Peace, Peace.*” May Peace Prevail on Earth. **JS**

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