

ROLE OF RELIGIONS IN RESOLVING DISPUTES

Article



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Ancient Scriptures: a Guide to Mend Cross-Cultural Differences in Diplomatic Mediation

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Abstract: With effective and informal crisis-management options like mediation emerging over time, nations around the globe have also adapted to it. Despite this, contemporary conflicts in a global setting are extremely layered and diplomatic encouragement is the key to resolving such disputes at the onset. This task requires a deep understanding of the versatility and nuances of how diverse each nation is. Whether it is a dispute between India and Pakistan or the US and China, putting together the pieces of such diversity reveals the cross-cultural differences within and between nations. These differences may pose a hindrance to preventive diplomacy and, in turn, to diplomatic mediation as well. Harmonizing such intercommunal relations requires tapping into the ancient wisdom popular to that nation. The way to do this is by tracing the origins of dispute resolution in ancient scriptures and consequently reaffirming its relevance in the modern day. Various scriptures, including the Bible, Quran, and Bhagavad Gita, reveal a common emphasis on peace and harmony as the solution to dispute resolution. This information

from history can serve as a guide to effective diplomatic mediation in the present.

Keywords: mediation; ancient scriptures; diplomacy; cross-cultural; harmony; conflict

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I. Introduction

The origin of disputes essentially dates back to the origin of man himself. Early Neanderthals had disputes over food and hunting grounds, whereas the *homo sapiens* of today have disputes relating to kinship, land, property, inheritance, and much more. Irrespective of the time period, there is a certain sense of “universality” inherent in disputes. As Simon Roberts said, “Disputes, both within groups and between them, are found everywhere in human society” (Roberts, 1979). Such a universality of disputes consequently brings to light the universality of dispute resolution. The presumption of ideological functionalism

reveals that the “need for resolution” and the “concept of conflict” are both extremely integral to each other from a societal standpoint (Cain and Kulcsar, 1982).

In this context, just as disputes and their manifestations have undergone a transformation over time, dispute resolution has also witnessed significant changes recently. Over the years, there has been a shift from traditional “litigation” to alternative forms of dispute resolution, popularly known as ADR. With the world being ever-evolving and increasingly interconnected, these methods of ADR are pivotal in traversing conflicts peacefully. Specifically, mediation has seen a steady rise in its acceptance globally. Mediation comes from the Latin verb “*mediare*”, which means “to be in the middle”, like a bridge between two sides. Nations have also recognized this and made changes to their existing regime in order to include mediation and advance their dispute resolution mechanisms.

International peace mediation, in this context, is essentially “an engagement both in interstate and intrastate conflicts by an external actor” (Barbosa and Kuster, 2019, p. 138). Such an external actor could be an international organization like the United Nations (UN) or regional bodies such as the African Union (AU) or the European Union (EU). Particularly within the UN system, the use of mediation in peace processes has become a cornerstone of conflict prevention strategies. The UN’s “promediation activities” can be seen through its Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) that has played a crucial role in mediating international and domestic disputes by utilizing both traditional and innovative approaches to peacebuilding (Klos, 2020). The UN Charter, in particular, not only enshrines such commitment to the peaceful settlement of disputes,¹ but also obliges Member States to pursue diplomatic means before resorting to the use of force. Additionally, other key international instruments, such as the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961), further support the mediation process by emphasizing the principles of diplomatic

¹ Art. 33 of the UN Charter obliges all Member States to settle their disputes by peaceful means such as negotiation, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, and judicial settlement. Additionally, Chapter VI of the UN Charter offers specific guidance on how States can seek peaceful resolution mechanisms.

communication and peaceful coexistence between States. Although the Vienna Convention (1961) primarily governs the conduct of diplomatic relations, its provisions such as the inviolability of diplomatic missions and the protection of diplomatic agents, implicitly creates a conducive environment for dialogues and communication. Such a system that fosters free and confidential communication strengthens the practical foundation for diplomatic mediation efforts.

International customary law and general principles of law further legitimize mediation as a legal tool for resolving disputes. For instance, the principle of “*pacta sunt servanda*”, which mandates “all subjects of international law to exercise in good faith their rights and duties under law”, ensures that mediation agreements, whether bilateral or multilateral, are respected (Lukashuk, 1989, p. 513).

Despite the fact that diplomatic mediation is an invaluable tool to manage and resolve global conflicts, the intricacies involved in such a process cannot be sidelined. These intricacies include, but are not limited to, socio-political, economic, and cultural nuances. More often than not, a dispute between two countries is not just about territorial or economic disagreements. It also delves into historical contexts, cultural perceptions, and deep-rooted sentiments.

One of the most significant challenges to effective diplomatic mediation is the vast cross-cultural difference that exists between nations. In light of this, the authors choose to argue in this paper that successful diplomacy mandates a profound comprehension of each nation’s distinctiveness. Global peace, as a result of diplomatic mediation, requires not just strategic acumen but also profound cultural understanding, which can mend misinterpretation, miscommunication, diverse conflict resolution approaches, and varying values and norms.

This issue of resolving cross-cultural divides during international mediation is not novel, as it has been explored in depth by various scholars over time. Scholars such as Molly Inman, Roudabeh Kishi, Jonathan Wilkenfeld, Michele Gelfand, Harold Abramson, Cheng Lu Wang, Xiaohua Lin, Jacob Bercovitch, Allison Houston, William Zartman and others have written extensively about cultural influences on international mediation, compared conflict resolution styles, and

suggested mediators' approach to resolving such disputes. Additionally, in parallel, scholars such as Mohan Kashikar, Theresa Der-lan Yeh, Judith M. Keegan and others have also analyzed how scriptures such as the Bhagavad Gita, Dhammapada, and the Bible offer great insights into conflict resolution and peacemaking.

Yet, as profound as these individual areas of study are, there exists a noticeable gap in the research landscape. Our research aims to recognize the interconnectedness of culture and the State, which allows a more nuanced exploration of international differences.

With culture being an ever-evolving entity and the world growing increasingly interconnected, there is an absence of a holistic tool that marries the wisdom of scriptures with the nuanced understanding of cross-cultural dynamics in diplomatic mediation. This paper attempts to bridge this very gap. By recognizing the strengths and potential limitations of both the research on cross-cultural differences in mediation and the insights derived from ancient scriptures, the attempt is to craft an innovative approach.

This paper is divided into three parts. The introduction gives a brief understanding of disputes, dispute resolution, how mediation emerged as a form of ADR mechanisms, and the existence of cross-cultural differences in diplomatic mediation between nations. In Part I, the reasons for these cross-cultural differences and the manner in which they emerge are examined in depth. Part II examines the strengths and limitations of both historical and ongoing attempts to resolve such cross-cultural differences during diplomatic mediation. It is then proposed in Part III that various scriptures from around the world have common themes of peace, morality, and justice, which can be harmonized to mend such cultural divides. By highlighting the broader theme of dispute resolution that is common to all scriptures, specific issues of cross-cultural dynamics can be resolved. The conclusion underlines the potential of ancient wisdom as a supplemental tool to existing tools during diplomatic mediation and as a universal compass, pointing towards harmony, understanding, and coexistence.

II. Cross-Cultural Differences: An Underlying Complexity of Diplomatic Mediation

To begin with, culture, as defined by American cultural anthropologist Clifford James Geertz, is “a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (Tikkanen, 2006). These conceptions are multi-layered, whereby each layer represents various facets and complexities. Given the current geopolitical and economic realities, it is all the more relevant to view culture as this “multi-level, multi-layer construct” (Leung and Bhagat, 2005, p. 357). Comprehending such depth and multiplicity of cultural dimensions is imperative in order to trace the roots of any cross-cultural differences that might arise in a global conflict.

II.1. Understanding Cultural Variations in Temporal Orientation

At the surface level, culture may be expressed through certain tangible elements such as symbols and rituals. Following this, beneath the surface is the intermediate level, where culture essentially embeds values and norms. The Hofstede model of dimensionalizing cultures identifies how power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, and indulgence/restraint are elements that underpin the value systems of nations (Hofstede, 2011).

Going deeper, culture, at its core, is rooted in basic assumptions and worldviews. This multi-layered nature of culture reveals that when individuals from different cultural backgrounds interact during diplomatic mediation, they tend to do so with a complex web of symbols, values, and assumptions. The interaction of these worldviews may lead to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and conflicts.

At the core of comprehending such cross-cultural interactions in diplomatic mediation lie the dimensions of collectivism and individualism, as theorized by Hofstede (Hofstede, 1980). Collectivistic cultures tend to place emphasis on group harmony, family ties, and societal cohesion. During mediation, collectivistic cultures may prioritize

group consensus, and the mediation process usually involves a wider circle of stakeholders. For instance, during the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) meetings, the decisions arrived at more often than not through consensus reflect the collectivistic tendencies of the nations involved.

In contrast, individualistic cultures might prioritize self-expression and personal autonomy. In mediation, this would mean an emphasis on task accomplishment, individual responsibilities, and transparent commitments. The United States' approach to the Kyoto Protocol negotiations illustrates such individualistic orientations. The American representatives, although they recognized the global community's concerns, sought terms that eventually protected U.S. interests. Different societies have different communication styles, time orientations, and conflict resolution styles, which amalgamate to create layered diplomatic complexities.

For instance, differing communication styles amongst collectivistic and individualistic cultures are a significant aspect that can hugely impact the success or failure of mediation endeavours. Edward T. Hall's context theory explains how different cultures embrace different styles of communication (Hall and Hall, 1990). Some cultures, i.e., high-context cultures, rely heavily on non-verbal cues and shared understanding, whereas other cultures, i.e., low-context cultures, place emphasis on explicit verbal communication (Hall, 1976). High-context cultures are characterized by implicit communication, emphasize interpersonal relationships, prioritize group harmony, give value to historical traditions, and are more often than not seen in collectivistic societies.

Contrarily, individualistic societies are usually low-context cultures, which means they rely on direct communication, emphasize individual responsibilities, prioritize tasks over relationships, and give value to rules and regulations over traditions. As enunciated by Hall and Hall, "high-context people are apt to become impatient and irritated when low-context people insist on giving them information they don't need. Conversely, low-context people are at a loss when high-context people do not provide enough information" (Hall and Hall, 1990).

Interactions between low-context and high-context cultures naturally cause miscommunication and create scope for conflict. For

instance, the Camp David Accords in 1978 were a result of attempts to end decades of hostility between Egypt and Israel. However, these peace negotiations facilitated by President Jimmy Carter were not without its fair share of cross-cultural challenges. Even though the end goal was to secure lasting peace based on mutual trust and respect, the challenges encountered included differences in religious significance, historical context, and negotiation styles. For instance, recognizing and respecting the profound spiritual significance that Jews, Christians, and Muslims had towards the land, i.e., Jerusalem, was essential.

Similarly, it was also essential to address the varying collective memories that the two nations had of past wars, displacements, and national narratives in a sensitive and culturally aware manner. While Israel, with a more Western-influenced approach, preferred low-context and explicit negotiation, Egypt's negotiation style was influenced by broader Arab and African diplomatic norms, wherein a balance between directness and relationship-focused diplomacy was preferred. The complexities of such intercultural communication and collaboration, when not acknowledged or resolved, result in mismatched intentions between the messages sent and the messages received.

Another reason for cross-cultural difference is time perception, which, while often overlooked, is deeply embedded in a culture's norms, values and cognitive framework. Akin to communication styles, time can also be viewed as a "silent language", as explained by Edward Hall (Hall, 1959). Based on Hall's work and his introduction of the two concepts, i.e., monochronic time and polychronic time, it was deduced that cultures vary in their temporal orientations, wherein some view time as linear, while others perceive it to be cyclical. In cultures with monochronic time or a linear time perception, time is often seen as a finite resource and value is given to punctuality, scheduling, and efficiency (Nonis et al., 2005).

Contrarily, cultures with polychronic or cyclical time perception view events and experiences as recurring in nature. This would mean that they place emphasis on patience, long-term considerations, and relationship-building (Nonis et al., 2005). This kind of perspective is displayed by many East Asian and Middle Eastern nations. For instance, during the Six-Party Talks, which aimed to dismantle North Korea's

nuclear program, the involved East Asian countries, i.e., China, North Korea, and South Korea, more often than not approached the issue with a long-term perspective and focused on recurring consultations, which was in clear contrast to the more timeline-driven approach of the United States.

People with a present orientation tend to focus more on “living in the moment” and value spontaneity (Brislin and Kim, 2003). Those from a future-oriented culture usually make decisions with foresight and place emphasis on the long-term considerations of such decisions (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961). As explained by Zimbardo and Boyd as well, such “time perspective” is “the often unconscious process whereby the continual flows of personal and social experiences are assigned to temporal categories, or time frames, that help to give order, coherence, and meaning to those events” (Zimbardo and Boyd, 1999, p. 1271). This temporal lens through which individualistic/collectivistic cultures view events differently has a huge impact on international diplomacy.

Additionally, event time and clock time, pace of life, and time as cultural metaphors are other dimensions that give rise to such temporal variations between nations (Fulmer et al., 2014). Failing to balance these variations and giving room to misunderstandings could significantly affect the mediation process.

II.2. Cultural Approaches to Conflict Resolution Styles

Conflict resolution styles, primarily determined by the previously mentioned dimensions of collectivism and individualism, also have substantial implications on the result of diplomatic mediation proceedings. Mediation challenges stemming from such cultural orientations often lead to mismatched expectations, overemphasis on cultural stereotypes, and other temporal differences. Researchers propose that, more often than not, a harmony model of conflict resolution is found in collectivistic societies, while a confrontation model of conflict resolution is found in individualistic societies (Kozan, 1997).

This would mean that countries with collectivistic societies would mostly exhibit an accommodating, problem-solving, or avoiding style of conflict resolution during diplomatic mediation (Wang, 2005).

Individualistic cultures lean more towards a forcing, competing, or obliging style of resolution, owing to the fact that they prefer negotiation as a “zero-sum game with a winner and a loser” (Wang, 2005). The U.S.’ hardline stance during the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) renegotiations illustrates such a competing style, wherein national interests and clear benefits were prioritized. Understanding such nuances is crucial, in the absence of which misunderstandings stand to complicate diplomatic endeavours.

Crimea’s accession to Russia in 2014 was followed by diplomatic tensions with Western nations, which again illustrates opposing conflict resolution styles and their impact on mediation outcomes. Despite international outcry, Russia chose to employ a forcing style and pursued its own strategic objectives. The fact that Russia moved swiftly, decided to bypass diplomatic channels, and did not wait for international consensus clearly underscores its forcing style (Sakwa, 2015). On the other hand, Western nations, especially the U.S. and EU members, choose to oscillate between problem-solving and competing styles. This meant that they encouraged diplomatic dialogues and peace proposals while also implementing sanctions and seeking to isolate Russia in the global context. The implications of these conflicting styles include prolonged tensions, diplomatic strains, and economic impacts.

In the era of globalization, such varied conflict resolution styles are also a result of the intersectionality of culture, region, and local traditions. The Juba Peace Talks illustrate such multifaceted nature of conflict resolution styles and how they further complicate diplomatic mediation. The talks, hosted in Juba, the capital of South Sudan, were mediated primarily by Riek Machar, the Vice President of South Sudan. The negotiations aimed to resolve the protracted conflict between the Ugandan government and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), a rebel group led by Joseph Kony (Hendrickson and Tumutegyeize, 2012). However, with the LRA being largely from the Acholi tribe and Uganda having a rich tapestry of tribes, each with its own cultural norms, histories, and grievances, the conflict was not merely political but deeply cultural as well.

The peace process was a tapestry of traditional, regional, and international mediation approaches. Firstly, the Acholi, being an ethnic

group from which most of the LRA originated, had their own traditional reconciliation process known as the Mato Oput, which gave value to forgiveness and communal restoration (Deogratus and Olango, 2023). The Western stakeholders, on the other hand, had a more retributive approach, including the 2000 Amnesty Law and indictments by the International Criminal Court (ICC) (Nabukeera-Musoke, 2009).

Regional dynamics were also in play as the mediator, South Sudan, being a nascent autonomous region at the time, was influenced by its own experiences with civil war and its relationship with both Uganda and the larger international community. This meant that South Sudan embodied regional diplomacy and prioritized a balance between justice and reconciliation (Hendrickson and Tumutegyeize, 2012). In light of these varied styles, it is pertinent to note that “each mechanism affects the progress of the other” (Nabukeera-Musoke, 2009).

Navigating these varied cultural dynamics is what creates significant issues in forging a path towards global peace and harmony. In the context of these varied dynamics, various attempts have also been made over time to tackle such issues and improve relations among disputing nations, which shall be discussed in the following part.

III. Historical and Ongoing Endeavours in Bridging Cross-Cultural Divide During Diplomacy

In light of the cross-cultural differences that have been identified in the previous section, it is now necessary to examine the strengths and limitations of the various attempts that have been made to mend such differences. Over the years, scholars and diplomats have put in constant efforts to bridge cross-cultural differences and achieve sustainable peace agreements. As discussed previously, cross-cultural differences stem from disparities between collectivistic/individualistic societies and usually take the shape of temporal variations, differences in conflict resolution styles, and different communication styles to create layered challenges to diplomatic mediation.

Discrepancies in such cultural perspectives and values can either be a challenge or an opportunity, depending on how they are handled. Diplomatic misunderstandings rooted in cultural divides have, in certain

situations, escalated into larger conflicts, while successful manoeuvring of these differences has paved the way for historic agreements and collaborations in other situations. Making use of structured interactions, holistic dialogue, and employing both formal and informal diplomatic tools, various attempts have been made over time to resolve such cross-cultural differences and foster cooperative international relations.

These attempts to mend differences range from bringing in nuanced cultural sensitivity during mediation to cross-cultural training and other formal procedures. For instance, mediation done through “multicultural teams” is one such effort that was made in the past to resolve cultural differences, and this would essentially mean matching disputants with mediators from a similar ethnic background (Davidheiser, 2005). On the face of it, this approach seems to have quite a few benefits. Ethnic parity of this sort would result in grasping cultural nuances, building trust, and facilitating communication. A sense of familiarity is built, cultural traditions are addressed, and cultural references are rightly acknowledged so that messages are not lost in translation (Ungerleider, 2008).

Despite this, the authors argue that, based on the several studies available, such “matching” is not ideal in most cases. Comprehended from the work of Viswanathan and Jon Ptak in their Dispute Resolution Award paper of 1991, such matching could naturally create a challenge of potential bias. Their deduction was from the analysis of the matching policy of a mediation program in Canada (Davidheiser, 2005). They also explained how such a process of mediator belonging to the same culture could result in the mediator “being viewed as more judgemental than a mediator of a different culture” (Viswanathan and Ptak, 1991).

Additionally, by placing emphasis on ethnicity, this kind of process is “of limited significance because it ignores the impact of other sources of diversity” (Viswanathan and Ptak, 1991). Another study by Linda Fisher and Jeremy Long also substantiates how “matching mediators to the cultural background of parties to mediation is not likely to contribute significantly to the result of disputes” (Fisher and Long, 1991).

Another attempt at bridging cross-cultural differences is seen through cross-cultural training in diplomatic mediation. Given the nuanced, often invisible barriers that cultural differences stand to erect,

it is all the more important for diplomats to be equipped with the right tools. As proposed by Hofstede, cultural norms influence behaviours, actions, reactions, and experiences (Hofstede, 2001). Cross-cultural training allows diplomats to be aware of such behaviours and to read and interpret them correctly (Hofstede, 2001).

Such training mitigates cultural shock and prepares the mediator to be exposed to unfamiliar terrains (Oberg, 1960). This training is given through various methodologies. For instance, simulation and role-playing provide a hands-on learning experience and foster a deeper comprehension of cultural nuances (Bennet, 1986). The U.S. Foreign Service Institute utilizes such immersive simulations to better equip the mediators with knowledge and awareness regarding cross-cultural challenges. As part of this, the School of Professional and Area Studies (SPAS) has the Center for the Study of the Conduct of Diplomacy (CSCD), whose role is to examine “recent diplomatic experiences in order to capture best practices and lessons learned” (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

The case-study method is also quite effective in that it provides valuable insights. As stated by Stephanie Stobbe, “learning from the ways other cultures understand and resolve conflicts is an important part of maintaining healthy relationships in our increasingly interactive world” (Mahan and Mahuna, 2017). For instance, the “Ping Pong Diplomacy” between the U.S. and China during the 1970s is often analysed to understand the role of cultural dialogue in diplomacy (An et al., 2021).

However, such a training-driven approach is also wanting. Stewart Black and Mark Mendenhall explain how there are certain theoretical implications that reveal the extent of the effectiveness of such cross-cultural training (Black and Mendenhall, 1990). For instance, differences in the cognitive flexibility of individuals may result in different understanding and, therefore, lower efficacy in bridging divides (Black and Mendenhall, 1990).

Retention, reproduction, motivation, and incentives involved during such cross-cultural training are also relevant in understanding how different individuals react differently to such training and consequently impact the mediation process (Black and Mendenhall, 1990). Despite the fact that such training increases cultural proficiency in most cases,

it is also pertinent to note that culture is never static, and such evolving cultures require a balance between a broad and specific treatment of differences.

Having a neutral third party is one such broad treatment, which, although highly crucial to the process, may require certain specific additions as well. Additionally, since the mediator is not perceived as having a vested interest towards favouring one party over the other, there is facilitation of stronger trust. However, as explained by Jacob Bercovitch, it is pertinent to note that a third party usually “enters an international dispute in order to affect, change, influence, or modify it in some way” (Bercovitch, 1985). This would mean that the third party may be impartial or neutral regarding the “content of the solution” but cannot be neutral in the sense of having “no effect on the outcome” (Glaser, n.d.). The mere presence of the third party “alters the structure of the dispute” (Glaser, n.d.). In this context, having just an impartial third-party mediator is too broad a solution required to mend complex cross-cultural differences.

While impartiality is a foundational pillar of mediation in the context of layered cross-cultural disputes, the authors believe that it is necessary to synergize it with specific solutions tailored to address cultural complexities.

Various basic but effective strategies have also been proposed and implemented over time to resolve such cross-cultural differences. Kai Lucke and Aloys Rigaut have given certain recommendations that are crucial in this regard. For instance, they reinforce that taking into consideration cultural factors would mean considering “the people” along with the problem (Lucke and Rigaut, 2002). Similarly, they also iterate that a “pre-mediation assessment” of the cultures of the parties involved would be ideal, so long as stereotypes are steered clear of (Lucke and Rigaut, 2002). Training and cultural awareness are also highlighted as important elements (Lucke and Rigaut, 2002).

Harold Abramson rightly points out that the mediator must also be capable of differentiating between “cultural behaviour” and “human behaviour” (Abramson, 2006). Abramson also explains that the mediator must be cognizant of his/her own cultural upbringing and its impact on the mediation process (Abramson, 2006).

The authors recognize that all these points are extremely relevant in bridging cultural gaps. Despite the “countless interpersonal, meta-level, and international tools and processes” available to resolve conflicts, the authors choose to argue that there is a pressing need for an approach that is universally supplementary to all or any of these tools (Mahan and Mahuna, 2017).

IV. Harmonizing Cross-Cultural Differences: Insights from Ancient Scriptures

Since the attempts mentioned in the previous section are lacking or insufficient in certain aspects, this section endeavours to propose a universal tool that can act as a supplemental aid.

As observed by Sally Merry, “disputing is cultural behaviour, informed by participants’ moral views about how to fight, the meaning participants attach to going to court, social practices that indicate when and how to escalate conflicts to a public forum, and participants’ notions of rights and entitlements” (Merry, 1987).

With culture being as dynamic as it is and this cultural behaviour being erratic, bridging these divides requires an approach that will stand the test of time. This approach should be culturally sensitive while finding its roots in the same culture. The authors propose that ancient scriptures can act as a supplemental guide that transcends traditional boundaries. By identifying and recognizing the enduring wisdom and values enshrined in scriptures, it can be explored how they stand to offer timeless insights and universal principles that can be applied to modern diplomatic mediation.

Although not recognized as an apparent tool, values from ancient scriptures and religions have been used as underlying mechanisms during international conflicts throughout time. For instance, during the Bosnian War (1992–1995), which involved religious and ethnic tensions, efforts were made by the Interreligious Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina to involve religious leaders from the Islamic, Orthodox Christian, and Catholic communities to promote dialogue and reconciliation, based on the “shared moral principles” of peace and harmony (Merry, 1987).

Janine Natalya Clark explains how religious actors could make use of culture and such underlying shared values to “promote and foster reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina” and highlights how “religion is a potentially valuable, yet fundamentally under-utilized peace-building tool in Bosnia and Herzegovina” (Clark, 2010). Neira Omerovic also suggests that “religion can be a powerful source in peacemaking” (Omerovic, 2017) by making use of “the organic peacebuilding framework” (Lederach, 1997). Our research finds this “peacebuilding framework” within ancient scriptures that contain shared values across religions and cultures.

For instance, in Cambodia, the Buddhist monk Maha Ghosananda’s suggestion of “Dhammayietra”, or mindful walks, allowed for a “step-by-step movement” (Poethig, 2002). This movement was towards “peace accords and reconciliation in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge’s violent reign” and was applicable even during the civil war in Sierra Leone, where the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL) was “able to break the ice and calm the actor through joint prayers” (Kadayifci and Maassarani, 2021).

Despite advancements in international conflict relations and conflict resolution strategies, there are certain situations where existing tools may either escalate conflicts or simply fail to address the underlying issues. We identify that this disadvantage does not apply to all cases. However, most of the limitations of current diplomatic tools can be covered using the aid of such ancient wisdom.

Ancient scriptures, be it the Bible, Quran, Analects, Bhagavad Gita, or other texts, have guided civilizations for millennia. The focus is on the fact that all these scriptures encompass universal themes such as the importance of understanding, compassion, forgiveness, and justice. Additionally, they are also embedded with narratives that, more often than not, highlight the futility of conflict and the significance of peaceful coexistence. Most importantly, ancient scriptures, with their widespread influence over various cultures, can serve as the common ground needed to mend cross-cultural differences.

IV.1. The Bhagavad Gita

“Conflict and peacemaking has occurred in various instances in the Hindu Texts” (Srivastava, 2018). The Bhagavad Gita, an ancient spiritual text, forms the philosophical part of the Indian epic, the Mahabharata, and is one such scripture that serves as a guidebook to mend cross-cultural differences. Within its 700 verses, the Gita is a conversation between Prince Arjuna and Lord Krishna that is deeply set in the context of an impending conflict, with Arjuna on the brink of a catastrophic war and questioning the moral and spiritual implications of fighting.

Often regarded as a “life science” and a “world scripture”, the Gita has been explored by various scholars in recent years as a tool for effective conflict resolution (Barmola, 2020). In the context of cross-cultural differences, the authors opine that this wisdom on conflict resolution is shared by all scriptures around the world, making it a commonality for bridging divides during diplomatic mediation as well.

For instance, Arjuna’s initial reluctance to participate in the war stems from moral dilemmas and emotional conflicts, which are usually sentiments resonant with leaders in the throes of cross-cultural disputes. The Gita highlights how concepts such as attachment and misconceptions about the Self and others are the root of most such conflicts. It also mentions in Chapter II, verse 47, that “Your right is in action only, never to the fruits” (Parthasarathy, 2017).

Krishna’s advice encourages participants to focus on fair processes and engage in negotiations with a sense of duty and integrity without being overly concerned with winning or losing. Krishna’s teachings on detachment, or *vairagya*, also play an essential role in conflict resolution. *Vairagya* is often misunderstood as a renunciation of worldly life, but in the context of the Gita, it is more about renouncing attachment to the results of one’s actions to be able to be free from emotional turmoil. In many international conflicts, the inability to let go of attachment, ideologies, or outcomes to past grievances can create significant barriers to peace. By cultivating *vairagya* or detachment, as

explained in Chapter VI, verse 35,² diplomats and mediators can help all parties to focus not on their ego-driven desires but on the common objective of peaceful coexistence.

Additionally, the “social conflict between man and man”, as explained by Sri Swami Krishnananda, can be resolved through mutual cooperation, realisation of the interconnectedness of all beings, and performing duties for the holistic well-being of society (Srivastava, 2018). In this context, Chapter III, verse 11, explains how “nourishing one another” is crucial to attaining the supreme state (Parthasarathy, 2017).

By recognizing this shared essence of nourishment, nations can focus on commonalities rather than their differences during mediation, paving the way for mutual respect and fulfilment. Chapter IV, verse 18, says, “He who sees inaction in action, and action in inaction, is wise among men”, which suggests observing the subtle nuances in conflicts and gaining the wisdom in perceiving beyond apparent disagreements, which may be particularly helpful for dealing with layered and complex cross-cultural differences (Parthasarathy, 2017).

Lord Krishna, an excellent example of a successful mediator, also advises in the Gita on how to maintain calmness and composure, irrespective of the outcome. Through Chapter II, verse 48, he teaches one to be even-tempered in both success and failure (Parthasarathy, 2017). In many ways, the Gita can be seen as an exploration of how to maintain inner balance or *samatva* in the face of external chaos.

Such equanimity can prove to be instrumental in diplomatic settings by fostering a balanced and objective perspective among the disputing parties. Equanimity in mediation fosters an atmosphere where all parties can feel heard, respected, and treated fairly. This balanced approach helps maintain the integrity of the mediation process and keeps it from being derailed by extreme emotions or short-term frustrations. Mediators who are calm, impartial, and centered are better able to facilitate constructive dialogue and guide disputing parties toward a resolution that honours their shared values.

² Lord Krishna said: “O mighty-armed son of Kunti, what you say is correct; the mind is indeed very difficult to restrain. But by practice and detachment, it can be controlled”.

One of the most central themes in the Gita is *dharma*, often translated as “righteous duty” or “moral responsibility”. In the context of international mediation, *dharma* can be understood as a guiding moral compass that helps parties understand their responsibilities toward justice, peace, and the greater good.

Even for mediators, understanding the *dharma* of the parties involved can be critical for crafting solutions that respect cultural differences while aiming for a broader and more holistic solution. The principle of *dharma* also leads to the ideas of *swaraj* (self-rule) and *sarvodaya* (the welfare of all). These Gandhian ideologies are heavily influenced by the Gita and can guide international negotiation to suggest that while individual sovereignty is important, the welfare of the global community should also be a central concern.

Another similar concept that Gita introduces in the context of conflict resolution is *karma yoga*, the yoga of selfless action. For mediators, *karma yoga* underscores the importance of taking active steps in mediation, not as a means of personal gain but as a service to society and the common good. Moreover, *karma yoga* also encourages the idea that actions, whether big or small, have a ripple effect in the world. Through such consistent and mindful actions, mediators can create a foundation for lasting peace that goes beyond temporary conflicts and short-term interests.

IV.2. The Bible

The Bible, a seminal religious text of Christianity, has for centuries offered ethical guidance and philosophical teachings to its followers, especially in the context of dispute resolution. In the realm of diplomatic mediation, specifically in matters involving cross-cultural differences, the Bible can be an indispensable guide. In Matthew 18:15, the passage advises believers to first approach someone who has wronged them privately before escalating the matter. This reflects the principle of addressing conflicts at the lowest level possible, and during cross-cultural differences, this brings the focus to resolving the dispute during mediation itself instead of escalating it further.

For instance, in international relations, this could reflect the principle of bilateral negotiations before involving external mediators or organizations like the United Nations. The incremental nature of this conflict resolution process also highlights the importance of patience and persistence, which are essential qualities in diplomacy. Many diplomatic disputes, particularly those involving cross-cultural differences, can initially seem intractable, but the biblical principle of addressing the conflict at multiple levels highlights that resolution often requires time, repeated dialogue, and a structured process to reach an understanding.

Moreover, in Matthew 18:15–35, the word “listen” is mentioned multiple times, which also points out to the fact that listening to the other party is as important as voicing out your own concerns during dispute resolution. This is all the more relevant in the context of cross-cultural differences, wherein language, communication styles, and other aspects vary significantly.

Mediation processes that foster an environment where both sides listen carefully to each other’s concerns are more likely to succeed, as they allow for a deeper understanding of the underlying issues, values, and emotions driving the conflict. From a biblical perspective, listening is not merely about hearing words but also empathizing with the other party. In Proverbs 18:13, it is stated, “To answer before listening — that is folly and shame”. In diplomatic mediation, where high stakes and emotions often cloud judgment, listening allows for clarity of thought and the potential to de-escalate tensions.

Peace, which is one of the foundational pillars of all scriptures around the world, finds its place in the Bible as well. Epistle to the Romans 12:18 states, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone”. This verse encapsulates the biblical mandate for peace, urging individuals and communities to do everything within their power to foster peace while also recognizing that it may not always be entirely within one’s control.

In the context of international mediation, this teaching highlights the need for mediators to pursue peace proactively. However, the verse also leaves room to acknowledge that peace is a shared responsibility. Both sides in a dispute must be open to reconciliation, and there are limits to what any one party can achieve. This passage from the Epistle

to the Romans also implicitly suggests that peace should be prioritized over the need to be “right” or to “win”. The biblical imperative to live at peace encourages diplomats to think beyond mere victory and to seek solutions that promote the well-being of all parties, recognizing that peace often requires sacrifice or compromise.

St. Paul’s letters to the Romans also advocate for proactive efforts in maintaining peace. In Romans 14:19, he guides believers, “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification”. This is particularly relevant in the context of international diplomacy, where the act of mediation is not just about preventing conflict but about actively building a foundation for future cooperation and understanding. St. Paul’s call for “mutual edification” also implies that peacemaking is not a one-way process. The coupling of the word “peace” with “mutual edification” makes it clear that peacemaking is inherently relational and reciprocal. In effective mediation, both sides must contribute to the resolution, learning from one another’s perspectives and making efforts to build a shared understanding. We need to realise that pursuing “peace” without “mutual edification” risks thin and ceasefire-only outcomes. On the other hand, pursuing “edification” without “peace” risks moralism with security. St. Paul’s pairing of the two together explains how sustainable reconciliation requires both restraint and construction. This understanding is crucial to suggest that effective mediation does more than suspend hostilities and actually creates conditions for durable cooperation. In international diplomacy, this is particularly necessary for long-term reconciliation in sensitive situations.

One of the core tenets of Christian teachings, and one that has significant relevance in mediation, is the principle of forgiveness. Jesus emphasizes forgiveness in several places throughout the New Testament, including in Matthew 6:14–15, where he says, “For if you will forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you”.

In diplomatic mediation, where there are deep-seated historical grievances or traumas, forgiveness is not just about excusing wrongs but rather about letting go of the desire for retribution and creating space for healing. This is a powerful tool in mediating complex cross-cultural conflicts where historical injustices may continue to fuel present-day tensions.

IV.3. The Quran

The Quran, revered as the Word of God in Islam, is another scripture whose teachings encompass various aspects of human conduct, including how to resolve conflicts. One of the most essential principles of conflict resolution in the Quran is the call for patience and mercy, particularly when confronted with provocation or hostility. For instance, elucidating the Quranic verse 41:34, it can be garnered that “God has commanded Muslims to exercise patience when they are angry, to express tolerance in the face of others’ ignorance, and to exhibit mercy in the face of something that is wrong”. This is especially relevant in the context of cross-cultural differences, where misunderstandings and miscommunications must be dealt with tolerance, patience, and harmony.

This also underscores an approach to conflict that involves responding to negativity with positivity, a principle that can be foundational for mediators. The teaching encourages a form of mediation that does not escalate sensitive emotions but rather seeks to de-escalate them through calm and measured responses. In many diplomatic conflicts, historical injustices and long-standing grievances can cause entrenched positions, making negotiations difficult. However, the Quran’s teachings of mercy can be a powerful tool in breaking down barriers. Mercy, in this context, does not imply ignoring the wrongdoing but instead recognizing the humanity of the other party, accepting their flaws, and working towards healing rather than retribution.

As with all other scriptures, the Quran, too, through the Surah Al-Hujurat 49:9, highlights the importance of peace and reconciliation during disputes.³ Peace, in this sense, is not merely the cessation of hostilities but the active creation of conditions for cooperation and mutual respect. The verse also indirectly suggests the importance of fairness, encouraging mediation efforts that are not biased towards one party. The Quran also establishes the need to “abstain from ignorant prejudice and provocation”. Additionally, the Quran also advocates for

³ Surah Al-Hujurat 49:9: “If two parties of the believers happen to fight, make peace between them”.

respect and discourages mocking,⁴ a principle that can be foundational in maintaining decorum during diplomatic negotiations.

Through the verse Surah Al-Hujurat (49:11), the Quran speaks to the concept of respect, both for individuals and for groups, and the need to avoid unnecessary provocation during conflicts. Cultural misunderstandings often arise from entrenched prejudices, stereotypes, or the tendency to view the “other” as inferior. The Quran’s command to avoid mocking or ridiculing others directly applies to diplomatic negotiations, where negative rhetoric or dismissive behaviour can exacerbate tensions and hinder the possibility of a resolution.

The Quran also promotes dialogue as a tool for conflict resolution. Surah 16:125 encourages people to “invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and kind advice, and only debate with them in the best manner”. This passage emphasizes the importance of conducting discussions in a wise, respectful, and constructive manner that promotes dialogue. In diplomatic mediation, such dialogue plays an essential role in overcoming misunderstandings.

The Quranic advice encourages mediators to facilitate a dialogue that focuses on cooperation rather than confrontation. Most of these essential principles of cooperation, collaboration, engagement in dialogue, and respect for other cultures are, in fact, astoundingly similar to Western peacebuilding efforts and “create opportunities for more common ground in working towards conflict resolution” (Huda, 2010).

IV.4. Other Scriptures

East Asian philosophical traditions, like Buddhism and Confucianism as epitomized in scriptures like the Dhammapada and the Analects respectively, have also given profound insights into governance, human behaviour, and conflict resolution. Both traditions provide a roadmap to peace, which is especially relevant in the delicate art of diplomatic mediation. In the Analects, “The Master said, ‘Shan, my doctrine is that of an all-pervading unity’”.⁵ This passage essentially embodies the heart

⁴ Surah Al-Hujurat 49:11: “Let not a group scoff at another group, it may well be that the latter at whom they scoff are better than they”.

⁵ Confucius, *The Analects-4*, Lunyu IV. 15 (81).

of mediation and resolving cross-cultural differences, during which common ground is often the cornerstone. To Confucius, “harmony was the most desirable state” (Wall and Blum, 1991).

Moreover, “compromise, persuasion as well as the intermediary who was able to secure them” was given high importance (Wall and Blum, 1991). Similarly, verse 5 in the Dhammapada emphasizes how conflicts cannot be resolved through animosity but through compassion and understanding. The power of responsive transformation is also highlighted, wherein the teaching from verse 223 of the Dhammapada is an embodiment of diplomatic strategy that helps to counter aggression with calmness and deception with transparency.⁶ The Our position as authors is to reinforce through the aforementioned descriptions that no matter the culture or nation, all the scriptures share certain core beliefs regarding conflict resolution. The styles may be different, the communication patterns may be varied, and the approach may be based on certain personal values and traditions, but the core remains the same. Our position explains how scripture and practice of varied cultures point to a common core of conflict resolution that can be adapted to different moral worlds without diluting its efficacy.

Despite all these differences, every scripture, in some way or another, acknowledges the importance of peace, coexistence, mutual respect, and understanding. As the Rigveda mentions, “Truth is one, only different scholars describe it differently” (Kashikar, 2011). The Quran explains how “the good deed and evil deed cannot be equal. Repel the evil with what is better”.⁷ This promotes the idea of overcoming conflict with harmony and mirrors the sentiment of Proverbs 15:1 from the Bible and Analects 4:15 of Confucianism.

Similarly, the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 5:9 about peacemakers⁸ are harmonious and similar to the saying in the Buddhist scripture, Dhammapada, that “Hatreds never cease through hatred in this world; through love alone they cease”.⁹ The root of all cultures is this

⁶ Verse 223: “Let anger be conquered by love. Let bad be conquered by good. Let miserliness be overcome by generosity. Let the liar be conquered by the truth”.

⁷ The Quran, Surah Fussilat 41:34.

⁸ “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God”.

⁹ Dhammapada. Verse 5.

truth that is built upon the core values of harmony, peace, coexistence, justice, and morality. Moreover, these are all elements that are crucial to the success of a mediation. By bringing the focus of the dispute onto these core values, diplomatic relations can be preserved, and mediation processes can be effective. This approach highlights the broader issue or larger picture of dispute resolution that is common to all cultures, using which the more specific problems can be mended with greater ease.

As the root of cross-cultural discrepancy lies within culture itself, the authors believe that deriving solutions emerging from the same culture may prove to be instrumental. In this context, ancient scriptures transcend religion and emerge as cultural artefacts that have influence over ethics, values, and social norms (Esposito et al., 2017). Moreover, General Anthony Zinni rightly said, “cultural understanding doesn’t just help you achieve your objectives — it helps you discover what your objectives should be” (Koumoulou, 2021).

V. Conclusion

The world we inhabit, with its cultural diversity and intricate political ties, constantly presents challenges that necessitate diplomatic mediation. Diplomatic precedents, political negotiations, and international law, employed as traditional means, have demonstrated value in addressing cross-cultural differences. Despite this, the authors have explored how conventional tools could be supplemented by an even richer, deeper understanding and solution to such conflicts. The authors believe that the wealth of knowledge housed within ancient scriptures reveals their potential as a universal tool to bridge cross-cultural rifts.

As established previously, historically, ancient scriptures from various traditions have universally emphasized fundamental truths concerning human nature, ethics, and the necessity for peace. Huntington postulated in his work “The Clash of Civilizations?” that people’s cultural and religious identities would be the primary source of conflict in the post-Cold War world (Huntington, 1993). If so, then the authors argue what can be a better way to address these conflicts

than by delving into the very scriptures that form the bedrock of these identities.

The idea is that when these principles are introduced during the mediation process, they serve as a reflective mirror so that the parties are encouraged to see beyond their differences and recognize a shared foundation. Take, for instance, the principle of empathy, a core tenet found in diverse scriptures. The Bible states in Matthew 7:12, “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them”. Similarly, the Quran mentions, “None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself”.¹⁰

This clearly goes on to show that whether it is “Ren” in Confucianism, the “Way” in Taoism, or any other virtue from any other culture, ancient scriptures have the potential to remind disputing parties of shared values, even when these parties hail from distinct cultural backgrounds. This line of thought is also quite similar to that of a “*global ethic*”, wherein all these values, when brought together, could form a cohesive whole, setting foundations for peace and collaboration (The Parliament of the World’s Religions, 1993). The Parliament of the World’s Religions had stated in this regard, “*No better global order without a new global ethic*”.

The authors also acknowledge that this approach creates cause for potential concerns as well. Can such scriptures, rooted in spiritual contexts, be seamlessly integrated into the secular realm of diplomacy? The answer to this is that the authors do not argue for imposing any kind of religious beliefs but, in fact, wish to emphasize the universally accepted values enshrined within these texts. Karen Armstrong’s “*Charter for Compassion*”, which calls for a global commitment towards compassion, as championed by various religious traditions, stands as a testament to this potential integration (Armstrong, 2009).

The “Golden Rule” is an illustration of how such scriptures can offer a simple yet profound guideline for interpersonal behaviour that has the potential to smooth diplomatic relations, particularly when cross-cultural differences seem complex. This golden rule of “treating others as

¹⁰ The Quran, Hadith 13, 40 Hadith an-Nawawi.

one would wish to be treated” is found in the Bible,¹¹ Quran,¹² Analects,¹³ Mahabharata,¹⁴ and many other scriptures, and embodies the essence of universal ethical precepts, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all beings.

By awakening a sense of deeper consciousness among disputants, “if you can come to see the other, not as your enemy, but as someone experiencing life from a different perspective, you are honouring them as you would have them honour you” (Gita Wisdom, n.d.).

With the increasing secularization of societies and the recognition of diverse belief systems, relying solely on scriptures may be perceived as exclusionary. However, our research positions these scriptures as a supplementary tool only and does not aim to discredit or replace existing mediation strategies entirely.

It is also crucial to clarify that the authors do not seek to undermine the established frameworks of international law, including treaties, customary law, and the general principles of law, which form the cornerstone of contemporary diplomatic mediation. These legal instruments remain fundamental in guiding state-to-state interactions and ensuring the peaceful resolution of disputes within the international system. In fact, our approach seeks to complement these legal resources by drawing upon wisdom embedded in ancient scriptures to inspire broader, cross-cultural dialogue.

Moreover, our emphasis on ancient scriptures does not necessarily mean prioritizing religious perspectives exclusively. Many ancient texts contain ethical and moral teachings that are applicable beyond religious boundaries, and our focus is on extracting “universal values” that foster an inclusive approach to diplomatic mediation. Some may also argue that relying on ancient scriptures for dispute resolution may be culturally biased and overlook the diversity of perspectives within a nation.

Placing emphasis on cultural relativism, such a one-size-fits-all approach based on ancient scriptures may not be universally effective in resolving contemporary conflicts. While the authors acknowledge that

¹¹ The Gospel of Matthew 7:12.

¹² Hadith 13, 40 Hadith an-Nawawi.

¹³ The Analects, 15.14.

¹⁴ Anusasana. Parva 113.8.

cultural diversity is crucial, the argument based on cultural relativism assumes an oversimplification. The intention is not to enforce rigid adherence to ancient scriptures or their values. In fact, the idea is to take inspiration from universal principles that can help provide a shared ground.

The evolution of societal values and the irrelevance of ancient wisdom in contemporary settings is another valid counterargument. By placing too much emphasis on ancient wisdom, the ability to adopt evolving values may be limited, and progress in conflict resolution may be hindered. Given that the world has rapidly changed since these ancient texts were written, historical wisdom poses the disadvantage of overlooking innovation.

Nonetheless, the authors strongly believe that although societal values change, certain fundamental principles such as peace, justice, and human dignity remain constant. This counterargument assumes a static interpretation of ancient wisdom, but the authors' idea is to adapt and reinterpret these principles in light of changing times. By justifying the meaning of "timeless", the essence of these values remains constant, while the approach to their incorporation takes modern perspectives.

In the complex and fast-paced world of international relations, the "practicality" of using ancient scriptures for every diplomatic mediation may also be questioned. The argument also extends to the criticism that this approach lacks pragmatism and may not provide tangible solutions to address the intricate geopolitical issues of today. However, this counterargument assumes an either-or scenario, thereby neglecting the complementary nature of historical wisdom and contemporary approaches.

The authors believe that integrating ancient principles into modern conflict resolution does not imply an impractical reliance on outdated methods. In fact, the suggestion is to use the wisdom gained over centuries as a supplementary tool to inform and enrich more pragmatic solutions.

The existing mediation and diplomatic tools are not being discredited, but in fact, this approach introduces a deeper level of universality by adding insights from the scriptures. Synergy, as the outcome of diversity (Yassien, 2015), and as defined by Covey, should

be the “working together of two things to produce a result greater than the sum of their individual effects” (Covey, 2009). Making use of the existing tools and focusing on common truths drawn out from scriptures, mediations can redirect contentious discussions towards shared human aspirations, thereby fostering a sense of unity and resolving cross-cultural differences.

As the world becomes increasingly globalized and interconnected, it is vital to recognize shared values that transcend national and cultural boundaries. As T.S. Eliot wisely stated, “The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time”. Perhaps it is time for diplomacy and mediation to look back into ancient wisdom for fresh insights (Eliot, 1943).

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