

Reconciliation: external realities, internal truths

Human Development Dawn

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2.5.05

AT a time when the concept of reconciliation is increasingly being used for conflict resolution in both international and national contexts, let us examine the subject from global as well as individual polarities. There is also a need to recognize the damage which a non-violent dimension can inflict on human relations.

An unassuming, dedicated group of individuals ably led by Dr Meenakshi Gopinath at the Foundation for Universal Responsibility in New Delhi known as WISCOMP (Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace) organized a three-day symposium in March 2005 that brought together a wide range of perspectives from South Asia and Europe on this subject.

Exchanges at this event illustrated the fact that while South Africa post-1990 under Nelson Mandela made "reconciliation" a part of the contemporary lexicon, there remains vast scope for new research and sustained reflection in this direction.

We need to explore reconciliation with a look at the world's map from three perspectives. The first is that 6.2 billion people on the planet today share an unprecedented collective consciousness that is instant and simultaneous, which is conflictual as well as consensual. There is some exaggeration on the inclusion of every human being in this shared collective consciousness. Even today mass media and telecommunication

— which are the instruments that shape this collective simultaneity — are not fully accessible to about half the planet's population. But never before in human history have as many as over three billion people been in immediate, daily awareness of each other. For the first time, they have the means to be able to switch into this shared world consciousness through media, telecommunication, mass travel, commerce and contemporary culture.

for the psyche and the spirit as violence can be harmful to the human body. This dark side of non-violence applies to inter-personal relationships, in the way, for instance, by which some parents may bring up their children, ostensibly smothering them with love but actually suffocating them with their own preferences and patterns of thought and behaviour. The dark side of non-violence can also apply to other levels of human relationships: between husband and wife, among relatives, and on a larger scale, among communities, races, religions, sects, castes and classes.

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have to begin with the individual human being and not with groups. Each individual begins with an inheritance that is also unchangeable.

A person's DNA, genes, race, parents, family, the given name, clan, religion, sect, gender and caste with which he has come into this world mean that he is immediately trapped at birth itself, locked into a time warp from which few ever escape. Our birth determines a great deal of what we are, what we do, what we

tion. We have to venture into unknown and as yet undiscovered territories of the mind and the spirit. Faith in religion, worship, practice of yoga, the observance dietary abstinence, the use of counselling, the resort to various support systems are meant to help stabilize a person's inner reality or the hazards of a journey into the unknown. But often, all these are not adequate or widespread enough to deal with the consequences of the non-violent context of conflict. For this non-violence does not bring outright destruction. Instead, there is a steady erosion, a gradual deconstruction, a diminution of the capacity for happiness. Every human life begins with so much joy and innocence and pleasure and ends with so much pain, decay, guilt and disquiet.

When individuals interact with each other, in the community, with the state, with a political system, there can be co-existence without reconciliation, passive hostility without even passive acceptance.

Adversarial parallels exist in abundance. States may reconcile with each other such as in the present peace process between Pakistan and India but there are non-state actors within each state that remain unreconciled and which receive notable levels of popular support. Internal units of a state can remain unreconciled to the state itself as in the case of the Maoists in Nepal, the Naxalites in India, the Tamils in Sri Lanka, and to a fortunately lesser degree, the tribal dissidents in Balochistan in Pakistan. States may be equalized within a single institution such as the United Nations General

Assembly and yet remain divergent in terms of power and might, within the veto-based UN Security Council. An overwhelmingly large number of human beings on the planet today remain unequalized as disparities of wealth grow greater, rather than decrease.

Democracy appears to drive reconciliation. Yet political parties and the practices and procedures of democratic institutions such as the principle of the "majority is right" and that

The second perspective is that there is an unrivalled concentration of technological, military and economic power in a single state that seeks to dominate the globe by promoting the free market, and the new mass cult which believes that "big is better" and "more is best" because "small" and "less" are no longer beautiful. This hegemonic dominance by one strong state and ethos repels as well as seduces; it becomes a determinant of the way world affairs evolve.

The third perspective is the unchecked devastation of our ecology. This is taking place through climatic change, loss of biodiversity, contamination of water, air and land. Consumption for its own sake, over and above the need to fulfill basic requirements has become the core value of life, instead of conservation. There is a grave imbalance between our desire for development and our disregard for nature. As we pursue growth and consumerism, eight million people die every year because of abject poverty. But ironically in a world so external and pervasive as the one defined by those three perspectives, we need to begin a search for reconciliation from within each person.

Let us also, in this instance only, depart from the violent and post-violent context of reconciliation which is the principal framework in which reconciliation is generally attempted. Violence is brutal, it is anti-human, it is antinature. Yet, it is perversely easy to measure: most of the results of violence are visible and obvious.

But there is a dark side of conflicts that is created and bred without using violence. This dark side of non-violence can be subversive and suppressive, in a subtle as well as a crude manner but can be in many ways as painful

as we are, what we do, what we become. In most of the above features, an individual simply has no choice. A whole life is spent as a struggle to overcome our genesis.

To say this is not to devalue the importance of upbringing and the choices that each individual is, in theory, able to make. Nor is it to take the responsibility that each person bears for his own conduct, particularly after attaining adulthood. Indeed, when we note the startling contrasts that can exist between parent and child, between siblings of the same blood and lineage, we are in awe of human capacity to transcend inherited traits.

As an individual grows from birth to adulthood, multiple levels of internal realities develop. Each person contains within his own mind and soul a vast unseen ocean, with unforeseen, uncharted depths. Life comprises a perennial search for internal reconciliation between the several levels of this internal reality. There can be harmony or conflict between the sense of self and of selflessness, childhood and adulthood, old convictions and new doubts, ambition and actual ability, inherited identity and acquired personality, dreams and reality, the physical and the spiritual. The existence of this inner, turbulent realm does not necessarily connote sickness, requiring psychiatric treatment or psychological cure. Even normal, visibly well-adjusted persons carry on living with an internal world which is often unsettled.

The combination of inheritance and of internal imperatives becomes a highly combustible mixture. To reduce the volatility that threatens stability, individuals resort to habitual thinking and repetitive patterns of action. This helps them deal with the insecurity syndrome.

Reconciliation requires innova-

tion. Majority is right and that "numbers rule", makes partisanship the poison of democracy, the brew that kills any attempt to reconcile. Perhaps this is because the technology of democracy even in the 21st century and even in societies with strong electoral systems and practices remains primitive and rudimentary, compared to the technology we have developed in computers and telecommunications.

There is a need for citizens to take more active responsibility for the conduct of reconciliation and not parrot the popular media-driven myth that portrays political leaders as villains and scoundrels. The distance between civil society organizations and political society, particularly in South Asia, is most disquieting.

People possess remarkable resilience. They have an almost infinite capacity to survive tragedies, traumas and tsunamis. Individuals have the capacity to conduct their own spontaneous reconciliation.

If internal reconciliation within the mind and the spirit of each individual is the pivot on which reconciliation on a large canvas is to be conducted, when does reconciliation become apathy, complacency and acceptance for the sake of bringing visible tensions and divisions to an end? Or can the search for internal personal reconciliation become dangerously destabilizing? As we know, searching self-criticism is the single most difficult process to conduct. Equally, this kind of no-holds-barred scrutiny of one's own persona is the irreducible and inescapable starting point of reconciliation with the other person, group or country.

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