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Reconciliation
The South African Experience and Its Relevance for India

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Abstract: Basing himself on the South African experience of apartheid and on the Truthand Reconciliation Commission, the author proposes a model for India to foster communal harmony and reconciliation. The article is both experiential and relevant for our times.

Keywords: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, apartheid, violence, reconciliation, South Africa.

On February 11, 1990, at 4.00 p.m. Nelson Mandela, the Black leader of the African National Congress (ANC), was finally released after 27 years in jail. On that day Mandela walked into freedom for the first time in his entire life. He saw his mission as one to build a new South Africa where peoples of all races and religions would live in peace and equality. But he was also aware of the history of violence against and oppression of his Fellow-Black-South Africans by the White minority Government. Torn between calls for revenge and yearnings for peace, he opted decisively for peace through reconciliation. His colleague and fellow-freedom fighter, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, supported him strongly and articulated the same vision when he said, "there is no future without forgiveness."

In 1995 in pursuance of this vision of a new South Africa, the Parliament created the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC). Its principal task was to bring healing to the peoples of this "new" nation by using the weapon of "truth."

This article will analyse the make-up and functioning of the TRC and conclude with a few reflections on the relevance of the reconciliation message for India.

What is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)?

The TRC was born in 1995 out of an urgent need in South Africa to unite and reconcile its Black, White and Coloured (Asian) peoples. The then South African Government of National Unity, made up of the predominantly Black African National Congress (ANC) and the minority White Nationalist Party (NP) passed the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Bill in Parliament. The passage of this Bill enabled the Government to form the Truth and Reconciliation Commission with the explicit mandate to heal and reconcile the whole nation. As Cheryl de la Rey says, "Four keywords encapsulate the objectives of the TRC: truth, forgiveness, healing and reconciliation" (de la Rey 2001:253).

Nelson Mandela, the Black leader who headed the ANC, was acutely aware that if South Africa did not go down the path of reconciliation it would be engulfed by a bloodbath of revenge and hatred for the former White rulers of the Apartheid regime. However, a significant majority of the NP was pressing for legislation that would grant full legal amnesty to the former White rulers, rather than talk of reconciliation with a threat of prosecution lurking in the background. Finally, a compromise was struck, the outcome of which was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In order to be able to deal with this amnesty demand while at the same time safeguarding the truth and justice aspects, the TRC formed three working committees: The Committee on Human Rights Violations, the Committee on Amnesty and the Committee on Reparation and Rehabilitation of Victims.

The Committee on Human Rights Violation was aimed specifically at the needs of the victims. It had to establish the identity of the victims of human rights violations, record their allegations, and seek the names of those responsible for these violations. Only violations committed between March 1, 1960 and May 10, 1994 were admissible by the committee. The second committee, namely the Amnesty Committee, had to consider every case of those applying for amnesty. Through public hearings and in accordance with the stringent norms drawn up for amnesty by the committee, it was to scrutinize applications and accept or reject these for

amnesty. So, in spite of the earlier demand of the NP for a blanket amnesty for all human rights violations, the TRC conceded to amnesty only to political crimes and under certain conditions. The main condition was that those seeking amnesty had to give a full and public disclosure of their actions to the Committee, which in turn would deliberate and decide on the merits of the petition for amnesty. The third committee, namely the Committee on Reparation and Rehabilitation of Victims, had to decide on policy for awarding reparations and rehabilitation to victims of violations and violence.

The TRC did not follow wholly a judicial process since it could not prosecute or sentence persons. However, it did function as a judicial body in so far as it could investigate allegations, cross-examine the witnesses and grant amnesty to perpetrators of political crime.

The Objectives of the TRC

At the very outset it should be stated that the TRC was a source of confusion for many, especially for the victims of violence who now sought justice. They felt that this talk of amnesty robbed them of justice; they feared that the perpetrators of violence would be getting away lightly, thanks to the amnesty arrangement by the TRC.

However, the vision of the TRC was driven by the interim Constitution of the State of South Africa. The Final report of the TRC states clearly that:

> The pursuit of national unity, the well-being of all South African citizens and peace require reconciliation between the people of South Africa and the reconstruction of society... These can now be addressed on the basis that there is a need for understanding but not vengeance, a need for reparation but not retaliation, a need for *ubuntu (humaneness)* but not victimization. In order to advance such reconciliation and reconstruction, amnesty shall be granted in respect of acts, omissions and offences associated with political objectives and committed in the course of the conflicts of the past...(TRC Report: Ch. 5, Intro.).

As is obvious, the overarching mandate given to the TRC by Parliament was the promotion of national unity and reconciliation.

Cheryl de la Rey succinctly presents the objectives of the TRC in the following words:

§ To establish as complete a picture as possible of the causes, nature and extent of the gross violations of human rights committed during the years of apartheid.

§ To facilitate the granting of amnesty to persons who make a full disclosure of all relevant facts relating to acts with a political objective.

§ To establish and make known the fate of victims, restore their human and civil dignity by granting them an opportunity to relate their own accounts of the violations, and make recommendations on reparation measures in respect of the violations.

§ To compile a comprehensive report of the activities and findings of the TRC together with recommendations of measures to prevent future violations of human rights. (253)

Some Characteristics of the TRC

The TRC had some unique characteristics, which made it both novel as well as controversial. We shall highlight some of these characteristics: a) its public nature; b) its functioning through the three committees; c) its permeating philosophy of *ubuntu;* d) its concept of restorative justice; e) its methodology of "telling one's story;" f) its quest for truth; g) its the provision of amnesty;

a) Its Public Nature

The Commission was open to public participation as well as scrutiny. The 17 TRC commissioners appointed by the President were women and men acceptable to the population. They were of various races and both genders. These persons did not have a high political profile but had high credibility in the community. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, "an almost universally acceptable choice and a person of impeccable credentials," (Smith 1997:23), was the chairperson.

Since the hearings were open, many people inside as well as outside South Africa became involved in the proceedings. People were confronted with:

Vivid images on their television screens or on the front pages of their newspapers. People saw, for example, a former security police officer demonstrating his torture techniques. They saw weeping men and women asking for the truth about their missing loved ones. The media also helped generate public debate on central aspects of South Africa's past and raise the level of historical awareness. The issues that emerged as a consequence helped the nation to focus on values central to a healthy democracy: transparency, public debate, public participation and criticism (TRC Report: no. 5).

b) Its Functioning through the Three Committees

As mentioned above, although the committees had clearly spelt out goals, they still seemed contradictory to large sections of the population. The Commission's report states:

Many participants, however, saw a contradiction between the work of the Human Rights Violations Committee, which devoted its time and resources to acknowledging the painful experiences of victims of gross violations of human rights, and the work of the Amnesty Committee, which freed many perpetrators of these violations from prosecution (and from prison) on the basis of full disclosure. ...This tension was deepened by the fact that the Amnesty Committee was given powers of implementation, while the Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee could, by and large, only make recommendations. Perpetrators were granted freedom. Victims were required to wait until Parliament had accepted or rejected the recommendation of the Commission. (TRC Report: nos. 8&9).

c) Its Permeating Philosophy of *Ubuntu*

The concept of *ubuntu* (humaneness) seems to have played a significant role in the very conception of the TRC. *Ubuntu*

Which derives from the Xhosa expression *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye Bantu (*People are people through other people"), holds that humanity, the common possession of the entire people, is diminished when even one individual is lost to inhumanity. African jurisprudence is restorative rather than retributive, Tutu explains, because *ubuntu* teaches that the dignity of one is linked to the dignity of all.(Appleby 2000:199).

Furthermore, in the words of the Constitutional Court Judge O'Regan:

> ...Apartheid was a denial of a common humanity. Black people were refused respect and dignity and thereby the dignity of all South Africans was diminished. The new Constitution rejects the past and affirms the equal worth of all South Africans. Thus, recognition and protection of human dignity is the touchstone of the new political order and is fundamental to the new Constitution. (TRC Report n. 81).

These quotations indicate clearly the permeating influence of the concept of *ubuntu*, which is characteristic of the South African culture. It stresses very much the commitment to respect human life and dignity. Moreover, justice is presented as restorative rather than retributive, though the latter is what we are more acquainted with and practise through our judicial systems.

d) Its concept of Restorative Justice?

Restorative justice emphasizes the "restoring of relationships" between victims and offenders and between offenders and the communities. Also the human and civil dignity of the victims was to be restored. One such way this was done by the Commission was by granting victims an opportunity to relate their own accounts of violations of which they were victims. In marked contrast to retributive justice, the healing process is highlighted between humans, since the offences are against fellow human beings.

Also, the stress is on reparation rather than retaliation. Reparation could take the form of community projects like providing housing, employment...etc to the victims. Such a process is also thought to restore relationships and not merely pay back dues to the victims.

Whereas traditional retributive justice does not concern itself necessarily with resolving the conflict, restorative justice would encourage victims, offenders and the community to be directly involved in conflict resolution. State and legal professionals are there to facilitate the process and not take it over.

It should also be said that in no way would the very large numbers of victims have received justice through the normal judi-

cial system. In most cases the lack of sufficient evidence, the unavailability of witnesses, the definite identity of the perpetrators etc. would stymie their legal and civil claims in the courts of law. However, the Commission's process of restorative justice did meet the human and emotional needs of the victims in large numbers even while falling short sometimes of addressing all the legal claims.

e) Its Methodology of "telling one's story"

"Telling one's own story" was the primary means for victims as well as offenders to come to terms with their past. Since it was done in the public forum it had the psychological effect of a "catharsis." For victims, it meant sharing their burdens, doubts and sufferings with their communities and the nation at large. For offenders, it was a freeing experience from the burdens of guilt and an opportunity to seek reconciliation and forgiveness. For both, it was an occasion to come face to face and reach out to one another in an effort to bring healing and closure. As Botman described it:

> Victims and perpetrators and those who thought that they were just innocent bystanders, now realize their complicity and have an opportunity to participate in each other's humanity in story form (Botman 1996: 37).

Michael Lapsley, himself a victim of a letter bomb attack in South Africa, confirms the immense value of story-telling as a method of healing. He gave personal testimony at the TRC and now conducts healing workshops for suffering South Africans; he describes the value of storytelling thus:

> The essence of our methodology is storytelling in the context of journey – storytelling that encourages letting go, the acknowledgement of what is destructive because of what has happened to us. To use a health-related image, you take the bandages off the wounds. By looking at them, you're also cleaning them before fresh bandages are put back on. That happens through the process of storytelling. (Lapsley, 2001: 10).

f) Its quest for Truth

While it is fairly obvious that the quest for truth was the driving force of the TRC, queries about: what truth, whose truth and the

like, kept overshadowing the work of the Commission. For functional purposes the TRC came up with four notions of truth: i) factual truth ii) narrative truth iii) social truth iv) restorative truth.

i) Factual Truth

> The Commission was required to take into account factual and objective information and evidence in the course of gathering or receiving information. Details of what happened to whom, where, when and how were carefully documented and extensive verification processes were also put in place. Furthermore, the Commission studied underlying patterns of violence in order to make inferences and interpret the extensive data it had gathered. Factual truth contributed importantly to countering the disinformation that the Government and others had widely circulated in the past and had been accepted as truth by the public.

ii) Narrative Truth

Archbishop Tutu is quoted in the TRC Report as saying:

> This Commission is said to listen to everyone. It is therefore important that everyone should be given a chance to say his or her truth as he or she sees it... (TRC Report).

In the South African cultural context where oral tradition has great value, the process of story-telling was particularly important. In fact, this was considered a unique feature of the TRC when compared to truth commissions elsewhere in the world. There was recognition that in this method of story-telling there was also healing for the community. Hence, the stories were not presented as arguments in the courts of law but as personal narratives, which were more evocative than accusatory.

Thus, a narrative truth was created which also contributed to the memory bank of the nation for generations to come. This process of restoring and enriching the collective national memory connected with the years of violence and brutality was reinforced and strengthened. Many others could participate and share in these experiences of fellow South Africans.

iii) Social Truth

Social truth has been defined as "the truth of experience that is established through interaction, discussion and debate." Sometimes also referred to as "dialogue truth" its goal was to transcend the past divisions and listen carefully to the complex motives and viewpoints of those involved. Hence, the TRC took pains to invite:

> People from all walks of life to participate in the process, including faith communities, the South African National Defence Force, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and political parties. The public was engaged through open hearings and the media. The Commission itself was also subjected to constant public scrutiny and critique. (TRC Report).

The "dialogue truth" also brought in a culture of transparency after years of oppressive White rule where disinformation and untruths were the order of the day. Furthermore, democracy and people's participation in the process of discovering truth became strengthened and led to affirming human dignity and integrity, one of the objectives of the TRC.

iv) Restorative Truth

Restorative truth sought to place facts and their meaning within the context of relationships between humans and in the context of relationships between the State and its citizens. It sought to go beyond mere facts by initiating a healing process and restoring relationships. It was not enough to merely document what had happened. What was needed was to establish a truth that would contribute to the reparation of the damage of the past and make provisions to prevent the recurrence of something similar in the future.

Restorative truth also emphasized the role of "acknowledgement." Acknowledgement meant placing information that is known on public, national record. As the report states:

> Acknowledgement is an affirmation that a person's pain is real and worthy of attention. It is thus central to the restoration of the dignity of victims" (TRC Report).

g) Its Provision of Amnesty

This provision proved to be most difficult and troubling to many, especially to some of the victims. Many thought that the offenders were getting off lightly. It seemed that all they were required to do was own up to their misdeeds of the past in public and in turn receive amnesty, namely, protection from any future prosecution in the courts of law. However, the matter was not that simple. The Amnesty Committee had worked out stringent conditions and criteria for the granting of amnesty. (TRC Report). Nevertheless the perception continued among many that justice was being delayed for the victims while amnesty was granted more readily to the offenders. Furthermore, some thought that amnesty pointed to a failure to respect the suffering of the victims, while encouraging a culture of impunity for the offenders. All of this indicates the delicate balancing act the Committee had to perform between the need for justice to the victims of past abuse and the need for reconciliation in order to build a new South African society. In fact, the post-amble of the Constitution stated this thinking quite clearly:

> In order to advance such reconciliation and reconstruction (of society), amnesty shall be granted in respect of acts, omissions and offences with political objectives and committed in the course of the conflicts of the past. (TRC Report).

Thus, the Commission seemed determined to foster the culture of restorative justice while not denying that the customary model of retributive justice would also play a role in South African society, particularly in crimes of a non-political nature. The provision of amnesty and the concept of restorative justice set the stage for the process of reconciliation and forgiveness so much desired by the Parliament of the country.

Reconciliation: A Goal as well as a Process

The ultimate goal of the TRC was reconciliation in the South African society. However, it felt that it should give equal importance to the process that was intended to lead to the goal. Hence, as we have seen above, the process was made transparent, participative and inclusive. It was envisioned that these ingredients would initiate and ultimately help the nation to arrive at reconciliation.

The TRC's Understanding of Reconciliation

The primary understanding of the TRC's notion of reconciliation was its restorative and relational nature. (Tavuchis, 1991). In other words, human relationships between communities and between the State and the people needed to be restored. Reconciliation, which means "to make compatible or to bring harmony," also included concepts of forgiveness and reconstruction of society. But the TRC did not enter into finer distinctions between forgiveness and reconciliation, nor did it permit itself to be totally guided by the Christian notion of reconciliation. It insisted that reconciliation for the TRC remained in the political realm of nation building within the democratic framework of society. (TRC Report). Such a nuanced position was taken out of respect for South African society; while the majority of its citizens are followers of Christianity the nation remains multi-religious and pluri-cultural.

Moreover, the TRC was careful not to equate reconciliation with forgiveness. Forgiveness was viewed as a pre-requisite to reconciliation. Also, forgiveness was not to be associated with the simplistic platitude of "forgive and forget." Rather the TRC's emphasis was on "remember and forgive." The memories of the past sufferings and injustices were precious and to be publicly shared and safeguarded in the treasury of national memories. These could be then re-visited by future generations so that they remember never to repeat this history of violence and injustice. As da Silva says elsewhere, "it is only in remembering that we can call up the courage to forgive." (da Silva, 2001).

Different levels of Reconciliation

Since reconciliation was a process as well as a goal, it permeated the process at different levels. The Commission mentions five levels at which reconciliation was mediated: a) at the level of confronting factual and painful truth; b) at the level of victims and perpetrators; c) at the community level; d) at the national level; e) at the reparation and reconstruction level.

a) At the level of confronting factual and painful truth

Often victims felt a sense of 'closure' when they were provided with some definitive and conclusive evidence about previously considered open-ended cases. However, the reconciliation of victims with their own pain may not have always been smooth or rapid given the complexity of the emotional situation. At times perpetrators too found it hard to be reconciled with factual truth and would go into a denial mode, while at other times their acceptance of the truth relieved them of a lot of guilt and put them firmly on the road to reconciliation.

b) At the level of victims and perpetrators

Victims often felt the need to know whom to forgive and asked that their perpetrators come forward. Father Michael Lapsley, who lost both arms and an eye in a near fatal security police parcel bomb attack, told the Commission: "I need to know who to forgive in order to endeavour to do so." Similarly, a white woman, Beth Savage, seriously injured in a bomb attack carried out by a black liberation organization, said at the hearing: "this experience has enriched my life. I want to meet the perpetrator so that I can forgive him and that he might forgive me."

In another case, one of the policemen involved in the abduction and murder of a black activist, Mathew Goniwe, asked for a chance to meet with the family. After more than four hours of tense discussions the son of Mathew Goniwe forgave his father's killer and embraced him. (Smith 1997). But there were also instances when meetings between victims and perpetrators did not result in reconciliation and may in fact have led to alienation.

c) At the community level

There were violations of human rights also between and within communities. Internal divisions led to conflicts between young and old, men and women, as well as between ethnic and racial groups. It would seem that a culture of violence had penetrated most communities and scores were sought to be settled secretly and with immediacy. The Commission for its part tried to assist in bringing reconciliation to such community problems. However, it would seem

that the predominant focus of the Commission was to bring reconciliation in the conflict between the majority Black community and the minority but very powerful White community.

d) At the national level

The TRC, through the very process of reconciliation it adopted, brought about a new culture of transparency and democracy at the national level. Such a culture facilitated the reaching of the goal of reconciliation at least in so far as a bloodbath between the Blacks and the Whites was prevented. The Commission also sought to restore the dignity of the victims of oppression while restoring confidence in State institutions. These measures made reconciliation a tangible and visible outcome for the nation as a whole.

e) At the reparation and reconstruction level

The concern that reconciliation should impact the disadvantaged of the nation in the form of reparation and reconstruction was predominant in the working of the TRC. However, it seems that due to a scarcity of financial and other resources in the country, the committee on Reparation of the TRC could not quite meet the expectations of the victims and the marginalized in society. There seems to have been a higher level of disappointment here which no doubt undermined to some extent the reconciliation process.

The road to reconciliation for the majority of South Africans means both material reconstruction and the restoration of human dignity. This would imply heavy financial investments by State institutions in upgrading and improving the lot of the ghetto dwellers and slum residents. The task is enormous and maybe the goal of reconciliation has to be viewed as a long-term goal that may span several decades and generations. But the TRC has set the process in motion and the fall-out in terms of healing and restoring of relationships cannot be belittled or underestimated.

Nevertheless, the TRC's partial failure to meet some of the high expectations of reparation and reconstruction on the part of those who came forward and told their story has raised the question of the relationship between truth, justice and reconciliation.

An Evaluation of the TRC

South Africa's unique experiment with truth had some very laudable results while at the same time falling short of its lofty goals of national reconciliation and unity. The TRC's major achievement was that it got the truth out and into the public forum where ordinary women and men of South Africa eke out a living. The voiceless of centuries suddenly were given their voice back and people were listening. As an elderly man in Soweto township said, "When my tormentor tortured me at John Vorster Square, he sneered, 'Shout your lungs out. Nobody will ever hear you.' But at long last people are listening" (Times of India Dec. 11, 2000, 4-5).

The oral tradition of South Africa of telling stories contributed greatly to enriching the national memory bank. Testimonies heard from approximately 21,400 people and running into 5 volumes have been carefully documented and are available to the citizens of the country as well as the world, on the World Wide Web. This is a monumental tribute to the countless victims of the obnoxious Apartheid system that came to be a way of life for centuries in South Africa. Moreover the philosophy of *Ubuntu* and that of 'forgive but remember' was reinforced by the truth ferreted out by the TRC.

Did the truth contribute to national reconciliation as hoped for? This is a debatable question at best. It seems that it did contribute much to personal healing for many thousands of victims and their families. The psychological leap from personal catharsis to national reconciliation is both long and arduous. In addition, it would also seem that Whites participated less than Blacks in telling their story, thus leaving a significant social cleavage in place, in spite of the vision of reconciliation for all South Africans. At least it could be said that the process of reconciliation has begun and now there is no looking back for this young nation.

The question of amnesty for the perpetrators continues to trouble many in South Africa especially those of the victims who feel that in the event justice has been bypassed. This in spite of the fact that the TRC was extremely careful not to accept readily amnesty petitions; besides, it had put in place stringent conditions for approval of such petitions. Maybe the amnesty arrangement would have drawn

less criticism had the reparation and rehabilitation project moved ahead with vigour and commitment. But as mentioned earlier, the paucity of funds and other resources hampered the State's contribution to the march for reconciliation. Understandably, the victims grew disillusioned and in some cases became downright cynical since they could not see any tangible benefits flowing from telling the story of truth.

Now with hindsight it would seem that unless the three committees had worked at the same pace and in much greater tandem the dream of moving from truth to reconciliation was bound to remain elusive. As pastor Piet Meiring, one of the Commissioners of the TRC said:

> Over the last few years, we have produced something of the truth. But we were naïve to think that if truth were brought in through the front door, reconciliation would slip in from the back. Reconciliation only comes hand-in-hand with justice and reparation – and that involves decisions about land, privileges. Reconciliation, we need to realize, does not come cheap. (Times of India, December 11, 2000, 4-5).

Reconciliation: Its Relevance for India

India has a centuries-old tradition of non-violence thanks to its sages and sacred scriptures. Paradoxically, the country has also been racked with wars, communal violence and riots, inter-caste and inter-ethnic conflicts. One wonders why has the philosophy of non-violence not led to a practice of reconciliation in our land? For a brief while, while the nation struggled for its independence under the leadership of the Mahatma, it seemed that reconciliation was both possible and real. But after winning the trophy of independence the practice of non-violence became a memory of the distant past. For Gandhi, non-violence was a cherished belief and a way of life, but for many of his supporters it seemed a calculated strategy to outwit the British.

Rajmol.an Gandhi in his book, *Revenge & Reconciliation,* thinks that while reconciliation is relevant to India, it has remained elusive through most of its history. He says:

> On the key question (of reconciliation), we found that despite a long line of valiant proponents the heterodoxy of reconciliation did not become a dominant Indian or South Asian trait.... revenge was found alive and well in South Asia.... Over and over again, our survey revealed the destructive role played in South Asian history by a habit of distrust and an unwillingness to come together. (1999: 392).

Truth and Reconciliation in the Indian Context

As we have seen in the analysis of the South African experience there can be no reconciliation without truth. But for truth to be manifested it is necessary that there is the goodwill for dialogue, story-telling and the sharing of experiences with fellow citizens in the nation. This process seems not to have been attempted nationally at least since India's Independence in 1947. On the contrary, the trauma of the Partition of the nation, the subsequent wars with Pakistan and the numerous riots between Hindus and Muslims to this day seem to tilt more on the side of amnesia rather than remembering. The tendency towards amnesia leaves bleeding wounds in the hearts of the victims and a haughty arrogance among the perpetrators. In fact, perpetrators of communal violence are rarely if ever punished in India. Enquiry commissions write lengthy reports only to find them buried away in the cupboards of ineffective bureaucrats anxious to curry favour with their corrupt political masters. There is no better insurance for the recurrence of the cycle of violence than to brush under the carpet the untold stories of pain and suffering.

Furthermore, since murder and violence in riots seem to be decriminalized and prosecutions minimized, the savagery of fresh atrocities keeps reaching new heights each time. The most recent conflagration in Gujarat in the year 2002 points to the sophistication and cold blooded manner of executing death and destruction on helpless victims. The undue haste to declare "normalcy" after the mayhem and the speedy closing down of relief camps in Gujarat are hardly signals for the triumph of truth and reconciliation.

A tradition of demonizing the "other" seems strongly inculcated in some of the oral traditions in the country. Thus the

Muslim and the Christian are readily branded as foreigners, whose loyalty to the country is suspect; similarly Hindus are characterized as being idol worshippers. Such negative characterizations and attribution of stereotypes prejudice the discourse between members of communities and serve only to perpetuate suspicion and hatred. So long as the discourse reinforces negative emotions and images of the "other" it is well nigh impossible to initiate a more constructive dialogue along the lines of truth and reconciliation.

In more recent times scholars like T.N. Madan (1992) and Ashis Nandy (1992) have been analysing whether the very concept of secularism embedded in our Constitution as a safeguard against interreligious violence in the country, is itself party to this violence and resistant to reconciliation. Their basic argument is that the modern, western concept of secularism, which separates religion from public life and politics, is simply alien to our cultural experience where religion and all significant expressions of life co-mingle. Therefore, secularism, which is presented as a panacea for religious intolerance, ends up becoming vulnerable to the charge of intolerance towards 'religionists' In other words; it becomes an ideology of intolerance of religion in public life, in a country where such a distinction is at best ephemeral. Further, these scholars claim that tolerance is far better articulated and practised through Indian religious traditions than through an alien and culturally impoverished western concept of secularism. In a similar vein, da Silva in another article also concludes that:

> Indian secularism, the usually proposed antidote to communalism, seems to have failed to check the growth of communalism. (da Silva 1999: 85).

The South African vision of reconciliation drew its inspiration from its own ancient traditions of *Ubuntu*. It would seem that too contributed to its success and easy acceptance by the people. It could well be that we have failed to experience significant levels of tolerance and reconciliation in modern India because we may have also failed to return to our religio-cultural roots and replace secularism with a more proactive Indian vision of tolerance and reconciliation. After all, some of the most tolerant figures in Indian history from the Buddha, to Ashoka, to Akbhar and more recently to Mahatma Gandhi,

all drew their inspiration for tolerance not by denying their religious traditions but by publicly affirming their religious values.

Prospects for Reconciliation

While on the one hand we do not have ready evidence of the kind the TRC was able to generate in South Africa regarding reconciliation, yet our daily experience of living in a multi-cultural and multi-religious India belies the thesis that reconciliation is elusive. So what could be going on in the psyche of the Indians when confronted by violence and injustice? Could it be that their thoughts and feelings are more attuned to revenge rather than violence? While the analysis of wars and communal riots tends to point to a preponderance of evidence in the direction of revenge rather than reconciliation, we also see examples of humanitarian interventions and people coming together to build rather than destroy.

It may well be that the prospects for reconciliation are a lot brighter in rural and peasant India than in its rapidly modernizing cities. One hears only rarely of communal riots in rural India where men and women of different religions live rather peacefully alongside one another. The ethos of reconciliation seems more prevalent in these situations, and conflicts are resolved with less recourse to violence and mayhem. In contrast, urban India with its compulsions of modernization, the strains of reclaiming one's socio-religious identity and the anxieties of eking out a living, pre-dispose the average urbanite to respond to crisis with aggression and anger. In addition, manipulations by political powers of people and situations make reconciliation an unattractive alternative when compared to the speedier solutions delivered via riots, lootings and mayhem. It would seem that there is the potential for reconciliation though no Government to date has seriously pursued such a course of action after any of the nation's more conspicuous riots. The recent riots of Gujarat are only the latest example.

As stated earlier no reconciliation is possible without truth being shared by its people. Hopes for reconciliation therefore soar when one reads about the *Partition Project* initiated by the political psychologist, Ashis Nandy. It consists of a team of social scientists who plan to talk to several hundred survivors in India about their

experience of the partition trauma. It is hoped that such an oral history would enrich the collective memory of the nation and start a process of reconciliation between Hindus and Muslims, between India and Pakistan. Nandy believes that by repressing trauma we only sow the seeds for many more communal riots in the future. However, a sharing of memories may also lead to a healing of memories.

Another sign of hope on the Indian horizon is the work of reconciliation spearheaded by Rajmohan Gandhi, the grandson of the Mahatma. In his *Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation (CDR)* in Delhi, Gandhi is contacting assiduously people from Pakistan and India in order to establish a dialogue for peace. Similarly, persons from Kashmir and other parts of India are being mobilized to work out some modus for peace and reconciliation in violence-torn Kashmir. Gandhi claims that we generally do not listen to the neighbour's story. The aim of the CDR is to lend an ear to the stories of the pain of the others.

Finally, the story of Hamzabhai, a poor pushcart owner, selling nylon rope, demonstrates that reconciliation is alive and well in the hearts of ordinary women and men. During the Mumbai riots in early 1993, Hamzabhai lost a twenty-five year old son, who had been stabbed. Before dying, the son told the father who his assailants were. The relatives wanting revenge demanded that Hamzabhai tell them the names. Hamzabhai refused. When asked later what motivated his silence, he said, " I did not want another father to go through what I had gone through." Though one part of him urged revenge, Hamzabhai listened rather to the voice of reconciliation.

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