Reconciliation in Indian Epics: A Mediative Perspective

Swarna Rajagopalan

Abstract

How do you make it possible for people who have been fighting bitterly with each other to resume their lives, living together and moving past their experiences after violent ruptures in a way of being? This essay surveys the stories of two Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, to glean what reconciliation might mean to Indians, and by extension, what approaches to reconciliation might be consistent with Indian ways of being, doing and seeing. Two kinds of ruptures are studied: Considered here are irrevocable ruptures like war and bereavement and ruptures like displacement which may be reversed. The essay culminates in a list of entry-points within Indian cultural tradition from which reconciliation may be facilitated.

Author Profile

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Reconciliation in Indian Epics: A Mediative Perspective

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India has a rich heritage of political ideas and practices, including those relating to "reconciliation." This brief essay surveys the stories of two Indian epics, to glean what reconciliation might mean to Indians, and by extension, what approaches to reconciliation might be consistent with Indian ways of being, doing and seeing.

Sidestepping the problems of politics and translation relating to the keywords "Indian," "political," "tradition" and "reconciliation," this study is operationalized simply: How do you make it possible for people who have been fighting bitterly with each other to resume their lives, living together and moving past their experiences after violent ruptures in a way of being? Two kinds of ruptures are possible. In the first, it is possible to recover from the break as in displacement or exile, or even a curse. The second kind causes irrevocable changes, and therefore, calls for a different kind of response. Examples of this are war or bereavement.

Always cognizant of diversity, inclusion-exclusion, war and peace, Indian polities evolved distinctive ways and rules of engagement, person-to-person and polity-to- polity. It is possible to generalize five features of this political heritage:

1. The polity was usually subservient to social structures and ritual relationships.
2. The ideological underpinning of the polity was a singular value system and social arrangements that gave it form. (This is true even if the value system has changed.)
3. The function of the state was to protect this value system, provide refuge and guarantee justice.
4. From persuasion to coercion, statecraft entailed the judicious employment of a range of options. However, punishment or coercion kept a central place in each configuration of options.
5. Strict rules of interaction or engagement governed every aspect of life.

Arguably, the extensive and living mythological and literary heritage of the subcontinent constitutes a more relevant source of political thought than the didactic manuals of the past. The epics reviewed here, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, are extant in innumerable versions, feature protagonists from the warrior/ruler caste, and serve often as tropes in the political

context—Ramarajya being a good example.[1] Exile and war are central to the Ramayana and the Mahabharata stories. What happens and how characters respond will form the substance of this essay, identifying spaces for reconciliation initiatives in our time. First, however, a very short account of the plots of the two epics, for those who may be unfamiliar with them.

The Stories in Brief

The *Ramayana* is the story of Rama, the prince of Ayodhya, who is considered the epitome of all that is virtuous and perfect ("*maryada purushottama*") and who, largely unknown to him, is a divine incarnation. His father had three wives, and sons by each one. When Rama was about to be anointed 'crown prince,' his youngest stepmother was convinced that her son's future and her own place in court were threatened. Reminding her husband of unclaimed favors, she had Rama exiled and her own son, Bharata, anointed in his stead. Rama left for the forest, with his wife and his other brother, without argument or rancor. When approached by Bharata to return to Ayodhya and take his rightful place, Rama declined, insisting on serving his exile. The exiles' journey through hermitages, encounters with the demonic and the accursed that eliminate or redeem them, and finally a fateful crossing of swords with a member of the Lanka king, Ravana's family.

Soorpanakha, Ravana's sister, propositioned Rama and Lakshmana in turn, and attacked Sita, seeking to eliminate obstacles to her path. The events that followed led to Sita's abduction by Ravana and upon her refusal to accept his propositions, her captivity in his gardens. The quest for Sita led Rama and Lakshmana to ally with the Vanaras (forest-dwellers/monkeys) and once they located her, to march upon Lanka to free her. In the war that followed, Ravana lost, but we learn that Sita was freed, not to rejoin Rama but to vindicate his honor. The couple was reunited only after Sita underwent a trial by fire to prove her fidelity to Rama. The exiles returned to Ayodhya where Rama was crowned and ruled Ayodhya in such a just and honorable way that his rule (Rama-rajya) became the metaphor for perfect, utopian governance in the Indian tradition. The twist in the epic tale is added by a later addition in which Rama's penchant for unimpeachable governance standards led him to exile a pregnant Sita in order to answer one person's doubts about his integrity. The epic ends with the restoration of Rama's sons to his court and Sita's decision to die rather than

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[1] The term 'Ramarajya' refers to the perfect rule of Rama in which the integrity and fairness of the ruler assures to the kingdom a bounty beyond its jurisdiction, described by Valmiki as regular rains, rich harvests, freedom from sickness and, to borrow a phrase from Bhutan's contemporary politics, 'gross national happiness.' This utopian vision finds a place in the common, collective cultural knowledge of people in the areas where the Ramayana has been known. In modern times, M.K. Gandhi first used the term to evoke his vision for an independent India. In recent decades, it has been used more loosely as a handle to identify a narrow vision of Indian society as primarily Hindu in certain fixed, essentialized ways, but not so casually as to not call into play for that vision, the traditional association of the term with perfect governance. The result is a political sleight-of-hand that suggests that recognition of India as primarily and simplistically Hindu will result in perfect governance. One incentive for revisiting in the epics in studies such as this one is to be able to return an authenticity of meaning to terms like 'Ramarajya.'

go through a second fidelity test at the instance of her ever-scrupulous husband.

The *Mahabharata* is a far more complex braiding together of many large and small stories. The central strand is the story of the fraternal and ultimately fratricidal rivalry between the sons of two brothers, Dhritarashtra and Pandu. The one hundred sons of the first, the Kauravas, are associated with all the negative qualities of power: arrogance, avarice, anger, insecurity and ultimately, folly and dishonesty. The five sons of the second, the Pandavas, embody their mirror-image: integrity, courage, intelligence, humility and honor. The events leading up to this rivalry, the upbringing of the princes and the growing engagement of dynasties and kingdoms across India with this rivalry, set the stage for two periods of exile and the eponymous war that involves practically every army in the Indian subcontinent. Into this strand, making it something more to Indians than a possible history of an event in the distant past, is woven the story and involvement of the divine incarnation, Krishna. Krishna knows his divinity and deploys it strategically, altering the plot at critical turns.

The Pandavas and Kauravas grew up together, but when the time came for Yudhisthira to assume the throne that had belonged to his father, the Kauravas conspired to rid the court of their cousins. First, they gifted the Pandavas with a new palace, constructed with wax so that they may burn to death. Escaping this, the Pandavas went into hiding for a year, at the end of which they emerged at the competition held to find a suitor for Drupada's unusual daughter. As it turned out, she became wife to all five of them and they returned to their uncle's court. The next ploy to marginalize the Pandavas was a partitioning of the kingdom that left them its most barren reaches. When the five brothers succeeded (through good governance) in making their part prosperous, it was time to challenge them again. This time, they were invited to a game of dice, and upon losing several rounds, the Pandavas went into a thirteen-year exile, of which the last year was to be spent undetected and in disguise. This period was a period of ferment and preparation, and when it ended, the princes sought to return to their kingdom. Diplomatic efforts failed and war became inevitable, resulting in a bloodbath that killed most of the princes of the subcontinent. The Pandavas won, with Krishna's help, and they ruled well (although the credit for a perfect reign remains exclusively Rama's). The epic ends with their abdication in favor of their grandson, and their retirement to the Himalayas.

Exile and Homecoming

In both epics, exile works as a plot device to engineer the confrontation that is the crux of the story. In the case of the Ramayana, that point and purpose for which Rama is born is the killing of Ravana. Unless the princes and Sita leave Ayodhya, the encounter that precipitates conflict cannot occur. In the case of the Mahabharata, where a fratricidal war marks the climax of the epic, the case has to be built for that war and this is done through the many machinations that lead to two periods of exile. None of the protagonists are aware of the larger project guiding the events in their lives, and their experiences and responses have an ordinary context.

In the Ramayana, Rama was exiled at the behest of one person and it was temporary. Therefore, his departure was marked by grief and his return by jubilation. He was crowned king, and all those who had played positive parts in his period of exile attended the coronation.

Nevertheless, Rama's reaction to the exile is of interest. In the plot, it underscores his divine temperament. While everyone else, including his brother and wife who follow him into the forest voluntarily, express anger against Rama's stepmother, the prince himself ascribed the exile to the workings of fate. He appears to lack rancor, and when his family visits him to beg him to return, Rama welcomes them with unaffected warmth and does not berate his stepmother even when he learns of his father's death. We know all along from Valmiki that Rama is divine, but neither he nor his family knew this for sure; they merely knew he displayed qualities beyond the capacity of a human. Therefore, his forgiveness may be attributed to this divinity and commonly disregarded.

In spite of his brother's demonstration of filial loyalty, when Rama returned after fourteen years, he took the precaution of sending a follower ahead to test the waters to see if he was truly welcome. Valmiki's sensitivity to the difficulties of reentry is a signal that the manner of Rama's return may have been exceptional.

The second exile in the plot occurs at the instigation of Rama. At the end of the war with Ravana, he insists on Sita undergoing a fire-ordeal to establish her chastity. However, on hearing that some subjects still doubt her, Rama exiles her in order to establish his impartiality as a king. Bound by devotion and obligation, both Sita and Lakshmana accept this diktat, albeit with sorrow. The difference lies in the moment of return. The first exile ends in a triumphal return; the second does not. Returning to court, Sita is once more asked to prove herself. This proves unbearable to her and she chooses to end her life (she is also an incarnation). Thus, even reversible ruptures can result in irreversible alienation.

The protagonists of the Mahabharata, the Pandavas faced two banishments, both consequences of conspiracies. The first was disguised as a gift and the second was the consequence of a plot openly hatched. In both cases, the conspiring branch of the family had every intention of assassinating the protagonists before the exile period ended. Over time, both sides kept a tally of wrongs and perceived wrongs and this dreadful account was settled in a war that engaged most of the polities in the subcontinent.

On the first occasion, it is gently suggested to the eldest Pandava, who has been anointed crown prince, that he and his brothers might enjoy a year away in a remote province. Unable to refuse, yet alert to the motivation—jealousy of their prowess and popularity—they move. Their jealous cousins commission the construction of a new palace—in wax—which they hoped to burn down along with the Pandavas. The long and the short of the story is that the Pandavas escape and spend the rest of that year in hiding. This banishment ends with their marrying the daughter of Drupada.

The exile ends in a compromise arrangement: the partition of the kingdom. The Pandavas were given the arid, undeveloped part and in the spirit of conciliation, they accept it. With the help of their friends, they develop it into a beautiful place and hold a public sacrifice—the *rajasuya*—which brings them tribute from everywhere in the subcontinent. This idyll ends with a game of dice that is rigged so that they lose everything again. This time, the events leading up to the exile are marked by humiliation and insult, so exile is a gestation period for feelings of revenge and of preparation for the next encounter. Every event during the period of exile is part of both sides' preparation—psychological, diplomatic and military—for war. In this, the second Mahabharata exile resembles more closely the conflict displacements of our time, notably Afghanistan.

At the end of the exile, the Pandavas return to their kingdom and are received with little grace. The diplomatic exchanges that follow leave no room for compromise although they try hard to avert war.

What are the lessons we can learn from this brief analysis about successful return and reconstruction? First, the conditions that led to the displacement must cease. In Rama's case, this was his stepmother Kaikeyi's ambition and it passed as soon as she learnt her son did not want the throne after all. Therefore, he was able to return without acrimony. In the *Mahabharata*, the resentment and envy that motivated the exiles were exacerbated until the war left no one to be jealous any more. At that point, one set of negative sentiments was merely replaced by another: grief, anger and guilt. There is no scope for reconciliation here and the story winds to a close with one self-destructive plot turn after another. Rama's persistence in asking Sita to prove herself and her subsequent self-immolation also illustrate this.

Second, the *Mahabharata* suggests that good faith is an important part of post-conflict (or post-exile) settlements. The settlement made with the Pandavas after their first exile was grudging and mean-spirited. To grant them the worst part of the kingdom and then to resent their making good of it anyway is no way to build a peace. It is to seek more war.

This brings me to the third condition, which is that an amicable return from exile is possible when bad actions are not chased down by worse. In the case of the *Ramayana*, the prince went into the forest, served his sentence, and returned, and that was that. It was a contractual absence, in many ways and when the terms were met, they were done with. In the case of the Mahabharata, there was no leaving well alone. The hostilities and intrigue worsened. First, the Pandavas were not just sent away but a plot was hatched to burn them to death. When they returned alive, they were sent to the worst part of the kingdom. The reaction to their success there was to invite them to a rigged game of dice. Alienating their kingdom and belongings as lost stakes in the game was not enough, but each of the princes was also staked and lost. When all five were lost, they were asked to (and did) stake their wife. She was dragged into court and humiliated before everybody. The story goes on, one humiliation or intrigue following another,

leaving no room for retraction, forgiveness or reconciliation. To imagine, then, that serving out the term of exile and meeting all its conditions would suffice to create the conditions for peace, was an illusion and the Pandavas knew it.

Finally, the experience of the exile itself matters. For Rama, the banishment to the forest was also a welcome sabbatical during which he could commune with nature and with forest-dwelling ascetics. Until the abduction of Sita, it was truly a sylvan idyll. Even after her abduction, Rama made good friends as he sought her and sought to rescue her. Therefore, the very real traumas of the abduction and the loss were off-set in many ways by friendships made along the way that mitigated that suffering. Rama and Sita could return to their kingdom unfettered by the memory of bitter experiences.

Not so the Pandavas. The circumstances of each flight were bitter, but they carried the memories of that experience with them. During the second exile particularly, Draupadi fulfilled the purpose of her birth—the destruction of the Kauravas—by wearing matted locks to remind her husbands of her public humiliation at their hands. Every encounter cultivated their anger. Every experience either brought them an ally or taught one of them a martial skill. They fled from one dwelling to another and spent the last year in hiding as per the terms of their exile. In spite of this, they were open to conciliation, but when diplomatic efforts failed, they were more than prepared for war and had fourteen years of well-cultivated anger to fuel their determination.

Conflict and its Aftermath

War is the inexorable end towards which both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* move. This information is shared with the reader/listener in a number of ways, but it is unknown to the protagonists who respond as we do, knowing nothing of the next moment.

The *Valmiki Ramayana* is a simpler story than the *Mahabharata* and both characterization and plot lend themselves more easily to good-evil binaries. The destruction of Ravana is the purpose of Vishnu's incarnation as Rama, or in other words, of Rama's birth. Every event in his life moves him closer to achieving this goal, and where Rama finds it possible to forgive his stepmother and where his acts of punishment are also acts of grace, he finds the abduction of Sita unforgiveable—not because he grieves her loss (which he does,) but because his honor has been violated. Sita, too, refuses to be rescued by anyone other than her husband. The conditions for a bitter fight to the finish are thus quickly set up.

At the end of the Ramayana war, Rama, granted a boon, asks that all those who fought on his behalf be restored to life. He does not extend the same consideration to his opponents, and installs on the throne a prince who has defected to his side during the war. That prince remains a staunch ally. At the end of the war, for reasons delineated in the previous section, Rama is able to pick up and move

on. The epic is not interested in how the people and princes of Lanka recover, and there is enough physical distance between them to negate the need for the two sides to actually interact and negotiate a new *modus vivendi*.

It is tempting to say that such impassable physical separation was a feature of epic times, reflecting the technologies of travel available. However, we know that the kings of Lanka at least had access to a flying chariot that could take them everywhere—but that was just the kings!

Further, there is no partial resurrection for those who died in the Mahabharata war, and on either side, they remain dead. Because the warring parties are first cousins, the winners' triumph is marred by grief at the loss of loved ones on both sides. This is closer to the contemporary experience of conflict as an internecine, fratricidal affair. Moreover, the war is fought not on distant, alien shores but in the vicinity of the kingdom. Therefore, moving on from this conflict is harder.

Indeed, fighting is, itself, harder. Unlike the *Ramayana*, where the human princes and their monkey allies are also asserting their moral superiority over *rakshasas*, the Pandava prince Arjuna looks out at the enemy's battle formations and sees an uncle, a teacher, a grandfather and cousins. It weakens his resolve to fight until he is convinced that his duty is to fight for what is right without a thought to consequences.

What makes moving on possible in the Mahabharata is that there were no survivors to reconcile with—the other side's elimination is almost as total as in a successful genocide, and the elderly retire to the forest. The author of the epic tells us that a pall of gloom remains over the kingdom after the funerals and coronations. The performance of public rituals is the suggested way out of that mood. This brings to an end the mourning and legitimizes the Pandavas' gains in war.

What is noteworthy is that in neither case was there a question of justice for war crimes, apology or reparations. The observance of the rules of engagement—when to fight, how to fight, whom to fight—made most actions justifiable because they were in consonance with the prescribed code. It was accepted that the conflict had resulted from the actions of either side, and in either case, that efforts had been made to avert it. Therefore, there was no question of apology. In both cases, the losing side was all but decimated and so there was no one to pay reparations to.

Lessons for our time on post-conflict reconciliation? First, both epics suggest a pragmatic war ethic. If all other expedients have been tried and have not worked, then war is to be entered into without a second thought. If conciliation, diplomacy, duplicity and patience have not worked, then it is appropriate to prepare and go to war. When this becomes necessary, as the hesitant Arjuna is told, it is the duty of the warrior caste (and rulers) to go to war, do what is needed and take the consequences. There is to be neither post mortem nor *ex post facto* guilt. From the point of view of reconciliation and recovery from war, this means an acceptance that war was inevitable, that it took

place and wrought losses, and that now it is time to move on.

Second, there had to be a universally acceptable rationale for war. In the case of the *Ramayana*, there were two reasons why Ravana had to be fought. The first was his growing power in the universe, but this was a reason unknown to any of the actors in the story. The second was his abduction of Sita, which, within the patriarchal framework of the story, is an outrage against Rama's family and must be punished. Rama does not fight Ravana simply because he is a *rakshasa*—therefore, difference is not reason enough and although the destruction of the other side is merciless, it is important that destruction is not an end in itself. That would not be reason enough for war.

The plot of the *Mahabharata* unfolds such that it paints a very clear balance sheet of wrongs done, by whom, against whom. Even as we see the actions of both sides move the plot along, step by step, we are left with no doubt as to which side gave greater offence. The judgments we form create the basis of our verdict that it is correct for the Pandavas to go to war. Having determined this, everything that follows has the same 'tit for tat' quality—one violation of rules calling for another, one lie calling for another lie. Therefore, when the day is done, and the Kuru elders walk through the battlefield, you feel sympathy for the living and not the dead.

Third, as I stated before, there was some consolation in knowing that there were rules and codes governing all these things. Therefore, if the Kauravas encircled and killed Abhimanyu after disarming him, there was some natural justice in Karna being killed while getting his chariot wheels out of the mud. This calculus allowed the killers to feel that they were, in some sense, justified, so that they could move on from feeling guilt. More importantly, it allowed the survivors to feel that in a situation of combat, their loved one had probably been fairly killed. I know this seems like empty consolation and I am not suggesting it as a tactic to console the bereaved, but pointing out that it seems to have helped in this epic at least.

Notwithstanding this, the mother of the slain Kauravas cursed Krishna, whom she saw as the architect of this destruction, that his family would be destroyed the same way the Kuru dynasty was, through internecine fighting. Krishna's response is acceptance, and he adds, "Your anger has now found an outlet. You can never more be angry with Yudhishthira." (Subramaniam 1989, 694)

Finally, the public rituals of coronation and sovereignty set in motion the healing process. The coronation marks the beginning of a new reign, but public sacrificial rituals like the *rajasuya* and the *aswamedha* were performed from time to time by kings so they also provided a sense of continuity to people. These sacrifices entailed great expenditure, but they also engaged every single member of society in some way and so they provided two opportunities—the opportunity to earn both merit and income through participation in the preparation for society, and the opportunity to rebuild a sense of belonging in the community. If the sacrifices were like potlatches, then partaking

of the feast was a sign of being part of the family. For rulers who had fought each other, these could provide opportunities to forge new relationships without confrontation or losing face.

Postscript

Was there any way for rulers or the state to express compassion? In fact, there are three ways in which this is possible.

The most important of these is the provision of refuge. The king was to provide refuge and protection to all under his jurisdiction, and any creature besides, who sought it. Even enemies were to be sheltered if they sought asylum. Turning away refugees was expressly disapproved of. When Ravana's righteous brother, Vibheeshana, approached Rama for refuge, Rama asked his allies for advice but said:

> ... a major sin is incurred by failure to protect refugees under such circumstances; (for) such failure shuts out heaven, brings infamy and puts an end to one's strength and virility... I vouchsafe security against all living beings to him who comes to me only once and seeks protection (from me), saying 'I am yours': such is my vow. (SVR II Yuddha XVIII, 31, 33) [emphasis in original]

In both the epics, the notion of grace also provides a way in which compassion can be experienced.

> 'Men who, having perpetrated sins, have been subjected to punishment by kings become stainless and ascend to heaven like those who have performed meritorious deeds.' (SVR I Kiskindha XVIII, 31)

Accepting punishment at the hands of a king allows a person to atone for their wrongdoing and then to be released from the consequences of that act forevermore, as Rama told Vali in the above extract. Failing to atone results in endless misery for the offender, and failing to punish adds the sin of the offender to the karmic account of the king.

When the king is also a divine incarnation, as Rama or Krishna were, then, having suffered your punishment in the short term, and paid your dues, you were redeemed by grace in the long run. In the Ramayana, Rama's grace releases the accursed and assures to wrongdoers redemption after their atonement. If Ahalya, punished for infidelity by being turned to dust, was restored to her human form, and ascended to the heavens with her husband, so were Kabandha and Viradha, fallen celestial creatures. Unable to persuade Ravana that it is not wise to antagonize Rama, Maricha says finally, "…the moment I see Rama again, I will die. He told me as much. But at least, if I die at his hands I will find heaven for myself." (Menon 2003, 258)

Similar stories of Krishna's grace lie outside the *Mahabharata* in other *Puranas*. Nevertheless, we are reminded of his divinity on at least four occasions: the first is at the Hastinapura court when Draupadi is being disrobed; the second is again at the court when his last attempt to make peace between the two branches of the Kuru House fails; the third is on the battlefield during his discourse to Arjuna and the last is when Bheeshma invokes his grace, his divine form and asks his leave to die.

Questions Left Unanswered

In this very preliminary exploration, many questions remain unanswered.

1. *Is the epic the appropriate place to look?*

Speaking of Indian tradition, continuing to sidestep the definitional debates, there are three kinds of sources one could cull political ideas from: didactic literature on politics, the epics and other Puranic literature and finally, less overtly political ideas in the spiritual teachings of the region. I view the epics as still relevant because they marry narrative, political pedagogy and spiritual teaching, especially in their less-than-classical versions. They remain part and parcel of most Indians' imagination and, I would argue, political vocabulary.

However, do spiritual teachings (from the *Bhagavad Gita* itself to the discourses of contemporary teachers) matter more than that didactic tradition and even the epics? The lessons common to most traditions—to be in the present moment and not obsess over the past or future; to accept what is; to forgive both oneself and others in the interest of inner transformation; to detach oneself from events and actions and just do what one can; to control one's emotions, including anger, and to heal anger with compassion—seem to form a core of useful ideas that may be more explicitly and immediately available to people.

2. *Is it the personal or the political level at which it is consistent with Indian traditions to talk of reconciliation?*

While all of us working in the policy realm focus on collective solutions and collective responses to conflict/post-conflict situations, the Indian tradition—whether political thought or spiritual practice—seems far more focused on the individual. Even the ruler acts as an individual given that most of this literature—didactic and epic—was composed in the context of monarchies. If we are seeking culturally consistent ways in which to promote the values that foster reconciliation, it is not clear that the most effective level of intervention is the state or even the community. Carrying the very individualistic orientation of this civilization forward, it seems that it is the individual who

is the appropriate focus for our attention.

This is the sort of thing that many contemporary spiritual communities within the Indic universe are promoting – social transformation through individual inner transformation. A quick and unscientific internet search for activities of some prominent teachers reinforced this idea. Their organizations focus on two types of activities, both pertinent to the reconciliation process. Service to society that takes the form of medical, educational or developmental activity is a common form of intervention. The second is to take their teaching of inner transformation to crisis zones so that people develop their own resources for coping with their experiences during conflicts, disaster, displacement and other times of crisis.

> "Revolutionary thinkers of the past endeavored to change society without changing the individual. Mostly, they did not succeed. The neglect of the connections between Self, spirituality, nature and collective wellbeing unleashed the destructive trends of globalization in modern history." (Sakshi 2005)

> "..peace is the inner nature of everyone's life." (Maharishi Mahesh Yogi quoted in Subhamoy Das 2005)

> "We have the potential to guide the world towards becoming a more loving place. It begins with our ways of thinking as our outer world is a reflection of what lies within our inner world." (Brahma Kumaris 2005)

Three prominent spiritual movements observe peace meditations. The Brahmakumaris have, since 1978, observed a monthly World Meditation Hour on the third Sunday of the month at 6:30 pm local time. Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev's Isha Foundation observes the International Day of Peace Vigil every year, with a Silent Peace Procession and day-long meditation. Mata Amritanandamayi's organization does this as well, with a reading of prayers, one-minute silence at noon and *satsang* (group singing of devotional songs). Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, the founder of the Art of Living Foundation, also founded the International Association for Human Values which engages with a wide range of issues from community development to drug abuse to emergency relief, providing everything from medical assistance to trauma services in the last instance. The Art of Living Foundation has been active in conflict regions like Afghanistan, Kosovo, Iraq, and along the Israel-West Bank/Gaza wall. The core of their activities everywhere remains the teaching of the Sudarshan Kriya technique through 'Breath, Water, Sound' workshops. In all these cases, the accent is on the individual—either getting individuals to affirm their wish for peace by praying or meditating, or actively helping individuals to cope with the stress of living with conflict.

Track Two initiatives also work at the level of the individual. People-to-people contact is ultimately person-to-person contact. With every cricket match, every seminar, every tour, every

rally, there are interpersonal connections being built.

3. *What is the relationship between rebirth and reconciliation?*

One important difference between Indic and Semitic faiths is the idea of rebirth. The entire Western literature on reconciliation, both operational and scholarly, is rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, where a person is born, lives and at the end of her life, faces judgment. In Indic faiths—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism—a person experiences life, death and rebirth in a cycle that continues as long as she accumulates karma and until she attains self-realization.

Therefore, discussions about forgiveness, atonement, punishment and healing take place within a very different time-span. Having several lifetimes for self-realization is not however, a 'get out of jail free' card. Individual culpability does exist and each person, in the course of their karmic evolution, pays for their acts of commission and omission. A larger karmic justice prevails over every single person—every character in the epics, for instance, no matter how heroic. Thus, the oldest Pandava, who was known for his exemplary devotion to the truth, pays at the end of the *Mahabharata* for the sole lie he has told in his life, which was told during the war. The existence of a karmic account book might account for the 'pick up and move on' attitude displayed by the characters in these stories.

The point is: are the very questions we are posing wrong, given the elastic time-frame with which we are dealing?

What are the Spaces for Reconciliation Based on the Indian Epics?

Can we find spaces within the Indian epic tradition that are conducive to reconciliation, which (spaces) we can seek to replicate? The summary discussions at the end of each section suggest the following entry points for those who would seek to facilitate reconciliation.

1. Since the Indian polity is traditionally dominated by society, focusing attention on civil society rather than the state makes sense.
2. The ideological underpinning of the polity was a given value-system, and the function of the polity was to protect this value-system, provide refuge and guarantee justice. Therefore, reconciliation interventions are most useful at the level of redefining that value-system, on its terms.
3. Reconciliation activity in cases where displacement has taken place must address the conditions that led to the displacement in the first place, and do so in good faith.
4. Seeking to limit violence during a conflict and being vigilant about human rights violations and atrocities can increase the possibility of an amicable return from exile.

5. Experiences during the period of displacement make a difference to how prospects of reconciliation are perceived. Therefore, particularly where displacement is internal, the interests of reconciliation are best served by paying attention to life in refugee camps and the experiences of IDPs and refugees.

6. War undertaken decisively, after all other methods have failed and for a universally acceptable rationale, is more conducive to reconciliation.

7. Rules of interaction and engagement, codes of conduct in war all ensure a certain predictability in dealings and events that reduces anxiety, builds confidence and induces acceptance in the face of tragedy.

8. Public rituals and ceremonies, that are not triumphal celebrations but dedicated to the public welfare and that are inclusive, can create economic opportunities as well begin to heal alienation.

9. Following the focus of the epics on individual actions and of spiritual teachers on individual transformation, it seems that individuals rather than institutions or collectives are the most culturally appropriate unit for reconciliation activity.[2]

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[2] This paper was originally published in *Peace Prints* in 2008.It is reprinted with author's permission.

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