

Mewa Ramgobin interviewed by Iain Edwards, Ramgobin's Parliamentary Office, Old Assembly Building, South African Parliament, Cape Town, Monday 27st January 2003

TAPE I, SIDE 1

IAIN: Let start off with discussing your university of Natal days. Who was lecturing you, what were the conditions like?

MEWA: Some of the lecturers - we had the radical left on the one hand. We had people like Antony Matthews. And another in the early 60s in law, but he left the country because of the 1960 State of Emergency, when they rounded up people. And I have a suspicion that he was deeply involved in the politics of liberation. When he left then we had others who were also radicals. But ambivalent in some ways, there was Edgar Brooks, with whom I have shared experiences in protesting against the Separate Universities Act. He he agreed to take to the streets with us. In that context we had international dignitaries in our midst. This was in our resistance against the separation of the minds of people; the ghetto-ing of minds, to try to ghetto human beings into racial categories even at university level.

Until 1959 university education was so-called integrated, but it was not. I mean when a person like Nelson Mandela himself was told at Wits by a person like Professor Halo that blacks should not be doing law. I was told that myself, that to do law you got to have a very big sense of the understanding of the English language. This by a fellow who lectured me in Criminal Law in 1959. He left because of what we did to him. He was British in South Africa.

On the other hand we had good people like Professor Mc Donald, Mrs Mc Donald, the old lady who lectured to us in English and who was understanding and kind. And there were so many elderly people who lectured to us. Most of them retired, because there was sense of a commitment that they owed it to the human race in some way or the other to give back to it. Training. I think people like the Mc Donalds and others fell into this category of persons.

I think they were themselves embarrassed to the extent that this university demanded university autonomy, but they realized that the university had in fact had university autonomy. Which they knew as academic freedom: academic freedom to the extent that lecturers did teach us freely, lectured to us freely, interactions took place freely. But what is an academic freedom qualitatively when you are taught, when you lectured to, and when you interact with each other, when you have your classrooms - which were in fact were abandoned fruit warehouses where the walls had to be pasted with hessian bags so that the acoustics would be sort of right. Whilst you have the same lectures coming from an institution called Howard College of the same university, no more than 3 kilometres away as the crow flies up of the hill, and we are down the valley. We did not depend on physical conditions for our

education. We were hungry for education. We were ready for education because we realised it is the instrument to fight back against what we did not want in society, and what we are seeking. So there was this - another kind of education. There was a black section of the University of Natal in Warrick Avenue. City Building. Outside this building was a parking lot and in the late 50s, 60s this parking lot was used by busses in the one side, and other driving schools with cars on the other. You were getting the emergence of an African middle class; entrepreneurs who were coming to learn to drive a bus, learning to drive motor cars. And in broad terms the vast majority of these people did not own motor cars, but they were aspiring to become drivers, just as much as they did not own hifi sets or radiograms – what were called gramophones. So there was the upward mobility, in terms of aspirational acculturation. This in itself was part of our own education. We were to walk from the university campus City Building almost a kilometre and half a kilometre at night. White students went by cars, lectures went by cars. You saw this huge volume of students who were hungry for education worked during the day, came to part-time classes, senior in age walking towards bus stops and railway stations. All these things were an integral part of education for us, our university education. When you had people today sitting in the Bench in South Africa: people like Lewis Skweyiya being arrested for not carrying a pass in your company. Me belonging to the Indian community, who did not have to carry a pass walking down West Street outside a furniture shop apprehended by a fellow black person African who happens to belong to a squad. I forget what they were called during those days - there was a squad and they had a funny name. Apprehend and arresting a person who has now become a judge of the Supreme Court.

So all these things in the full knowledge that lawyers like Oliver Tambo, who had gone away into exiles - Nelson Mandela was in jail at the time. But in 1964 things were happening to us. As contemporaries we had a whole range of people who would become lawyers and judges: Phyllis Naidoo, Thumba Pillay, Selake Sello, and Sidney Dunn. These categories of persons were an integral part of another kind of education programme. I remember so distinctly a person like Ronnie Kasrils used to hover around in the late 50s, early 60s: hovering around meeting the so-called seniors who were planning so-called revolutions. I remember distinctly my first speaking with Jacob Zuma was in those days - late 50s or early 60 - outside the campus when he came to listen to what we were talking about and what we were planning. He didn't have any formal education. What we learned from him - the very person who had come to listen to us - we as university students learned from him. So the kind of holistic education that we were subjected to and the rest that we also got was definitely different from the kind of education that one get in the classroom from the teacher as a student. We were happy for it, which meant a redefinition of our own personalities, a redefinition of our own education, a redefinition of why we were here, and a redefinition of our entire objectives.

So these redefinitions facilitated the definitions later in life. We had inherited the Freedom Charter, we had inherited the Mandela Plan. In fact Johnny Makhathini was one of those people - and I - who presented the Mandela Plan to a university grouping. Now to present the Mandela Plan in terms of

organisation and mass mobilisation was an essential thing. Essential to the extent that without the participation of the masses no change was going to be possible. The system continued in the full knowledge that it had the conscious and unconscious compliance of the community. I think it would be less than the truth if one were not to say that once this debate takes place in one's consciousness, and once one consciousness becomes the crucible wherein you make your own choices in a given reality, then real changes can take place.

There was in the first instance with the introduction of the Freedom Charter a component of small lettered liberalism. There was an admission of co-existence: it is inherent in the Freedom Charter: no purist sectarian bigoted tendencies; whether that bigotry will be related to conservatism, or racism amongst white people. Nobody in his or her right mind can construct Albert Luthuli's presidency with the denial of liberalism on the one hand and with the denial of the African National Congress consciousness on the other. The equilibrium sought by people like Albert Luthuli must of necessity rub off onto others who followed him and were subject to his halo and shadow of leadership.

In the midst of all of these there was undoubtedly a construction of attitudes amongst so-called revolutionaries and radicals. They had to either identify with it or alternatively break away. Classical examples of this radical chain in a revolutionary way not termed `co-existence` is in some of the die-hard communists themselves, like Ishmail Meer and James Singh. Oliver Tambo was not a communist. Nelson Mandela, was not a communist. MB Naidoo was a communist, Rowley Arenstein was a self-confessed communist. All these people did the necessary adjustment and political shifts, whether it was strategic for them or one of principle; whether it was Machiavellian, or whether rooted in deep wisdom. I would like to choose the latter.

But this rootedness in wisdom of what ought to be done in a particular set of circumstances can be construed – by me – to the emergence of the liberal in the black person. I am not talking of the liberal person like John Ngubane who could become identified with the Ken Hills and the Alan Patons, but once people became identified with people like the Leo Coopers who belonged to the Liberal Party but had their hearts and souls outside of the liberal party for a higher objective. This is why people like Leo Cooper were not as cautious as other liberals were. Liberalism for me should not be related to white and blacks. There have been glaring examples of black liberals on the African continent from time immemorial. The cultural invasion that has taken place on our continent has made more liberals than anything else. In many ways the black man became the white man's doer in extension and in some ways became his own enemy because of that. In the same fashion with the turn of the 20th century in India we had the emergence of the Quakers who were white people but played a critically important role in the liberation movement in India. A liberal like Gokhale who was always considered to be Gandhi's mentor was rejected by most radical politicians as been the true example of the Indian personality's worst enemy. So the adaptations of liberalism and radicalism can be best understood by what happened and what continues to happen.

Like manner the adaptations took place in my country, South Africa, by the time of Gandhi at the turn of the century, when Lenin and he were the two most formidable personalities on the face of earth, giving two most formidable ways of resolution of human kind's problems. One held to the inevitability and indeed necessity of violence, the other to the deliberate introduction of action without violence. We were beneficiaries of action without violence. We were beneficiaries of this polemic that existed then, and also became beneficiaries of a polemic that preceded the Second World War and events that followed it. When in the 1940s the Communist Party of South Africa was quite formidable; the mobilization of the newly formed Youth League; the radicalization of the ANC politics took place. What also took place was the emergence of African nationalism in the Youth League. So much so that the Mandela's, the Tambo's, the Mda's and the Ngubane's could never relate to socialism or communist thinking. Whereas others did, within the ranks of the African National Congress. And within the ranks of the Natal Indian Congress at that stage was an equally formidable shift: the take-over in 1946 of the Natal Indian Congress by the so-called Young Turks. Stalin was the yard stick to live by and a yard stick to make choices. And the Soviet Union became the barometer to judge what ought to be done in anyone society. To such an extent that if the Soviet Union felt that the mobilization of white workers was far more important than the mobilization of African workers, then it remains questionable since when workers had had racial connotations. And yet the communists in the leadership of the Natal Indian Congress people went out of their way to mobilize the Indian sugar workers in KwaZulu-Natal. H J Naidoo was seconded to the Western Cape to mobilize the factory workers there. It became a contradiction to the instructions from Bunting and whoever in the Communist Party.

I may be totally wrong in my interpretation of the events of that time. May be this hindsight. But in the 50s and 60s we debated this formidably. I was one of those people unashamedly asking us to introspect, so that we may identify our weaknesses in order to mobilize our strengths. And I came up with a concept which I still stand by to this day, and which I think is an immutable concept. It is not structural relationships that matter; it is the political relationship that people have that matter. We were not an island in ourselves or by ourselves. We were influenced and we were influencing. We were influenced by the works of Gandhi, and by the spear and the shield of the African National Congress and even long before the African National Congress when the first spear was raised to protect and the first shield was raised for the protection of the mother land.

We cannot for a single moment isolate ourselves. If today we are thinking in terms of developing sustainable democratic processes then it is incumbent on the people who are doing the thinking processes to never be isolated from people, just because it is a revolutionary thought which must be right. And the finest exponent of this was non Marxist called Gandhi. While a Marxist negates the principle that anything without the people is basically and fundamentally against them, Gandhi on the hand said do not identify the world for the people, they have identified it themselves, become an

integral part of that world to emancipate yourself and them. This is totally different from the imposition of a party political position to a people's position.

It is in this context that in the late 50s, 60s and even the mid-70s it became critical for people inside South Africa, not the people on Robben Island not the people in exile, but the people inside South Africa to reflect. What they were going to do? And will this need or require tacit or explicit approval of people inside jail or outside of the country? Those of us who had the historical honor, privilege and opportunity to lend ourselves, in how so ever small a way to this spiritual reflection ... I put it differently: it is necessary to acquire spiritual understanding of how changing times requires us to reflect as to how we need to change our understandings. .

In the politics of liberation one of the cardinal principles the UDF adopted was that when we sought to bring all those forces which opposed to apartheid, regardless of the differences between and amongst us, and brought them into a United Democratic Front - and I am on record for having said then as a matter of principle that the strength of the United Democratic Front can only be measured by the strength of its constituent part. If a constituent part anywhere was diminished by a super-arching umbrella body controlled by a small group of people on top that would be the end of the Front. I argued at a Pretoria meeting years later, after the UDF, on needing to understand the differences between alliance politics, front politics and the politics of a uniform political organization. .

Now these are the historical experiences of human beings throughout the world. We live in a small country which in scientific terms has not reached the heights of science and technology and communication. And in South Africa we have the question of rising expectations was emerging rapidly. Small but important examples – don't dismiss them: from gramophones, to bus drivers, to owners of motor cars, to taxi owners, to bus owners. What then became the choice of people who had assumed through force of circumstances the positions of leadership? I didn't choose to....

TAPE 1, SIDE 2

IAIN: And one of the big questions of the 60s: how did you relate to the formation of MK? In a non-dogmatic fashion.

MEWA: It was not difficult. On the one hand Mandela had said that all negotiations had failed, and therefore we have chosen this. We have action. On the other hand it is my view that the dogmatic view of non-violence is not the correct interpretation of the Gandhian view of life. In my view Gandhi was not dogmatic about the question of non-violence. In my view in some ways Gandhi himself was not a Gandhi-ist. If Marx had to live at the turn of the 20th century he would have said `I am not a Marxist.` Because of the things done in his name. But in this case it was not what others were doing in the name of Marx. It is not what others were doing in the name of Gandhi or Gandhi-ism or Gandhi-ist

nonviolence. It was Gandhi's views of himself: he is on record for having said 'I am rather a violent person in the defence of the motherland, than a coward who hides behind the skirts of nonviolence.' In around 1960 a choice was made to go the sabotage - MK - route. By then I had married and I had returned from India. I was living in Epsom House in Greyville - in 1st Avenue. My home, my flat, became a branch structure of both the NIC and an underground venue for MK. For me it was no contradiction. The people who were housed there, and who discussed there were people like MB Naidoo, Dr Randerie, Ibrahim Ibrahim - who was a little boy then. These guys operated from my flat, they got instructions from my flat, because of the glaring racial differences at the time it was not easy to operate from townships because you will be identified. It was easier to work from such venues. I didn't find any contradictions. Johnny and I were entrusted with the responsibility of presenting the M-Plan to the University of Natal students after that period, which we did. I did not have the strength of character to engage in a violent act, but I never sat in judgment on people who did. Whatever they did on the bases of their convictions, and they did some stupid things, but they did what they had to do, and what they felt they should be doing. But I think it was stupid to go and take bricks and bash a businessman's showcase windows in Alice Street because he was working with the government. Now you are hitting the weakest link in the chain of oppression. Should that man have been part of the oppressors? In my view, even now, those guys were people were trying make a pass - and not even a straight pass - and adjust themselves to the norms of the times when the white man was boss. Let's find out from him his attitude. I am not passing judgment, I don't want to. I don't like it. I despise terrorism then as I hate it today. I don't believe that any one human being has any right to do to other human beings what he will not want other human beings to do to him. And one of those things that human being would not want other people to do to him is to kill his innocent members of his family, innocent members of his neighbourhood.

IAIN: At this time you'd met Ela. You were married then?

MEWA: In January 1961.

IAIN: How has your political philosophy being affected by becoming part of the Gandhi family in Phoenix?

MEWA: I think I grew my own way. But Phoenix afforded the opportunity to do those things and how it should be done. There were disagreements, as there ought to be when people live together. There is a story of Phoenix at that stage. We had a person like Mrs Gandhi who was the resident trustee. We had a person who was a religious leader in Cape Town. We had an educationist in MB Naidoo whose politics were not essentially Congress leaning. Then you had a person from Johannesburg who was essentially a businessman. Then two brothers and a cousin of theirs whose parents were members of the Natal Indian Organisation - opposed to the Natal Indian Congress. So one had to work in this context and I can unashamedly say that I was prepared to work with anybody who would advance the causes of

Phoenix Settlement and to become not only a cogent part of our cultural heritage but who would become an instrument for change.

IAIN: But it couldn't have been easy.

MEWA: Yes it was not easy at all, and this how difficult it was. Within a month of the closure of the newspaper *Indian Opinion* the Mahatma Gandhi clinic was established. And one of the trustees at that time, within a fortnight of that clinic opening, tendered his resignation. That resignation was an eye opener for me as young man, I was not even 30 years of age. It opened my eyes to such an extent I realised that the paper was closed because of financial difficulties, and there was resistance to it going to the hands of people who would not present the particular historical line of the *Opinion*. It could have been radicalised, to the extent that it would have not been recognisable. But I think it was the overbearing experiencing of delivery; of taking a decision collectively, to have a Mahatma Gandhi Clinic. The question arose of getting drugs, medicines, the organisation of doctors and whatever, these were done successfully and nothing is more potent in making meek people meeker. And nothing is more potent in making successful people more successful. Nothing is more potent than success. While there was resistance on the one hand, there was enthusiasm and action on the other hand.

IAIN: It was a critical point to close the *Opinion*.

MEWA: Very sad, yes it was. It is a very sad moment in the history of Phoenix Settlement. I do not wish to comment on it because those who took the decision, why it was closed, but this is the reason given: it was not economically viable. So be it. So closed one of the foremost papers in the country. However, working together as a team has its advantages, and when you are resident there and you have the resident trustee who happens to be your mother-in-law, it's undoubtedly an advantage. Because I was not theorising, I had an opportunity to be part of the decision-making process even though I was not a trustee. Then to be part of the implementation of policies and the positions taken. And then I would independently evaluate myself, as to what I was doing, whether it was in tandem with the declared objectives, and so on. So when the people came to evaluate: once in a month, once in two months, when they did meet there to evaluate, because we had progressed from point A to point B without their presence - it was not a one man show. It was a collective show. But a collective in name also because I had the people working with the doctors, the community itself, and the capacity to reach out to people was established, I think. That sound a bit impolite on my part. Immodest. But yes I had the spirit of the people with me. I had the support of one trustee in particular, a doctor, and his son Surabjee, who stood by me thick and thin. He was a year or two older than me, he could understand me, he worked in that area as a doctor, he served in that area as a doctor, he saw me in operation, I saw him in operation. So this confluence of diverse views also had a confluence of light minded views, in this case I want to salute the memory of people like Mrs Gandhi, Dr RS Rustomjee: without them it would not have been possible. Fortunately for me I have an outgoing personality. And I am told I am

quite disputable, I am told I am quite warm. I don't know whether it is true. But I think it was easy for me to relate to people to work with.

IAIN: Brick by brick at Phoenix; *Indian Opinion* decisions; NUSAS. These are important learning situations.

MEWA: The kind of life that I led at Phoenix Settlement was a kind of life that is indeed the envy of lots of people. There were very humble surroundings, when your toilet was 20 yards away from your house, when there was no electricity - we used paraffin lights and candles - we used penlight batteries and torches to go to the toilet. All these proponents and physical environment was a lesson. I come from that environment myself. There was a particular point where we could put up a motorised electricity plant but when the press building closed then light from the generator diminished. There was some generator of sorts still in existence but essentially the lightning facilities came from paraffin lamps and candles. It was fine.

The one thing that was very glaring at Phoenix, yes the paper closed, but I consulted with Mrs Gandhi who was a resident trustee at the stage before I got there: that I take responsibility for all hospitality, transport, and clerical work of the settlement. I don't know whether it was a conscious thing or unconscious thing but I did something that was not popular. I said to visitors who came to visit the settlement, and they were many, 'You are welcome to sit down and as soon as we are ready we will take around to show you the settlement'. But there were some visitors who could come along there and walk right into the kitchen, open the fridge, and help themselves to whatever there was in the fridge. I was not mean, I am not a greedy man, I am not, but I couldn't stand that. It is nice to say to these youngsters, 'Please seat down, are you thirsty? Shall I get you a cold drink or a glass of water, it is not tea time now, when tea time comes you will be served tea, but please sit there and don't [INAUDIBLE] Now this might have been a harsh thing. As a 70 year old today saying that to people when you are 29 years of age or 30 years of age can be a hell of a lot different. But I think I am certain if I were given the opportunity to relive that life I would do it again.

IAIN: As I'm listening, it seems you're attracted to many forms of Gandhian-ism. You try and become a farmer yourself, you understand Gandhian simplicity, possibly in a romanticised way, but it becomes something very important. You understood that Phoenix Settlement was an ashram. And you tried to instil something of that meaning in others.

MEWA: You know it rather a funny thing.

IAIN: Did you have a romantic idea about the rural?

MEWA: I will tell you. It is rather funny today. I used to play tennis there and between the main house and the tennis court was a garden with roses, peaches and whatever, but most of it was cemented with the ordinary stones. I volunteered to dig it out and was agreed to by Mrs Gandhi who was the boss then. I said to her it would not be at the expense of Phoenix Settlement. I will do it myself with my own hands, which I did. I think I was trying to say something. Firstly I didn't like the look of that extended cemented area around the house. I thought grass is more natural and closer to nature and closer to simplicity. The other thing was an identification with the aspirations of this old man's vision. I was nowhere near it. I have no pretence at all that I am anywhere near that, but I think there was an attempt, an unconscious attempt, to be identified with what I liked about Phoenix. But not everything that Phoenix stood for. His house could have been converted into a school. It was brilliant that his house could have been converted into a shrine for some people to go and pray their respects to this great man and his life, was excellent. The knowledge that this became a tourist attraction was equally good. The idea that local people could take responsibility; children could take responsibility to come along every afternoon and clean the instruments and the utensils which were used for prayers was brilliant. These things were very good. I liked them and yet in the same context I didn't wash my car because I was too busy doing other things. It is one thing to own a motor car in the context of Phoenix Settlement. It was my car, it didn't belong to Phoenix Settlement. I don't remember washing it for as long as I was there. It's nothing to do with my dignity because I have done worse things than that, but with domestics, washing my own car was not a problem. I washed the car in Durban for as long as I was in Durban. But God knows what happened to me when I got to Phoenix Settlement. With the plethora of manual assistance around there, something got over me and I said 'No I know I've got better things to do than to wash my car.'

IAIN: Where were Ela and you actually staying at Phoenix Settlement?

MEWA: In the main house which was built by Manilal Gandhi in 1944. Until 1944 Manilal Gandhi and his family – with Ela. But 1944, 1945 the entire wooden and iron building which was used by Gandhi to build his own home was removed. They built another house for themselves just spitting distance away up the hill - designed by Kallenbach - who also contributed part of his property to consolidate Gandhi's property in terms of Phoenix Settlement. When the trust was created in 1913 by Gandhi the two consolidated properties become one in the Trust.

IAIN: Did you have a room there in that house?

MEWA: No I actually had the whole house. Yes because I was living there with Mrs Gandhi and only Ela and I. There was nobody else besides Mrs Gandhi. It was just the three of us in the entire house. We had three bedrooms there, a lounge, and a dining room, a massive kitchen, a study and a breakfast area, bathroom inside, with the toilet outside.

IAIN: Your relations with Manilal?

MEWA: I can't say what he thought of me. I can only say to you to the extent... I remember this so distinctly. There were times when he had very important guests visiting him and staying with him. I remember being invited by him, to join him for supper sometime in 1951, 52 I don't know some time there, when a distinguished Indian diplomat visited South Africa to perform the official reopening of Sarvodaya. So I don't think our relationship could have been bad or that he was just being polite in inviting me. I had dinner with them.

In 1952 when he was released from jail in the Defiance Campaign his son and I - he was a little older - went up in the car to Pretoria Central Prison to fetch him to bring him back home. Then it took some 8 to 10 hours to drive from Johannesburg to Durban. It is a lot of time to be sitting in the same car, as kids. I don't think his son and I were fussed. We started to sing in the car because we were getting bored. There were other times when we'd have to go around and collect arrears subscription dues for *Opinion*. He'd ask us to do these things. And he was a regular visitor at my home. I remember when I got back from India in 1955, as a sick man he came to visit me on the day of my arrival. And when I was departing to India he sent his car to take me.... It was in 1954.

So I don't know. It is difficult for a young man to say as to what an elderly person thought of him, but this I do know. That when he was in hospital with a stroke - in St Augustine's. I was wondering what he was doing in St. Augustine's because it was only for white people then. And I think something happened in the family, not because of me, even when I wondered what he was doing there. But then I think he asked to be removed to Phoenix Settlement, where I visited him regularly. And the day of his death I was one of the first people to be there at his house at Phoenix, I was living in Inanda then.

IAIN: When did he die?

MEWA: In 1956 and with the arrangement being made, I drove our family to the Cato Manor crematoria. All these things must impact on the growth and development of anyone.

TAPE 2, SIDE 1

IAIN: Now another of your multiple wings is your being part of the attempt to draw NUSAS into the broader liberation movement.

MEWA: Ironically, yes when the first two years 1961 and 1962 or mid-1962, there was a formidable input into Phoenix Settlement even though I was a student then. And Ela had to study, and I had to study and I won't say there was a lapse of activities, but there was a tremendous emphasis on Phoenix.

Because very candidly there was a cultural conflict in me. My mother's home was no more than a mile away as the crow flies from Phoenix Settlement. In fact two properties were my mother's but father's property in Phoenix Settlement had joint boundaries. So there was a cultural conflict in me. It was not the done thing for the son-in-law of the house to be resident in his mother-in-laws home. I was persuaded to do so in 1961 when in 6 months of me taking a bursary to go to university in Durban. When I was approached to go and live at Phoenix, for which I had very serious doubts, but more serious doubts was in Ela's mind and to her credit she had more doubts than I had. I had a simple approach to my mother, who said to me `At least you will be nearer me then, I will see your car pass every day, its within walking distance to you` and things of that nature. The other persuasion was that as Mrs Ghandi was a widow with a son who was living in India she was now alone at Phoenix. So people like the late Dr Naidoo said to me to move residence and to her he said `But you will be surprised that in losing a daughter Mrs Ghandi you might just find a son.` I am not going to say anything about that but I moved to Phoenix Settlement within six months of my returning to South Africa, which was in the month of August. And I lived there until 1976, mid 1976. When Soweto burnt I had moved into my new home in Verulam. But I am going to be absolutely honest about this. That Phoenix did more for me than I did for Phoenix. I can't be insensitive to what Phoenix was doing for me. It was undoubtedly allowing me to do - for that I will forever remain grateful - so hence the passion that I have for Phoenix Settlement. My call for it to have been rebuild must be viewed against this background. But the issue is further compounded by the perception and views held by those in the community who had an different view of what Phoenix ought to be, and to what I was doing there. That it was because of me that Phoenix Settlement was destroyed or had to be destroyed. Because of my activities at Phoenix Settlement that it had to be destroyed. Because the `call for clemency` was made at Phoenix. The Natal Indian Congress had its inaugural meeting of there at Phoenix. The Natal Indian Congress was revived there on the 2nd October 1971 at Phoenix. The work camps for leadership programmes were held at Phoenix. Symbolically the first official national executive meeting was held at Phoenix. So if that is the burden of guilt I had to bear, and if Phoenix was a price to pay, then I had vowed that Phoenix was to be re-built in my lifetime.

IAIN: What was the philosophy behind this belief – against you?

MEWA: That the Gandhi spiritual must be separated from the Gandhi political, and I was in vehement opposition to that view. For the life of me I could never separate Gandhi man spiritual and Gandhi man political. For me to understand these politics I had to understand his spirituality and for me to understand his spirituality I had to understand his politics. They were symbolic, interdependent and integral parts of the whole. Not ideal because he was human, but the nearest to an ideal and a walking symbol of his own ideals. No other political leader, including Lenin, came anywhere near that.

IAIN: And you begin this understanding as a young, let's call it field worker, at Phoenix.

MEWA: Yes including the dreams of those people who historically associated with Phoenix Settlement. No doubt of the fact. There are some who fell along the way side, other who came in. It might be construed that I was selfish, unfeeling of others, that the enlarged Board of Trustees allowed me so much initiative. I will leave that for history to determine. The nature of the celebration of the Ghandi's birth centenary in 1969, the programme of which began in 1962, the variation of the Board of Trustees - done almost on the heels of it - the inclusion of a wider spectrum of system-orientated politics, all created these discussions.

IAIN: Who motivated for the formation of the Ghandi Centenary festival?

MEWA: Here all credit must be given to Mrs Ghandi. She floated the idea of celebrating Ghandi's birth centenary in 1969. This was done as early as 1961/62: well it was after dinner talks and before dinner talks and Sunday afternoon talks and motor car talks and then correspondence with the people in India between herself and them. It was then called the Ghandi Centenary. She became fairly obsessed by the idea and I think it would be fair to her to say that while the idea came from her, others ran with it.

IAIN: Pardon me for saying so, eight years of gestation was rather a long time.

MEWA: The preparations for the Ghandi Centenary Celebrations began in 1962. The fund raising campaign began in that period 1962/1963. The target was 1969. The nature of celebrating and observing the Ghandi centenary was in the context of non-cooperation with the state. South Africa was one of those three states: I think it was Pakistan, Portugal and China – maybe four states which did not have direct government participation in the observance of the Ghandi Centenary Celebrations in India. And every country on the face of the earth had some kind of celebrations sponsored by their government. And in 1969 to celebrate this at Phoenix: to build a museum, to build a library, to rebuild a brand new clinic, to orientate the garden, to have 400 odd rose bushes, to develop approximately 8/10 acres of farmland - to redo the entire place so to speak meant effort. To get the community involved in it, me the fundraiser as I said earlier, to create a momentum, to have talks with experienced people – the Gandhi Lectures. There were no Ghandi lectures before that. Edgar Brookes was the first one who presented in 1961/62. And I still remember this, he was standing on the steps of the International Printing House. All these things became an integral part of the celebration. But you have got to have some direction, you have got to have some driving force, and what have you.

IAIN: What comes across very strongly is that the Centenary Committee becomes the vehicle for you to ...

MEWA: That Centenary Committee gave me the opportunity to reach out. To reach out to people as they came, from as far afield as Newcastle on the one hand, and Stanger, and outlying areas. Gandhi

Centenary Committees had been established in several places. We had business people mobilised, transport organised. In fairness to all parties concerned, I don't think I took them all into my confidence as to what my agenda was. And I need to clarify it. But my agenda was basically that here is an opportunity to take it further and to give expression to one of the most formidable aspects that Gandhi left as a legacy for the entire human race: the legacy to resist evil wherever you see it, to engage in those aspects, and to set the pace. Gandhi has left us as a legacy. Gandhi has left this for the entire world that injustice is only possible for as long as people agree or are willing to acquiesce to that injustice. How do you take this out to the people in the days of our deepest depression? How does one do it? That is why I did not fight publicly with people who said this is Gandhi spiritual and not Gandhi political. I have no problem in people maintaining that view. If people want to offer prayers and offer flowers and offer milk at the foot his statues that is their way of expressing their love for the man. But the likes of me and those thinking like me around me, hoping that we all do this together - and there were people who became involved in 1971 - to become the catalysts of the revival of the NIC. The people in Port Shepstone were the people who were involved in the Gandhi Centenary celebrations - not all of them but some of them. So to the people in Ladysmith, Pietermaritzburg, Newcastle, Stanger, Verulam, Inanda, and Durban: all these people became the catalysts for the revival for the Natal Indian Congress as they were in some way or the other associated with the celebrations of the Gandhi Centenary Celebrations. Now how do I do this? It is patently clear that I could not sell Gandhi. Nobody sells Gandhi. Gandhi is not sellable by itself. We become adjuncts and in becoming adjuncts of Gandhi not as Gandhi. We become adjuncts in advancing his vision of self-respect, self-determination, and the fight against injustice. Good enough for me. With lots of people from across the spectrum - call it liberalism - call it what you wish. I don't give a single moment's damn as to what people call it, but if the chairperson of the Board of Trustees at the culmination of the celebrations of the official opening of the museum, library, or the clinic in June 1970 June could say from a podium - I was not there because I was banned and house arrested - at a podium at which Harry Oppenheimer and Chief Gatsha Buthelezi, the King and others are present, that `Had it not been for the activities and the initiative taken by one banned person, this celebration would not have been possible`. And when Oppenheimer leaves the stage to come and meet this one person, one banned person he realises it was me.

IAIN: Now, cold war is on. There are two worlds, and the Third World is coming into being, from 1955. You must have been aware of this?

MEWA: Yes, to the extent that I was in India the time when the Bandung Conference was held. I was in Bombay at the time when Moses Kotane and Maulvi Cachalia were on their way on behalf of South Africa to the Bandung Conference. They in fact represented South Africa and this again was education for me as a 22/23 year young lion. How can two human beings like Kotane and Cachalia represent their country? I'd barely returned and there was the Kliptown Conference. I had just come back from India and not being in any structure I didn't get to attend. But the debates: the spat between the

Africanists and the Luthulis. Now I am not going to arrogate to myself that I knew what was happening in history, but what was happening in the history at the time was all around me. It was happening. So when one wanted to pick up *Opinion* to read as to what Luthuli said in response to what the PAC was saying, or Ngubane was saying it became more than a university, because at the university campus one would not have that opportunity.

IAIN: These were not sterile ideas, it was a very dynamic situation.

MEWA: Alive and confrontational. It was confrontational. It was confrontational where people of Indian origin became a centre part of the confrontation. That when the allegation was made, that the African National Congress is now led by Indians and communists. Now I could look at myself and say what the hell is all this about. And then investigate and find out and read more and ask more questions and then after writing the article and having printed it on Thursday afternoon, I would take a walk from Phoenix Settlement to take a bus from outside the place of my work. And Jordan would stop in, panting because he was asthmatic, and rest in the tearoom and have a glass of water or a cool drink, given to him by me. He had just written that the ANC is controlled by Indians and communists. And there was that slogan 'Africa for the Africans', and when I had to contest this idea with him, what about me, 'Am I an African or not?' And I leave the rest for people's imagination.

IAIN: At this time you are developing a political dynamic of your own, a sense of conviction, and because of your contact with your father's influential friends, you're not scared of people with different views?

MEWA: Well I am not going to say that I was not scared. I was scared of the system in some ways but I took away that veil of fear rather early. Lots of people said that I was cocky without direction but I would say that I was, as Jerry Coovadia puts it, 'courage personified' - which he did say later in life. At that stage, yes, it is true that I did want to express my own person and personality. It will be untrue if I said that Phoenix did not help augment it. It gave me the potential, possibilities, channels, scope to build structures, to mobilise people around Gandhi and Gandhi Centenary Celebrations. In 1962/63 when I questioned why do people want to celebrate the Gandhi birth 100th anniversary, I was given many reasons and I made it very clear. I will not be associated with it unless - I will only be associated with it for as long as that celebration reminds people about struggle, emancipation and that celebration must lead to the kinds of things that will make the life of the poorest of the poor better than what it is and what it was. In broad terms, the Trustees agreed to this and much to my delight to such an extent that when the library was built, they asked 'What do you do with a library, is it going to be a conventional lending library, is it going to be reference library? What is the meaning of the library?' Is it an English-language library, in the heart of Inanda? Now we are going to call it the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Library, and with the passage of time ideas gelled until actions took place. I suggested that this becomes a third world library. Now the linkages between 1955 and what is happening at Phoenix

at the time were important, no doubt for me as a person. It gave me the scope to give expression to an experience that I have had 12/13 years prior to that in India.

IAIN: Gandhi must have been remembered within important circles, even if just in Natal and the Transvaal. How did this help? Did it, with your Third World ideas? Paton?

MEWA: This goes beyond that. It was possible to get, with the charismatic presence of Phoenix Settlement, to get the Harry Oppenheims, and the Alan Paton's together. It was also possible to get trade unionists and train them. It was also possible to get community leaders, church leaders, religious leaders to work there. It was also possible to get students to go there. Maybe this is naughty on my part but that naughtiness, if naughtiness at all, is such an important part of my own life. I am pretty certain I didn't make Gandhi turn in his grave. I am pretty certain of that. The task according to Marx and Lenin of a revolutionary – the first task according to Gandhi - another revolutionary of another kind: of all three of them, in my interpretation of their life and works, is one. This is that the first task of the revolutionary is not to alienate people. No matter how much you agree with them or disagree with them. No matter what the purists think of it, revolutions are not fought from arm chairs, revolutions are not fought on the 5th floor offices of people's lives. There has got to be a measure of activism. Because Gandhi, for me, is that kind of activist, was the kind of activists, who could measure his own activism with his knowledge. Now the first task of a revolutionary is not to alienate people. Is it my duty, as the humble pip squeak I am, my role to not to alienate the Oppenheims, or the Patons or the ... What are we doing today? What is being done today when the captains of industry sit with the leaders of labour, presided by government, to work together. I am grateful to my parents for giving me this little bit of understanding, and that I was afforded with the opportunity to make those choices at Phoenix.

IAIN: The government didn't quite see you that way did they?

MEWA: I think they were fools. They were fools to the extent that they wanted to straight jacket all people. They didn't have a spirit of working together, building a common South Africa for all. And the spirit was in the Freedom Charter. It takes a hell of a lot of courage and vision for the leadership of the oppressed people say that South Africa belongs to all who live in it black and white, in the full knowledge that a very large percentage of those white people were not South African citizens. They held dual citizenship. It takes a lot of character to do that and the leadership of the congress movement under the leadership of the African National Congress at Kliptown did have this vision. And you know that trouble will come. I was imbued by this. And I was first banned in 1965, when all the preparations were being made. But by 1965 we were clear on our path and our goal in the full knowledge that all those who believe that South Africa belongs to all those who live it, had a responsibility to make South Africa liveable for all who live in it. Now if we have got to make South African liveable for all who live it, how does one do it? Do we do it in a purely capitalist way, do we do with it in a purely Marxist

way or what? What is that we are going to do then and what is that we are going to do now? In order for us to understand what we had to do then is to measure what we are doing today.

IAIN: Your banning. What was the response of the Trustees? You presumably took a letter to them.

MEWA: I was banned on 20th November 1965 - sometime then

IAIN: Just after your birthday

MEWA: Just after my birthday. The first person I telephoned was [NAME CONFIDENTIAL] who said `By the way, they have just banned me` and this monkey of a girl said, `Congratulations` - which meant you have arrived politically.

TAPE 2 – SIDE 2

MEWA: I guess it meant that to her too, to congratulate one when you are banned. so to speak. And in some ways the Trustees were upset, but I think in many ways they were happy, not happy selfishly, but that this guy will have more time to give to Phoenix Settlement. And because you couldn't contain my enthusiasm about Phoenix. Within a fortnight of me being banned I bought myself a pair of boots, a couple pairs of khaki pants and a couple of khaki shirts and a hat and I said to the trustees all barren land in Phoenix Settlement now must become productive land. We are going to begin to produce. The question was who is going to do it? My reply was `Me. I only want your permission. I am going to give you cabbages and mealies`. Which I began to do.

IAIN: Now you must have spoken to a lawyer.

MEWA: Rowley Arensteen was a lawyer. It was there, in whose office I got banned.

IAIN: They served it on you in his office?

MEWA: They served it on me in his office. By then most of us were particularly *au fait* with the nuances of banning orders. So there is hardly anything to discuss. So I accepted that in my stride, but in accepting that in my stride, I think Alan Paton described it very well once. They failed to break my spirit, they failed to stop me from laughing, they failed to stop me being creative, they failed to make me deny myself. Because by then lots of banned people had taken to booze, and were broken people. Lots of them. The banning order is basically designed to de-socialize and de-communicate people. You are in limbo. You are not in jail. And you are not outside. You are not free. You are not physically incarcerated. You can't reconcile yourself to the fact that `I am here but can do nothing about it`, so

you have got to make the best of it. The person with a banning order is on the limbo, he is neither inside nor outside.

IAIN: Did you have a support system?

MEWA: And that support system for me was Phoenix Settlement, a hundred of acres of land. Generally when people are banned they are banned, when they are house arrested, they are house arrested in their homes. Now for me my home was on Phoenix Settlement which is one single property: eighty to a hundred acres of land. So they were in a pickle, the system was in a pickle, they couldn't stop me. I literally came back to demarcate my area. But I was very careful of them. There were moments I took my chances and I got out the house and did whatever I had to do.

IAIN: You were continually writing to the Chief Magistrate in Verulam asking for permission

MEWA: This is when I got banished. When I got banished to magisterial district of Inanda, there was a kind of agony that set in, with every little excuse that I could find I would want to get out of that magisterial district. It became so profane at times that I had to write in one letter to say to him, that it pains me to report to you what I did in the exercise of my Christian duty because I belong to a cultural system that in relationship to giving help to other people your right hand must not know what your left hand is doing. And it is indeed a tremendous pain for me to report to you that I took a dying person to the hospital - to a clinic at Phoenix Settlement etc etc. Yes indeed I went to this extent because of the restlessness that my personality now suffered because I was not only banned I was house arrested, I was not only house arrested, I was bombed, I was not only bombed and failed to physically die in the bomb in 1972. Within a fortnight of me being bombed I was banished to the magisterial district of Inanda. So yes it was a kind of restlessness that set within me. I realized that the Bureau of State Security - BOSS - by 1971/1972 had infiltrated us. I realized that by 1972/1973 when they banished me that even Parliament here had begun to reflect on the activities at Phoenix Settlement. The members of the National Party could say and it was reported in Hansard that `We do know what happens at Phoenix Settlement and that Ramgobin man must watch his steps.` And then I get bombed and then I get banished. Against that background you suddenly realize that you are banished in the month of April into the magisterial district of Inanda, your office is in Durban. In some small way your office is a hub of out of system politics, the hub of COSATU, the hub of the 1973's strikes in Durban and Pinetown. It is the hub of mobilizing, of support systems for the strikers and then suddenly you realized you are hanging in mid-air without anchor, without people around you, and the magisterial district of Inanda meant it is such a large area with so few people that anybody would know what anybody was doing or what other people were doing. So yes, and one of the first things that we did or that I did was to get out of that area, not only get out of Inanda or to go to Durban but to get to India of all places. And I got magisterial permission because of some connivance of my relatives in India to say that such and such relative is critically ill and you are on her lips and she is not dying because she still constantly

calls for you. So this letter was sent out to Kruger. Jimmy Kruger gave me permission to go to India and what I did in India is a different matter. I came back in 1975 after spending six months there. So yes my banishment to Inanda in 1973 was a very serious nail to the wood that they were going to make into my coffin. But again I think they made a mistake.

IAIN: When you say that it had been penetrated by the Security Branch, what did you mean?

MEWA: There were lots of activists who came to Phoenix Settlement. Today they are professors, there are lawyers, architects, there are members of Parliament who had the leadership training programme there. For activism to work, whether it was painting of buildings, or planting of vegetables or the ploughing of land. The trade union movement at that stage was non-existent. They came along, discussions took place, decisions were taken from the late 60's and lots of them were trained there. The Vusi [NAME CONFIDENTIAL]. Lots of training. Rick Turner, Barney Pitso, Norman Middleton, Beyers Naudé. We were headquartered at the Printing Press. And Bolton Hall. It is about time people found out as to who funded these exercises. Halton Cheadle is still around, but Griffiths Mxenge is no more.

IAIN: Where were you getting your money from, your livelihood from, while you are banned and house arrested?

MEWA: It will be naïve to say that by 1962/63 or by 1964 that I had become a very successful insurance consultant. By 1965 I could hew my economic ground and not depend on anybody. By 1967/68 I could employ people in my office and pay them as if they were my employees, Harold Nxasana, Vusi [NAME CONFIDENTIAL], and there was one more. I forget his name - who basically the organizers.

IAIN: They were selling insurance for you?

MEWA: No I used to sell insurance. They were organizing; building the trade union movement, and what have you in the townships

IAIN: But you were paying them?

MEWA: I was paying them from my pocket. They were friends of mine. Being banned and this is where the bluff is called on people who were the critics of the NIC. All these things were done in the name of the NIC. Not in my name. All these things were done in consultation with people like George Sewpersadh, at the time. When George got banned in 1973, or 1971 immediately after banned, that measure was cut off. No, they got banned in 1973 after I got banished. But until then there was consultations. George's office was in Verulam, I had a set up office in Verulam. It made it possible for

Griffiths to get his articles through George's law firm. So the links with the African sector remained. George became very uncomfortable, so my office became some kind of a common room. It was a common room for a long, long time. But I had a restless personality. I think in many ways I still am. I had an impatient personality. For all intents and purposes at best I am a person who likes company. I don't know how many psycho-analysts there were in the security police but had they known that they would have done worse. As a result of which, I will give you an example, when we got arrested in 1984 one of the first things that I did was call for books. At least I could read other minds and interact with other minds and I said to my colleagues, 'If we do not begin to laugh in prison, we are going to be in trouble.' To such an extent that when we got charged with treason and were transferred to Durban Central where we were put three to a cell in a maximum space of six square meters or five square meters: three people sleeping in there in the Durban summer. Physically you are being literally assaulted. Emotionally you are subjected to three different kinds of temperaments but the moment we got off that prison cell in the mornings the first things that we insisted on was that all six of us from different cells got together to pray together. The only person who didn't pray with us was Archie Gumede, I don't know why but he didn't because it was an interdenominational prayer from all faiths. George praised the Christian prayer, I did in the Hindu prayer and others took the Islamic prayers. Now it is not an escape. It was a declaration of community. Then we got into discussions; each one of us had a responsibility from our own recollections, whether it was Marx or Ghandi, whether it was this or that. 'Please begin the discussion'. It was so persuasive, it was so uplifting that I for one asked Archie to join us. He being a deacon of church and a senior amongst us. He was already 71/72 then. And we explained what all this meant, especially coming from the background he had created. We discussed the armed struggle; the Indian community in the UDF. So we talked. It would sustain us. So when you say how did the Trustees respond. There is a saying, I have not created it, but others say that adversity is the mother of invention or whatever, some such thing. I think on my part it was a conscious effort to convert adversity to the greatest advantage. Examples of this would be at Phoenix. Farming was one, the intensification of the Ghandi Centenary Celebration was another. Intensification was my protection. The Ghandi Centenary Celebration was my protection and I intensified that activity to such an extent that when people came with their children and entrust the responsibility to you to look after their children while teenagers at the work camp - where there is no running water, no electricity, and they would sleep on the floor - here I think one was succeeding in changing adversity into creativity.

IAIN: And you were developing the work camps by then?

MEWA: That's what I mean: developing the work camps. Now OK the first work camps were to understand Gandhi and I was quite happy with that. When you had a person like the late Mr R S [INDISTINCT]: an historian who was to come and talk on Ghandi and you disagree with him but so be it. We will have a guy like Laurie Schlemmer. who would come and give his own thing, disagree with him so be it, but the very fact that this dynamism became the order of the day for a long, long time.

Now in that context, maybe it was an escape, but I think it was a deliberate decision to ensure that your enemies did not succeed in breaking you.

IAIN: These work camps ...

MEWA: You see when you want to communicate what do you do? You have a one to one communication, or you have a one to a mass communication or you have the power of the word communicating on written paper to others. What is the nature of communication that you have in a workshop, in a work camp? And on the assumption that you had eight people, I don't think I ever had less than eight people at a work camp. And there were dozens at one stage. Here are eight people; maybe they belong to the same age group, some of them did, some of them didn't. The same educational qualifications or not. You had people who were not educated at all. Some of the trade unionists there had no formal education. And then we had architects and medical students and candidate lawyers present there. Now to get them all together in the first place is an achievement by itself even if I have got to say it. To get them together and then begin to discuss issues on which they are not at one is yet another thing. And then to get these diverse people to agree that you can only talk after you have done a day's work is the most important of all for me. Because agreement on that - to do a day's work first, and then talk is breaking ground. So when an architect or a candidate attorney or the medical student or the doctor comes there, or chemists and agrees OK we will do a day's work and then talk. I am not saying you are creating equality amongst them. I am not saying that you are breaking the walls between or amongst them. But it is a step forward to say to each other that we have differences but we have a higher objective and the higher objective is beyond ourselves, beyond the gratification of ourselves and our self-centred selfish interests outside of the context of greater interests for community and society first.

IAIN: How did you attract these people?

MEWA: I don't know. Maybe, I think I am an open guy. I am easy to get on with, easy to get on and yet very difficult sometimes. At the best of times I was a bit their senior and by the time I started the Ghandi work camps, there was substantial things to look at in terms of successes - relative successes. The establishment of the Mahatma Ghandi Clinic and its running, its own growth, the growth of the clinic for the first time in the district of Inanda with a radius of at least five miles to the best of my knowledge. Nobody died without seeing the face of a doctor or some medical attention. That in itself is a success. The constancy with which, between 1961 and 1966, medical students were brought to the Mahatma Ghandi Clinic from Alan Taylor Residence - all had worked under the supervision of a GP and there were three or four of them at any one time. They were brought by me. I helped the nursing staff. There were very little nursing staff at that stage and to pay for their work was challenging. After the session one would take them back to Alan Taylor Residence and then come home. Simultaneously almost the same time you are at university. The Universities was in turmoil. The university had student

problems. Alan Taylor Residence - because it was an old building in a poor state where the African medical students lived - had very serious problems in terms of food and accommodation. If you are part of the student leadership or so-called leadership, you begin to mobilize them and then you get the assistance of people to present fresh meals to be delivered to the students when they are on boycott of the canteen on campus.

INTERVIEW ENDS