

**Mewa Ramgobin interviewed by Iain Edwards, Ramgobin's Parliamentary Office, Old Assembly Building, South African Parliament, Cape Town, Wednesday, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2003**

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**Tape 1, Side 1**

MEWA: One other thing that was of special significance in terms of education and I want to relate to education outside of the context of formal schooling, [but rather] education that came along through the interaction with other people, communities and events. In that period 1946, 1947 one significant issue happened and I was still in standard six but there was a time we could relate to events outside of the school situation as we did in terms of our activities in respect of TB.

IAIN: When it happened you were in standard six, where?

MEWA: At Inanda, in Inanda School, and there was serious talk around members of the family, friends, community, elders that India has just imposed a ban on South Africa to isolate South Africa. When I think back it was the first such event that happened in the history of the world that a country voluntarily did what it did in its fight against apartheid, even though at that stage the National Party was not formally in power but apartheid was in existence. They imposed these sanctions against South Africa so as to isolate it. And its Prime Minister Mr Nehru said that India will never feel free for as long as the African continent and such places were not free from colonialism and imperialism. As a child in standard six I didn't understand the depth and breadth of the statement, but there was such joy. The elders were joyful in finding out as to what this meant, and then they referred to a very beautiful lady who had become the chairperson of the general assembly, Mrs Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit [for 1953], and they had cuttings of newspapers and they said this is the sister of Nehru who is taking the cause of the Indian community in South Africa to the United Nations. These were my father's contemporaries and others who went up there to the School. My father and company were very happy that their economic, their business powers had the capacity because their leaders of the Natal Indian Congress were sent out to the United Nations.

So that kind of impact on a young person like me at that stage and others with me while we revelled, while we jumped of joy, while we shouted at each other and sang songs in celebration of what was being done, was for me a kind of education in itself. That we could identify with this emotionally. And that India had taken the role, the mantle, of the international leadership against

apartheid. And when you think back you realise to what extent it is so successful to have the question of South Africa on the agenda of the United Nation right up to 1990 year in and year after.

IAIN: And that is done by an Indian Prime Minister just after independence in India.

MEWA: Immediately after independence in India one of the first statements made was this and to add to that we had the visit of Drs Naicker and Yusuf Dadoo to meet with Gandhi and other in India. We had the visit of Albert Luthuli who went to India. These things naturally were discussed in that Inanda crucible. We had something to learn.

IAIN: And you are a young impressionable adolescent growing up in this environment.

MEWA: I am glad I grew up there. Yes as an adolescent, I had my adolescent behaviour. But in that adolescent behaviour we began growing faster than your normal child would grow, with the kind of progression that we were subjected to at the hands of regimes. Essentially at that stage my view would be Natal because Natal remained the outpost of the British Empire. They were more racist there than National Party ever became under the pretext of being liberals. I remember my father saying this to us - he died in 1951 but in 1950 he was a sick man – that the Group Areas Act was a United Party Durban municipality baby and that they are seeking to dispossess us the so-called Indians. He didn't of course talk about the African people at that stage but he did talk about his dispossession that it is a great likelihood. And therefore he says we have to do a rethink of what you are going to be. Get yourselves those things that nobody can take from you. And that is education. And they became so formidable in ensuring that the community gets educated, as a result of which was the proliferation of schools throughout KZN from Newcastle down to Empangeni. In the little *bundus* they had schools build by the community. A new kind of initiative and assertion.

I didn't like for a single moment the kind of exploitation of migrant workers or even Indian workers who were not migrant workers. But as a manifestation of a capitalist exploitative society anywhere in the world given no exception and I can't see African people today being exceptions to that capitalist view. Yes they exploited African people - migrant workers - yes they even exploited Indian workers. I mean I know that my father's tractor driver was an Indian. My father's *induna* was an Indian.

I was saying that this kind of exploitation did take place but I do not believe that this could be interpreted as oppression or repression. The bus drivers were African and Indian, the lorry drivers

were African and Indian. I am sure there was some differentiation in wages but all in all it was this manifestation of capitalist exploitative society. I mean today and I want to share this interpellation today and yesterday. When you have the entrepreneur who is in Sandton or Houghton with high walls and security gates who have come from the backyards of the Eastern Cape or in the North West wherever they come from, you have the captains of industry and commerce who happened to be white, who happened African, who happened to Indian origin and coloured. What is it that we see? To what extent can the person or persons in the neighbourhood in the rural area of the Eastern Cape or KwaZulu-Natal relate to a child who was born there but is today a captain of industry, in a mine: Anglo-American, NAIL, call it if you want to. And these captains live in Houghton and Sandton with high security walls, security gates and security guards and security dogs. Indeed people need to live in a safe environment, I have no problem with that. But who is kept out? The burglars are kept out, the criminal is kept out and that is good. But what are the conditions outside in the rural areas or in the townships or in the informal settlements? Can they have free access to these areas?

And when I look back at my father's life, what was he doing? He was an extension of a capitalist system. And when I look around me today what do I see? I see extensions of a capitalist system, which has no reference to race. Exploitation is exploitation. But the most exploited to this day are African people. Of course 7 million people, which is approximately seven times the total number of South African Indians, live in squatter camps.

I do not want to do any comparisons nor do I want to engage in any rationalisations. If I were born to one of these captains of industry today and I grew up in that kind of environment, I pray to God that I would have the strength of character as I had the strength of character to tell my father to tell them now that I cannot live like this, that this is wrong. I am not an island as I told my father, we are not an island in Inanda, I am very grateful for you to have brought me up and educated me, but in terms of that education you have made me conscious and in terms of that consciousness I left.

IAIN: It was a big breaking point.

MEWA: Indeed it was and I hope it is going to be a breaking point now that I have the strength of character to stand up and say that we are not complete in our revolution, that we have to be very careful that we do not betray our own revolution, that we have to be very cognisant that our own spirituality which is rooted in the satisfaction or the material needs and comforts of the poorest of the poor are not compromised.

So therefore now that we have the instrument of power it is not for power sake and in that period what is it that we wanted? We wanted to fight this dispossession, we wanted to fight the Group Areas Act. I was a kid, I wanted to be at school and I didn't get admission at Shastri College because there was no space and therefore I had to go in September of that year to the Congress High School where I had to do, in 1948, my standard seven. We wanted to alter those circumstances and there was a surplus of schools in the white areas and there were hardly any schools in the African areas. And this is what we wanted to rectify.

And today I am in power and a member of the ruling party. Can I confidently say to myself that we have redressed those ills? I don't think I can. I do not know to what extent my own generosity to myself is compromised. I do not know to what extent I was harsh to my father. If it was harsh it was with tremendous regret in hindsight. With the instruments of power now which he didn't have then, how much better is the life of my neighbourhood in Inanda. I just got a call this morning before this interview from my secretary in Verulam, that the people of Inanda have take a decision that they want to see me to rebuild the graveyard of dead people of my grandfather, my father, my brother and my uncle. They want to rebuild a graveyard on which squatters live. They want to build a tomb to recognise that this was my parentage and in keeping with the traditions of the African ethos, ancestors are very important components in the spiritual life of anyone human being. And because of my oneness with the people of Inanda currently, build in the politics of liberation and the politics of governance I am happy that this initiative is being taken.

I am asking myself now on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2003, was I really fair to my father? Was I really fair to that person who woke up at 4 o'clock in the morning to ensure that his staff went to work but went to the fields with them, came back then had his breakfast, slept at 9 or 10 o'clock at times, working all the way whether it was a supervision of his garage or the supervision of his fields but a hands- on tradition. I don't know if I have been fair to him.

IAIN: Tell me how do you think your father regarded Natal liberalism?

MEWA: There was no such think as Natal liberalism at the time. Natal liberals like who? In today's language General Smuts from the national government would be considered to be a liberal. In my fathers day I know this of Shepstone, and I don't believe that my father had a view on Shepstone but he knew that Shepstone was administrator of Natal or some such things. He knew people like Ellis Brown were Mayor's of Durban all that stuff. In as much as he knew that he could not get on economically without conniving with them. I don't think it engendered any respect because I don't believe that Shepstone in 1954 when he officially opened the Castuba Gandhi school at Phoenix settlement was loved by the trustees of Phoenix settlement but because

he was the administrator of Natal at that stage and there was this concept of rand-to-rand, for every rand the community collected the province matched that fund to build schools at that stage. And perhaps for that reason that he came there. I don't think there was any respect for the architects of policies that dispossess people or the architects of people who pass laws and regulations keeping other people down. I don't think there was any respect.

IAIN: If I was to ask you about people who called it benign liberalism ...

MEWA: Yes I think some people did believe that, that benign aspect that you are talking about. I would like to interpret or present it differently. There were those so-called moderates in the Indian community. And I would like to think given the historical experiences that I have had with my own parents that he would have fallen in that category of persons, not the radical that I became, but the moderate that he was because of the circumstances that he was in on the one hand the kind of camaraderie that he had with like-minded people economically and otherwise.

I think they would have belonged to the school of thought that half a loaf is better than none. As an example direct representation in the province would be better than no representation.

IAIN: Or white representing them.

MEWA: Or whites representing then in the national parliament is better than no representation but they rejected this. The vast majority of the people under the leadership of the congress at that stage rejected this. Even though the Kajee group were ambivalent about this because the Kajee group were negotiating with General Smuts at the time in Cape Town, I think there was this Cape Town agreement between Kajee and General Smuts where they wanted to do a compromise on the removal or relocation of people of Indian origin that they could trade in a particular area but could not live there. All these things were rejected. So that kind of compromise and in that period my father himself built a cottage for him and his family at Umdloti Beach - the first land owner of the black section of the population to own a property at Umdloti Beach, which then became exclusively white and we were kicked off there within 10 years. I grew up there in some ways over the weekends being the child of a bourgeois I could go to the beach every weekend.

I think they would have belonged to that category of person so that benign relationship between them and the hierarchy which happened to be white not liberal. I think one could trust the Afrikaner clearly because he was not a type of person who would come and give a caress on your hair and brush your hair and behind your back pass a Group Areas Act. Whereas the National Party supporter the Afrikaans-speaking person in his so-called uncouthness would say in blunt

terms you `bloody *koelie* get out of here`. And we will separate you forcibly if you do not listen to us, which they did. And yet the architects of the Group Areas Act were in Durban essentially English-speaking whites. Even in the early 70s some white people who came to Phoenix settlement invited me to come and have lunch or dinner at their homes in Hillcrest in the nine months period which I was unbanned. They who actually were seeking my company reflected on the pass laws, saying that the pass laws in some ways were good, that it would lead to the banishment of people in urban areas. Then I asked them which people? Manage which people? Well they kept quiet.

IAIN: People you refer to obviously ...

MEWA: I don't know, well, and Paton was a very good friend of mine, but Paton was a conservative because he was a liberal if you meant to mention this. Let me put it this way, there were some people in Natal who thought they were liberal, were happy that they were not in power. And when it came to voting were equally pleased to vote for the National Party. So this kind of person or persons was not a new phenomenon.

IAIN: Well look, I have just acted as a historical witness in a Land Claims case where an Indian family is making a claim. When I gave my evidence there now is, for the first time, the history of the role of the Durban municipality in creating and developing urban segregation. And it went uncontested by lawyers for the Durban Metro.

MEWA: The concept of divide and rule is not an inheritance of the grand Afrikaans-speaking white people in South Africa. It is not something that they created even though the move with the wagon wheels and cattle away from the so-called liberalism of the Western Cape. Even though they did this, but I think they understood better than we do the hypocrisy that went into the lives of the custodians of British imperialism, whether it was in the Eastern Cape, the Western Cape or Natal. I think they understood this best, inasmuch as the African personality or the African person raised the spear and the shield to defend Africa.

The people who went first to war in terms of frontier wars - I mean Gandhi, the Nehru's - are the Afrikaans-speaking whites against the English-speaking whites. I have mentioned this in Parliament in the first year of my coming here, appealing to those people whose home is South Africa that that we have to redefine ourselves as South Africans or else we are going to be in trouble, because if our loyalty is not to South Africa we will be in trouble. Those guys who hold dual citizenship, I do not know of a single Afrikaans-speaking white person who holds dual citizenship, but I can fill volumes with names of English-speaking whites who hold dual

citizenship. What is the significance of this? Taking this back to the deny-i-ness and [Indistinct] of liberalism in my father's days is not fundamentally different.

IAIN: But your father is in an interesting position. He is mixing with - although not a politician within the Indian community at the time himself - he is mixing with well-respected moderate politicians. He is also a business person, he has, lets call it two sides of his business: one is as a sugarcane planter of note, he is a farmer, not a small scale farmer, but a big plantation, and he also has businesses in the city. There're two groups of white Natalians who hold leadership, almost in perpetuity even to this day; a sugarocracy and commercially, another white elite. Your dad is not only sugarcane farmer in the Indian community, but he is also the Deputy Chairperson of the Indian Sugarcane Growers Association. He must have met these people in a range of different levels or have had to understand and read through them.

MEWA: Whilst doing that he - this is not perception, this is not hearsay, this is lived reality for me - he also did what his neighbourhood demanded from him to do of him. His neighbourhood was some kind of a crucible. The neighbourhood with the Dube's, Shembe's, Gandhi's, and Ngubane's and a whole range of people: workers, non-workers, exploited people, friends. Maybe he succeeded I think he did in keeping the balance between what ought to and what was. He didn't become a politician standing up on platforms and leading masses of people. But when politicians stand up on platforms and mobilise people against the education dispensation in Natal at that stage demanding more schools from platforms, their activities were augmented by the people who were in fact at the time building schools. Politicians are transitory people, political parties are transitory people, the best example of this is the Natal Indian Congress.

### **Tape 1, Side 2**

IAIN: You were talking about the Natal Indian Congress also being a transitory political force or institution.

MEWA: The permutations of the Natal Indian Congress itself went through, starting off with the organisation...

IAIN: Permutations of the NIC?

MEWA: It started off with a particular kind of syndrome initiated by business people. Gandhi realised in his own life time and related it to the working class of sugar workers and coal miners. The *Satyagraha* was engaged, which was born in South Africa, was not born as a result of hearing the needs of the business class satisfied with the needs people who carry passes and whose marriages were not recognised.

And then after he left, he laid low for a while, when the business people took over what was then the conservative moderate group in the NIC. Then in 1946 when the Young Turks took over - the Monty Naicker group and the Communist Party as a backbone in the NIC, and the emergence of the NIO - the Natal Indian Organisation - led by the Kajee group as counter to them. So this is a historical thing in the community. Then in the 1960s [Inaudible], and related to Indian community councils. Then in 1971 I had the privilege of being associated with people who could revive the NIC and link it directly this time - not as an alliance - but as a spokes-organisation of the value system of the Freedom Charter, because the ANC was banned at that stage and we were the only lonely voice. And in 1983 we became with a few other organisations the backbone of the UDF. Now the TIC was only revived a year or two before the UDF.

IAIN: Very early 1980s, I think.

MEWA: In 1981 as an [Inaudible] whereas the NIC was beginning to lead the politics of the Freedom Charter, so gave this kind of momentum in the country coupled with the Release Mandela Campaign. In many ways if you were to go by the state indictment against the like of us: that we were the mouthpiece of the ANC in exile, of course we were. We were not going to say to them then `Of course we were`. I mean the very fact that African people came to a meeting at our invitation to give us a mandate, in a meeting that I chaired as the chairperson of the ad hoc committee for the revival of congress and therefore the so-called person leading a movement. When African people came, Coloured came, and Indian people came and my own people came to give a mandate that the NIC should be revived. What is the significance of this? I mean Archie Gumede became an executive member, not a co-opted - we did not co-opt him - he became an executive member voluntarily. He wanted to become and he did become an executive member of the NIC from long before the NIC was associated with the UDF. The question is why?

Now this permutation, this transformation did take place. Those transformation could not take place without the transformation of the reality, the changing circumstances, the permanency of change in the community led to the permanency of change in the NIC to such an extent that the NIC took a decision informally in Newcastle, in March 1990, to stop its political activities now that the ANC was unbanned. We had fulfilled our responsibilities. Then we said now as South Africans we were going to build one single organisation, which we did. Of course some people didn't accept that but I did and I resigned from it.

IAIN: In the 1940s when Monty Naicker, Billy Nair and the young Turks take up in an organised way an internal critic of a particular form of politics and a particular tradition within NIC, that the



NIC represented only the interest of a particular group of established people within the Natal Indian society. Who have particular political gains to be made by adopting a moral stance. What were those political gains that people could criticise the most?

MEWA: We have to go a little backwards at the formation. Mahatma Gandhi was just a Mr Gandhi. At that stage a young man in 1894, He was hardly 35 years of age, when he established the NIC. No doubt at the fact that he did this exclusively for the benefit of the Indian people.

It was done essentially for the redress of the ills that the community - with Gandhi - identified for themselves in Natal at that stage. Then of course it spun off to the movement which led to people involved in *Satyagraha* under the aegis of the NIC. But *Satyagraha* then also involved breaking of the borders restrictions, the redress of the pass laws for Indians, to the marriage laws, and where sugarcane workers and mine workers were involved.

So it had its own dynamics and for anybody to understand or for anybody to say that Gandhi was racially-orientated didn't understand the realities of the time, because he was relating to people who had Indian citizens, they were not South African citizens. They were under the tutelage and so-called protection of the British Empire as Indians in India were. So no justification. No rationalisation that I am engaging in for Gandhi's conduct, but he was brought here to take up the interest of Indian citizens. He came here and realised that this is worse than what he thought it was going to be, and he increased that area of his participation. The very fact that the NIC in classical terms of a political party or as an organisation, was the first one in the African continent. I am not saying this, history says this, That is an acknowledged fact, from Cairo to here, it was the first modern political party, a party with its structures and a programme and with some results, was in fact in many ways an inspiration for the formation of the ANC.

IAIN: They were comrades?

MEWA: Well I don't know to what extent it meant that, but I do know this as neighbours, when Gandhi went up to live at Phoenix settlement with JL Dube as a neighbour, with Champion as a neighbour and others as neighbours, Pixley Seme as a neighbour there must have been some interaction. There must have been some interfacing of ideas. Here was Gandhi formulating his vision of *Satyagraha* and the culture bed of the Gandhian trinity was Phoenix settlement: of *ahimsa*, *svadaya* and *satyagraha*. I am not saying that this did not exist in *ubuntu*. But in any organised manner it was absent, for these concepts to get a political manifestation it was the first time on the continent here, in the NIC.

I think the adoption of the so-called moderate attitude for the leadership of the ANC, Dr JL Dube was not and could not have been exactly like his successors. Chief Albert Luthuli was not like JL Dube let alone the ones who came in between. There were differences in style and there were differences. There was one aspiration of freeing South Africa. The successor to Chief Albert Luthuli, and let us be specific in this case: that when the youth league took over not control of the ANC, but the management of its policy and programmes. And when *Umkhonto weSizwe* was formulated and when it engaged with the M-Plan, the Mandela Plan, and when Mandela became the commander in chief, I would want to believe that this was a fundamental shift in options from the Dube's to the Luthuli's to the Mandela's and the Tambo's.

The isolation of South Africa, mass mobilisation, trade union resistance, etcetera. These all jelled, not exclusively as a result of African aspirations only, but Indian aspiration, or white aspirations. The Communist Party which was controlled by whites at that stage - led by whites the Bunting and whoever they were. The ANC, the Communist Party members like Mabhida, and Govan Mbeki and whoever they were. Members of the Communist Party in the Natal Indian Congress: Ismail Meer, JL Singh's and those. And Dadoo and the rest. All these names and ideas jelled.

At one stage in 1955, when comments are made about the NIC, the allegation was made by the PAC - between 1955 and 1959 or 1958 when it was established - were these: the ANC is now being controlled by communists and Indians. And therefore the Mda's, the Ngubane's, the Sobukwe's, whoever they were broke away to establish the PAC. But the view that the PAC was established in the US Information Service offices in Johannesburg must be refuted. If it is not refuted and allowed to be held, the question must arise, why should they have been established in the offices of the USIS in Johannesburg, sometime in 1958?

As an adjunct to it, why was it necessary to create Cosatu against Fedusa. As a counter to Sactwu? Was it because the shade in their movement at that stage Sactwu in this case was under the control of the communist? If so what was wrong with it? If the worker's aspirations were the primary consideration this must be linked to an ideological issue. And for Sactwu to be established who was going to lead that and what would its ideological base be? Now this is an historical expression of a situation that led to the growth and development of the NIC. It is in the context of these permutations, changes, adaptations, that the NIC had to permute, change and adapt.

IAIN: Yes I can understand a long-term historical view, but you would also understand that these permutations are made by people within a range of options. You make certain decisions to take your particular decisions. When you take those decisions, where would that Indian moderate group find themselves.

MEWA: At the time of my own growth and development in the 40s, I do not want to pretend that people like my father had any revolutionary inkling which would have altered the social foundations of South African society. And I think in many ways the wide majority of people of Indian origin as with the vast majority of African people, wanted reforms. They didn't want a revolution to alter the fundamentals of South African society. They just wanted reforms, they wanted to ameliorate their conditions of life, they wanted to make life a bit better for themselves, they wanted the relaxation of certain rules etcetera. They wanted trade union movements, and the entire fundamentals of the society to remain the same. So that in the context of my growing I was subjected to this kind of ethos of reform. My father could not have been any exception because I do not believe that when Monty Naicker took over the presidency of the NIC, inasmuch as we claim and we committed ourselves in the NIC to be in alliance with the ANC. The ANC itself was engaged in the politics of reform, so that it is not correct for those of us who sit in Parliament today to say it was an easy path to come into this path to where we are.

Growing up in an environment like that I must say to myself in the first instance this is hindsight for me. But hindsight tells me that I could not have been precluded from being influenced by it. Not tentative but measureable reforms must become the order of the day. It is in this context that the relationship between people of Indian origin, in this case my father and his compatriots, African people in South Africa in this case even Dube and his compatriots - Dr Dube in the 1940s, and it is only a couple years after that my father died - must be viewed. Today we are in fact doing exactly what they have visualised. The only difference being that we have political power.

Whilst we have political power and we are legitimate, whilst we have the legitimacy to have state power, the question arises: Do we have the capacity to alter the economic contradictions in our country? Do we have the economic clout to overnight change South Africa into a democratic, egalitarian, self-respecting, self-sustaining country without white people? Or else if we have them, then I would not understand the motivation for Nelson Mandela, as the head of state, to go and have tea with Mrs Verwoerd and the others. If we have them, then I would not understand the Freedom Charter programme. If we have them, I would not understand the non-nationalisation of the mines. If we have them, I would not be able to comprehend as to why the instruments of production are not transferred into the hands of those people who wanted a revolution in this country to alter the fundamentals of our country. It is because of the realities of the current situation that we are engaging in those things that will retain peace, will enhance the possibilities of reconciliation, will make it possible for the transformation in the economic terms to take place. Albeit in this case there are sure cases of black empowerment, where you have the hiring of black faces, where you have black people for sale, where you have black people as fronts. This presents

a reality to us. Now at age 70 I am not tempered with age, but I am persuaded to think more clearly about the past, and not to be very harsh in judging my youth. I mean judging those people who were responsible to nurture me, to help me grow, to school me, and to feed me. If this is the reality today, then in the reality of the 40s and the 30s and 50s must also tell a story.

The picture is not more vivid and contradictory at times when as kind of a youth who went to Red Square to listen to the people who were then pronouncing judgement on the South African system. Of course we were exhilarated, but at night when I got back I came to sleep in my father's house, my father's house, home, my home, where I had the comfort and protection of parents, comfort and protection of brothers and sisters, comfort and protection of my father's kitchen. I didn't have to look for my food, I came back to that environment, just as much as a white member of a Communist Party would pronounce Marxist terms at Red Square - that is why it is called Red Square - but at night would go to the comfort not of a township because they were hardly in the townships. He would not go back into the rural areas, but would go back into the comforts of Berea or Durban North, lay his head there. Even those homes might have been built by their capitalist fathers.

So the growth and development of the youth in different circumstance were different. Inasmuch as the trade unionist workers would fill up Red Square, the leadership of the congress movement at the time, some of them would go Cato Manor, there was no Kwa Mashu at that stage, there was Lamontville too. There was hardly any meaningful Umlazi at that stage. The question arises: Where did he go to? Where did he sleep? As late as 1958 when Johny Makhathini my friend from Inanda, his mother comes from a place in Inanda where my father's buses travelled to. He travelled from Inanda, he studied at the University of Natal black section - it was called the non-European section - he lived in one room in North Street which was his bedroom, his sitting room, his dining room, his kitchen and bathroom. This is Johny Makhathini, whose profile became so big that Thabo Mbeki was his junior in the ANC structures in exile. He and I also attending these meetings, That is where we went to. In those days I went to my father's home. Where did he go to?

So these disparities and disparate conditions and disparate attitudes must manifest in our activities. I am not going to deny the fact that I was angry with myself when I ... to live like this. But I had the comfort and security of a home. Others didn't. And comfort and security of home are relative and this relativity was based on race. And this became the primary objective that any sensitive child, whether it is a child of 15 sensitive, of 20 sensitive has to respond to. There is no doubt of the fact that in that context I myself began developing an anti-white attitude, until later in life when one evolves and began to understand the real nature of oppression and depression, that it

takes away the anti-white-ism from ourselves and with the interaction with people very profound like Bram Fischer, with whom I interacted late in life. There is a redefinition for the congress style of work. This is why the Freedom Charter becomes such an objective to be revered. This is why I took it upon myself much later in life: 35 years later to reflect on the nuances of the Freedom Charter and I think it is important for us to understand as to how it works.

With the establishment of the ANC Youth League indeed a new phenomenon aroused: the youth in the congress movement as such Natal Indian Congress, Transvaal Indian Congress provided that kind of leadership, which shifted the politics of people like my father from moderate conservatism and informed politics to a more dynamic overwhelming overview of what the real ills in the society were. Here in emerge very profound leaders like Mandela, Mda, Sobukwe, Walter Sisulu and a whole range of people in the African community, linked to people in the Indian community and the coloured community and the white community. The emergence of this new kind of leadership angry, restless, cocky, impatient, emerged. It is very important, I mean this phenomenon is universal, I mean when you had the moderates controlling the congress movement in India.

IAIN: Talking about youth politics, what music were you listening to, what movies were going to?

MEWA: Indian.

IAIN: Indian.

MEWA: Indian music essentially, very candidly I must confess being foisted on me, and in that part my life was essentially Indian. With the passage of time in the late 40, early 50s we began to be influence by township music.

IAIN: It was sort of jazz, the penny whistle.

MEWA: The penny whistle township yes. I remember developing a relationship in 1952, many years ago, almost 50 years ago with an African tenor called John Ngcobo, I've got a picture of him actually. And I think he was the first tenor singer, we got very close together in 1951, 1952 is a long time ago. But by then lots of people had emerged with township music and whatever. But we had very little contacts with the townships because of the ghetto-ing of people at that stage. It was not only the ghetto-ing of people in the minds or their bodies, but it became ghetto-ing of their minds and their cultures. Unfortunately I didn't live in Cato Manor where there was a greater proximity in terms of concentration of Africans and Indians together. Inanda was a rural area. We

have distances between people and we had separation in terms of cultural activities like I said earlier. Divali and Eid would be celebrated by Indian people and Christmas on a certain level ... with workers at that stage on one hand and with the elite so-called elite on the other. I don't think it would be fair to say that there was a cultural link among elites at that stage I doubt it very much. It was definitely not in Inanda, I don't recall this kind of exchange between the Dube's, or Ramgobin's, or Shembe's even though the Ramgobins were there at the Shembe dances. That kind of relations had masses of people there, around a personal level I do know. I think there was.

At even high school, I was a [Inaudible] at high school but it was English uniforms: pants and shirts and coats. At high school it was completely western.

IAIN: And after school?

MEWA: Tennis was our football, but we could all play football. And there we had a fair amount of inter-racial, I can't say harmony, but interaction on the playing field.

IAIN: Messing around.

MEWA: Yes it was just messing around yes. Until the 50s when the 50s came then we started playing tennis together, serious, together at Ohlange Institute. Or they would come to my father's tennis court or the tennis court at Phoenix Settlement. But social mixture in terms of cultures, eating, drinking - yes they were there but I think there was that distance. These are different people in that environment until we came up into the scene and said `Hang on, we must re-look at ourselves and re-look at other people`.

IAIN: Movies.

MEWA: Hindu movies were very popular in those days. Cowboy movies from America, and I think I can comfortably say that they dominated, notwithstanding Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*. That just came up as an intervention, it did come up sometime in 1953, 1953, and which gave us another perspective. But it was difficult for us to comprehend the nuances of what he was saying. The nuances of what the good white man was saying, the so-called good white man was saying. On the British or the American screen the good white man was saying - to the bad guys, who were either Japanese or indigenous Red Indians or blacks, called Negroes then. And indeed those things influenced us to an extent. And the fact that I am speaking English. Perhaps my father is at fault. He said learn English and beat the white man to his own game.

IAIN: When you watched the cowboy movies there are pretty clear moral values between good and bad.

MEWA: But the bad was always reflected by the black man and the good was always reflected by the white man, which as we grew, this was becoming an anathema as a result of which we realized that today we don't have those cowboy movies. Because the ethos is a different thing altogether now. When the so-called Negroes of those days refrained - stopping people from calling them that and call them Black Americans.

You also had what was also called, what head - you look for a head and get paid for every head that you got. Whose heads were these? Whose heads did you capture?

IAIN: Scalps.

MEWA: Scalps, how you do it and that becomes vulgar. But what is the irony of it all is that this is in the royal picture palace of the Victoria Picture Palace which was showing these pictures. In that stage in Victoria Street they were patronized by African people: predominantly by African people because that was the only cinemas that we could go to in terms of segregation. The Avalon and Albion were there for Indian people. They showed Indian movies and of course western movies. But they were also venues for cultural events like Indian dance, and Indian orchestras. There were many Indian orchestras. I know quite a few of them, which fascinated me. At that stage I think it would be fair to say that I was enamored by Indian music, and the languages and I went to school to learn to sing. As a result of which I went to India, to try my luck. But it ended there.

IAIN: [Inaudible]

MEWA: Yes, there were four, five tennis courts in Inanda - to the best of my recollection. The first tennis court was built by my first cousin - my father's brother's children - after the family split in 1944, 45, 46. Sometime then. And then the next one was built in my father's yard a year or two later. There was one in existence at Ohlange Institute. And another one came up at Phoenix Settlement.

IAIN: There was any tennis club?

MEWA: Was there a tennis club?

IAIN: Or was it a tennis society or?

MEWA: No, no I think this was just a social thing for all of us. Perhaps also a social status symbol: to have three tennis courts in a rural area, within a kilometer radius is a bit heavy, but those things happened. But what I do know is that segregation was so bad that the Natal champ was a person from Verulam, named called SS Maharaj, who came to officially open the tennis court at my cousin's place, and at my father's place. He was a Natal champ, but never allowed to compete with white people. And I am pretty certain he would have sacked all of them. But ironically years later - he is now dead of course - in my banned states and house arrested state he was in his late 60s, 20 years ago he played tennis with me in Verulam. He came and fetched me and I was banned person so I couldn't be in social gatherings so we used to play tennis together.

In those circumstances I think it was quite a cohesive community, you know in that period of our history in South Africa and the history of the Indian community, we hardly had 250 000 people and spread between Pietermaritzburg on the one hand, Newcastle, Pietermaritzburg, Ladysmith, and Durban. At that stage there were approximately 30 000 Indians just in Clairwood. The current form of Merebank we didn't have. We had the Merebank which is on the crest of what is today Austerville and Merewent as it exists today was nonexistent - it was sludge marshland. But unfortunately those people out there, there was some very wealthy people in Clairwood: bus owners, shopkeepers and whatever. But Magazine Barracks of course tells its own tale. But what happens at that stage one cannot forget and in many ways can't forgive. The people of Magazine Barracks became the victims and this was observed by people like me as youthful, people at Shastri College eating in it because we came from families that could afford going to eat at Goodwill Lounge. Where I would see on a regular basis, I don't remember not seeing them there. We had one called Pastor Jeff Rowlands of the Bethesda Church who took people from Magazine Barracks 50, 60 years ago in my living memory and these people we were seated with them 2, 3, 4 in a row eating what he would be eating. Eating as equals, and it was a fascinating sight to watch these people from Magazine Barracks of Indian origin trying to eat with a fork and knife and not be able to do so and being taught how to eat with a fork and knife by Pastor Rowlands. And I am talking the chief Pastor Rowlands himself in a café/restaurant which was owned by Naidoo family. It was the best restaurant in Durban.

IAIN: Goodwill Lounge.

MEWA: Goodwill Lounge for Gods People. It was a nonracial one incidentally and these people who came from Magazine Barracks, brought there by Pastor Rowlands, ultimately converted to Christianity. So the conversion took place in ... in circumstances which I understand. These



people from Magazine Barracks wanted to pray; they wanted a spiritual link, a spiritual life and I know this as a matter of fact because I have seen this and when I discussed this with those of us who will think about this.

Then one Sunday morning I was taken up at Mngeni Road, where the Mngeni Road temple is up to this day. And I would see crowds of people standing on the street, on the pavement outside the temple yard, who happen to people of Indian origin belonging to the Hindu faith. And these people were disallowed from entering those temple precincts because of the practice of caste and these people ultimately became congregants to Christianity. So we had, two generations down the line, children born into Christian families. I have no problem with that. I mean they have found their own spiritual base and anchor fine. But you grew up in this circumstances observing these things and you also grew up noticing that paradox is the contradictions in the society that was fast becoming insular. And that insularism or that insular attitude became exacerbated by the imposition of the Group Areas Act. Now to understand what happened then is to look at what even during the time that I was just unbanned in the 83, 84 period. I had representations made to me and the Natal Indian Congress leadership. I had documents presented to me by the members of the Hindu community, saying look chaps we have a problem. We live in Chatsworth, and we live in Phoenix. We have allocations of pieces of ground to build temples we do not have the resources. The churches are now coming in to say that since temples are not being built here, the Muslims are coming in. We have the resources to build our religious institutions. It was not easy to intervene because within the fold of the UDF and the NIC we have all people belonging into all faiths so we could not discriminate. That there was a social, economic polemic when the municipality allocated sites to build temples or whatever in these ghettos there were people who were privileged and people who were not. And when I did the investigations on this I realized that the petrodollars and headquarters power to build as many mosques as it could be on the one hand and the World Council of Churches on the other was an encouragement that in engaging in the isolation of South Africa they continued with the relationship of the churches in South Africa. They funded churches in South Africa.

And this glaring contradiction was thrown in my face when I was told that you are a Hindu `How do you respond to this when the government of India refuses to give us any assistance, when the government of India has sanctions and boycott policy, boycotting even the sending of teachers from India to do this whilst this is happening in the rest of the community?` I said `Well I understand the contradiction and I sympathise with you. I will personally write to the government of India under the letter head of NIC that on this issues they should allow these teachers to come in because there is unfair competition where there should have been no competition.` And growing up with a circular mind by then I had clear attitudes myself but I thought it was an unfair situation

particularly with the inflow of petrodollars of the Islamic propagation centers in the country and the role of the World Council of Churches not being indifferent to apartheid - they did take stands against apartheid internationally. But they did not intervene and stop the building of churches or the propagation of Christianity or whatever.

IAIN: What do you mean by that?

MEWA: I was fortunate as a child to have lived in a family of believers in the Hindu faith. There was tremendous dialogue in the house. There was dogma too. There was the crude habit or habits that we do things habitually because it is done. All these things were fine but there was also the generation of young people coming up and they asked me questions. 'Is it correct to have animal sacrifice?' And we debated this. 'Is it correct to have the practice of caste and that one person could not marry another person because of the differences of caste and yet belonging to the same faith?' So this kind of dialogue - what I call the dialogued attitude developed. And as we grew I was inter-faithed. I had associations with, I had friends in the Christian faiths. In this case who primarily happened to African from Inanda. I didn't hesitate to go the Ohlange Institute for a moment to be with my friends. In this case, a person called David Matabese who was a very close friend of mine, to go to church. He was a believer, I sang hymns with him and I loved jazz music. But they won't sing hymns in the Hindu faith and this was a glaring contradiction. Then I became exposed to the institute called Phoenix Settlement. There I grew up my first wife's Arun. We played together, he studied at the same school at Inanda a year or two behind me, he will come home and I will go to his place, we will eat together and come afternoon and we will pray. The entire family had a practice of praying. For the first time in formal terms I discovered what is the meaning of prayer when I was participant in singing the Lord's Prayer in Christianity: lit a candle light, our father who art in heaven .... to pray it in the Hindu medium, pray with an Islamic prayer. There sitting on the floor without any symbol of separation, in Gandhi's original home that is for me the genesis of my secularism and spiritualism: at Phoenix Settlement.

The profundity of that experience, even if I am given two life times more, it would not be enough in terms to say thank you. It was a foundation, the basis, the genesis, the crucible of my secularism. To such an extent that today that my one child is a Buddhist, my one child an aesthetic, my one child is a Christian, and my current wife is a Muslim and my son-in-law is Christian. We live comfortably, I don't know what my grandchild is going to be.

IAIN: You mentioned this at the wedding.

MEWA: Well I am glad my daughter doesn't hold it against me for having done what I did. I debated it with them and the entire backdrop of her marriage in the Durban City Hall was symbolized by the existence of the cross, and the star and the symbol O all in one formation. They did their vows, a Christian priest performed for three minutes a Christian rite, a Hindu priest for a couple minutes performed the Hindu rite. Ela and I went up stage to hand over our child to a family belonging to the Christian rite and saying to them in as much as we give our child in marriage to your child and you give your child in marriage to our child. We would hope that they will be happy and that is the only consideration not the pin pricks and the rituals of what separates us with a deep nuances of what keep us together. I get on with my son-in-law like the house on fire, so does my former wife. My daughter--n-law gets very upset if they do not take [Inaudible] in Cape Town. But yes the crucible or the genesis.

I do not subscribe to the view that anyone state has a write to be a religious state. On the other hand I emphasize my secularism because of the antipathies that have grown, the hatreds that have been born and the wars that have been engaged in because of religious beliefs and insistence that one must be protected by the state, above others, which is wrong as far as I am concerned.

IAIN: And would you then as a 17, 18, 19 year old have had your first experience of this with India and Pakistan.

MEWA: Indian and Pakistan, I think the tearing and division between India and Pakistan was more an emotional than a rational one. I didn't understand, as a child, the cultural heritage of India. As a child I didn't know the depth and breadth of the understanding of the great Buddha as I do today, and there are limitations even now. But when I was told that Gandhi is the father of the Indian nation and when I realized that both Hindus and Muslims, but particularly Muslims, demanded the division of Indian motherland I wondered what was this all about. And I think in some ways I despised the fact that a great country like India could be divided in the way it was divided. The paradox of it all is what it is today. It was still fighting for a piece of land called part of Kashmir and again fought for the division of India because they did not want Hindu domination. A young nation and young group of people, the paradox of this is that today you have no Muslims living in India. They are in Pakistan and I don't what the division was then about and on hindsight it is all about power on the one hand, internal power between Muslim and Hindus, and power of those alien forces like Britain who was engaged in a practice of divide and rule. A weak India was not in the interest of Britain. This is an analysis that I do today. A weak India was not in the interest of the United States of America. A weak India was not in the interest of the Soviet Union, and there was no China at that stage as I have realized. So in whose interest was it to see India divided? Was it in the interest of the Indians themselves, I hope someday that the

people of Pakistan would have the strength of character to say themselves as to why do they protect the Taliban caves and ruins with their lives. Is it because they belong to the heritage of the Mujahedeen or is it because there is still, deep down in themselves, that they belong to this civilization: that Islam was a late comer. I hope the Indians would have the strength of character, the Hindus in India would have the strength of character to say one day to the world as to why do they protect the Taj Mahal with their lives. Why do they protect the great shrines of the Mughals with their lives? Is it an acknowledgement or isn't it an acknowledgement that these are integral parts of the total historical memory and heritage. I hope someday Africans would say to the world that we made a mistake, that the Taliban made a mistake, that the Taliban should not have been allowed to destroy the images of the great Buddha. I pray to God that they have that strength of character, and the question arises.

**Interview ends**