

Mewa Ramgobin interviewed by Iain Edwards, Ramgobin's Parliamentary Office, Old Assembly Building, South African Parliament, Cape Town, 4th February 2003

[Ramgobin returns from parliamentary meeting]

[TAPE 1, SIDE 1]

IAIN: Gandhi's supporters and those who remembered him when you lived at Phoenix Settlement?

MEWA: Well they were not University graduates. They were in awe, I believe, they were in awe. I think at that time I realised that for them Mahatma Gandhi was perfect and almost godlike. I am not saying that I was anywhere near that, don't get me wrong: I was a smoker, I ate meat and I planned to have children - not that there is anything wrong with that. But what I must say is that Phoenix Settlement facilitated for me as a person, as an individual, that scope, the opportunity and the challenge for me to realise boyhood dreams. Rhetorically of liberation as I understood it as a boy and it afforded me the opportunity to give expression and experience those things in life which should not just remain a dream. It had to manifest itself in some action, in some deed. What better opportunity when committing oneself to enhancing both the vision and the methodology of somebody who had by then become the Mahatma, somebody who taken this institution, of somebody who had not received the Nobel Peace Prize at all.

And I remember debating this at a work camp in that period: in the 60's. Perhaps the people who organised the Nobel Peace Prize, might have done a reflection on this. But given the nature of Gandhi, if it was offered to him, he would have refused to accept it? It was never offered to him: this man, half naked, walking around the villages of India shook the foundations of the British Empire and which led to the desolation of the British Empire. As pretty conscious that Nobel was a creator of dynamite, an instrument of violence, so an award from that institution of funds derived from the investment in dynamite might not be acceptable to Gandhi. And if they were to offer it to him should he have rejected it and given the reasons. He would have grown higher in stature and a Nobel Peace Prize from that foundation would in those circumstances, in those days, have suffered.

IAIN: So the Committee was second guessing?

MEWA: If I were them, I would have. I cannot understand for the life of me how the greatest apostle of peace that ever walked this earth could not be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. How the apostle of a philosophical methodology on how to reject the evil but not the evil doer cannot be a recipient only the Nobel Peace Prize Committee must answer. I am saying this in the full knowledge that my own hero and the current icon of the world, Nelson Mandela, is a recipient. But it is my belief that the Nobel

Peace Prize has diminished by it being offered to De Klerk at the same time as it was offered to Mandela. I am not passing judgement. I am not saying that Mandela should not have received it. But for De Klerk, he might be a good guy, and Mandela himself is on record as saying he is a man of integrity. Fine. I am saying in the full knowledge that I was one of those guys who was absolutely thrilled when Albert Luthuli was the first recipient from Africa for the Nobel Peace Prize. I am saying this in the full knowledge that perhaps South Africa is the only country in the world that has four Nobel Peace Prize laureates. We have four of them in our country.

IAIN: And it could have been a fifth.

MEWA: In a way yes. People like us were doing work at Phoenix Settlement: our clinics, be it the record clerk at the Mahatma Gandhi Clinic, and also engage in those underground activities it takes to take out of the country some of our leaders. In the same period, especially between 1959 and 1960, we became active participants in the boycott of beer halls. This provided us with new events and new ideas: how to deal with the men who visited the beer halls after work and went home drunk and assaulted the women folk. And the boycott of the beer halls was a massive success of the Congress political programme. And also a few years later, there was a funny phenomenon in terms of saying no to what was. When the men folk turned around and said to their women folk `You do not straighten your hair because it is not good for our liberation, it is not good for our consciousness, it cannot be the half-baked extensions of a dominant ethos by straightening your hair.` Now these things were fascinating moments in the growth and development of any one society, let alone us as individuals emerging from all these things, and at the clinic. You to ponder revolt taking place, arrests had taken place and all these things gelled to give rise later what became black consciousness which is a phenomenon, which is good in itself. To be conscious of your self-impression as black people was excellent. That consciousness came in quite a few years later. It came in 1968/69 and I used to have contestations about the origins of black consciousness. Indeed writings like Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* played a critical role in the black socialist ferment which became associated with the Carmichaels of America, which in turn converted itself into an Islamic programme. The mutations that took place in the black consciousness movement slowly began losing this radicalism. We were conscious of the fact, I was, that inasmuch as I never hesitated to work with anybody and everybody, including the black consciousness people. This to such an extent that in 1971 the Durban Central Branch of the Natal Indian Congress converted itself as a catalytic institution for the emergence of what became the BCM which launched in Pietermaritzburg. Now the resources, I did not ask them to comment or explain happened to the branch's resources. We knew it was spent. We squirmed, but it ended there. In the same period we had people like Rick Turner and Laurie Shlemmer. Rick Turner, a socialist philosopher, no activist, a philosopher, and others like him who had conjoined issues and like a good communist found a space with the mobilisation of people, hoping that they will assume the socialist agenda which didn't happen.

IAIN: What was your emotional attraction to what later became the Black Consciousness Movement?

MEWA: I began reflecting on it very seriously after 1971. It was in 1971 something terrible happened in the Natal region. It was flooded out; we had torrential rains for days on end. On the outskirts of Phoenix Settlement where I lived there were mud homes which had collapsed and people had become destitute and we at Phoenix offered them assistance, temporarily, until their homes were rebuilt. We intervened and provided clothing and materials to rebuild homes. I picked up the telephone and telephoned the South African offices of the big motor vehicle importing firms. They were all headquartered at Mobeni to the south of Durban. I asked them if they could also identify themselves with us in rebuilding these homes and what we would require from them was the boards from the big boxes in which motor cars came to South Africa from Japan. They were huge, lengthy boards, and far more formidable, far more solid, than the material used by the people in the shantytowns. They said to me that if you can come along with transport, take all that you want, and I got two of my cousins to provide free transport and brought them back to Phoenix. But we now had to have an organised method of intervention, so I went up to the student body at Allan Taylor and I said to Steve Biko and others who were there - but he was the leader - it was a Saturday afternoon and said 'I have an emergency. I have successfully negotiated this and these boards are now lying at Phoenix. We need to go there immediately and help people rebuild their homes.' He was very enthusiastic about it. Whilst he was mobilising I arranged transport for the students to be taken to Phoenix Settlement to help people rebuild their homes. I didn't consult with anybody. I probably had a duty to do this. I didn't go to people to ask whether they would want homes, I didn't go to people to ask whether you want us to rebuild your homes, I didn't go and ask whether will you give me permission to help you build your home. For whatever reasons I didn't do that. The reasons not to do that must be part of our lives. And by the same token I didn't expect and nobody expects the student body to go and consult to do this. So we all pitched up without having done this. And we went into the community, we gathered members of the community and we met at Phoenix Settlement. In one profundity a vulgarity was thrown at our faces. The members of the community said, the community in which I was living, said to us 'Oh so thank you very much, we knew the government would come to our assistance' and we looked at each other's faces, we said 'No we are not government' and I said to Steve 'Steve you need to explain this; that this is not a government hand-over or gift or whatever, it is not a government responsibility. No there is no flood relief from the government here. It is relief from fellow sufferers with you ...' And what fascinated me at that stage, he says 'No you say it'. I said 'Come on don't be silly, as a student we are going to do the building.' He said 'No, no, you say it.' So I said 'Why are you afraid of saying it?' He says 'You know they will realise that I not Zulu speaking.' So here was a revelation to me that I had to communicate in my English and their response was 'Oh our child we knew you would do it!' So much for our own consciousness and so much for my own political work. To what extent it was rooted with the people in satisfying the basic needs of people is a reflection on me, on us and I don't want to categorize other people with me here. They can make it.

IAIN: Who else was there? You, Steve Biko ...?

MEWA: And a whole lot. Those guys today are doctors. What have you. But they did come up. In my own mind I began redefining with them, not outside of them, not being critical in many ways. `Look chaps we need to look at this.` There is a consciousness related to a time of nationalism which was justifiable among their position and the unity movement position or a combination of all those pitched against the ANC. My assessment was this: the resolution of our country's problems has got to be done by South Africans. There are some people amongst South Africans who happen to be black, have become part of the problem in as much as the vast majority of whites are the problem. At what stage do you do make a definition or a separation of the two? I don't know. I do know this. That in the perpetuation of separate development at that stage, there is no compliance at worst or at best to separate development, there will be no separate development. So the debate from then until one day at a workshop which was facilitated by me and Rick and others at which Steve and the BCM guys were there, an AZASO workshop, where we went into a similar debate - getting between the rhetoric of `What is to be done?` `What's done?` and `What ought to be?` as our own intellectual selves evolved. And at that stage I was told, when I was on my rounds for the call for the release of all political prisoners by Steve that `We heard you mention the name of a political prisoner, but omitted to mention x and y.` I said then `No I was wrong in not mentioning them. But you are remembering my mistake. Teach me another lesson. You are remembering that I didn't mention whatnot reminds me as to who you are.` My suspicions were confirmed - not suspicion - assessments were confirmed.

IAIN: You are talking about Biko, reminding you that you had forgotten to mention Robert Sobukwe's name in the clemency campaign. And that reminded you of whom?

MEWA: And to all parties concerned I did not hesitate ...

IAIN: This is not an acrimonious meeting.

MEWA: No, no, no we were good friends, but diverse in political approach. But there was no doubt of the fact that there was this tension, created tension, between that formation and us in the Congress movement. That Griffiths Mxenge and whoever we were around at the time had reservations about this. We knew that others in the community were towards that politically. In as much as the likes of me understood as to how essential it was for people to be mobilised. But there is no doubt of the fact that having come from the Congress tradition there was in some ways comment from my own troubled soul at that stage. Will this put paid to the work that we were doing, how was it that people could relate to each other on an emotional level. Because I do not know how many people understood the political ramifications of it. There was one fascinating experience that I had when we were told that there was this formation which would facilitate the process of bringing together the ANC and the PAC - who were both in exile. Why are we fighting if there is a programme towards national self-

determination? But what became very difficult to comprehend is the agenda. Later, late one night at a workshop at Phoenix and with the leadership of the BCM there - I was a banned person at that stage and under house arrest - deep into the night I asked this formation 'Do you people accept the Freedom Charter as a programme of action?' I think Steve made a mistake when he said that was the most unfortunate document that befell the history of our people and my troubled soul became more tormented with that statement. But after that I was a bit ungracious and I said in response that you guys are no more than a bunch of PAC and unity movement [INDISTINCT]. It was on the basis of the rejection of the Freedom Charter that PAC was [INDISTINCT]. Today you are saying that it was the most unfortunate document that befell the history of our people. To Barney Pitsoa credit as he stood up to say, 'Steve you are wrong. I turned around and said to Barney' with whom I had had a recent discussion on this issue whether it should be documented or not. And he said to me 'You can't fight history.' I am saying it today: at that stage I said 'It is late at night, you are my guests here but I am going to do a very, very undone thing. I am leaving now, it is 2 o'clock in the morning and I am going to sleep.' But before I went to sleep, I turned around and said to all the Indian, so-called Indian, and so-called Coloured compatriots were there 'Guys, I do not know how you fit into this.'

IAIN: Who were those people?

MEWA: There was a called [NAME WITHHELD] who was a doctor, [NAME WITHHELD], also a doctor, and I don't remember all the names but I remember one [NAME WITHHELD] he is a doctor today too. I said you better leave. But 4 o'clock in the morning that same night, Steve Biko and Strini knocked at my window in Phoenix Settlement, woke me up and we went into the dining room. Steve said 'Please stop dividing my ranks.' And I said to him 'No, Steve. I can understand what you saying. I need you to understand what I am saying, I am not saying that I have the monopoly of truth on my side nor must you say that you have the monopoly of truth. But this is one truth that we have got to both agree on, that we have got to find, we have got to identify racism and fight it no matter where it comes from.' And that was the same Strini who tried to hijack the NIC branch!

IAIN: Now if that's in the mid 70's ...

MEWA: No, no in 1971/72

IAIN: That's the early 70's. From the time that you graduate and you focus your attention on Gandhi, the development of the clinic and Phoenix Settlement. Now it's the early 70's you have now made contact with another group of students: African, Indian and Coloured students who were coming to your home. Student politics hasn't left you. It has come to you in another guise.

MEWA: Because, as I said earlier I bow my head in humility and thankfulness to living at Phoenix at that stage. By then, Phoenix was not a platform for high sentiment. It afforded us, the community at

large, as a venue, a platform, a vehicle to begin to learn from each other. To begin to teach each other, to begin to make choices, that would influence our lives for ever to come. Now from white liberal students at work camps coupled together with white students with different perspectives, with different compulsions and different objectives. The analyses being different and the objectives were being influenced by the analysis. For it became a platform for us to begin to look at intellectually what ought to be and what ought not to be now. In that context it is true that Phoenix Settlement was an island in the morass of South Africa. By then there were hardly any institutions, there was hardly a single institution, around us at the time who could do the things that Phoenix could do. Not me, but that Phoenix could do. And what it did is to look at today's leadership in the different provinces, in parliament, outside the NGO's even in the academic world and find out how many products of a Phoenix Settlement sentiment – an approach you see there. Now in that context, as I said, it was not a platform for high sentiment, it was a platform to challenge.

IAIN: And there were real things being done?

MEWA: And there were real things being done. It was a challenge to confront our problems, build unity in action. Whether that action was serving the health needs of the poor and the downtrodden and the deprived, the dispossessed or whether it was the rebuilding of homes that were washed away, or whether it was planting beans and painting walls or making cement blocks.

IAIN: Or attending meetings with the ...

MEWA: Oh, using it as a venue and as a stepping stone for the likes of Charles Diggs to come into South Africa and to use Phoenix Settlement as a springboard, to be taken into the compounds of the sugar industry, to be taken into the backyards of South Africa, in the squatting camps of what was then called a Bantustan. Where in the sugar industry an able bodied migrant indigenous African worker was paid less than a retired sugar field worker who belonged to the Indian community. The compounds in which 15, 20, 30 people were housed in one single room, using hessian bags as mattresses and bricks wrapped up in hessian bags as pillows. Charles Diggs was taken into these areas, to highlight the plight of workers, to highlight as to why they should be a boycott of the South African sugar quota. Indeed it became a political act.

IAIN: And doing all this, from Phoenix. Building things brick by brick, minuted meetings of the Clinic and so forth, and developing your political philosophy at the same time, and being very brave – brazen actually. And you meet a new clique of largely students and their new black consciousness, and you're brittle?

MEWA: To the extent that it is on record that even in that period the concept arose and I was not harsh on anybody but just honest to myself by saying that the transfer of power can take place, either through

the barrel of a gun or howsoever, but for as long as we do not use that power in programmes like we are engaged in at Phoenix Settlement that power will remain for our sake and therefore the irrelevance of that power to the needs and satisfaction for the poorest of the poor on the one hand. On the other hand Phoenix Settlement which was not a platform or a call for high sentiment. It was a rough call for us in seeking our liberation that we had to ensure that we liberate our current oppressors. So that facility must be there for our liberation to have any meaning and lasting value. I am very happy to say that position has been vindicated with the emergence of 1990 and the Constitution of 1994 with the establishment of a document of national unity. With the installation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

IAIN: I understand. But at the time the apt saying was `black man, you are on your own.`

MEWA: Yes. My view is that the black man, you could never be on your own for as long as we blacks remained a part of the dominant ethos. The dominant ethos at that stage was every man for himself and the devil takes the high road. The dominant ethos was that apartheid was possible only because of the aiding and abetting of those very people. This is where the African National Congress ethos from day one had become a pre-eminent feature of South African politics. Even though that the African National Congress as an organisation ratified the adoption of the Freedom Charter. A week after its adoption at Kliptown, nonetheless it pioneered the concept that South Africa belongs to all who live in it. The question arose, with this kind of polarization could we then say that South Africa belongs to all who live in it. Could we then say that it is our bound and duty to make South Africa liveable for all who live in it. Could we say that whilst we might have achieved our political legitimacy, could we transform our country economically when the economic control and management remain in the hands of the so-called white race. That's on the one hand. On the other hand, I began questioning who was funding projects under the control of the Black Consciousness Movement. In this case, to be specific, in King Williams Town. That in 1977 when these organisations are outlawed, it became pretty evident that the Harry Oppenheimer Foundation did not hesitate to fund them. Of course the Harry Oppenheimer Foundation did not hesitate to fund Phoenix Settlement too and herein lay those contradictions in our society. We went down on our bended knees to get support for the revival of the Natal Indian Congress and the communications that we had from Alec Boraine was that we are a communist movement in people's eyes. Now don't get me wrong. To raise the level on consciousness against apartheid and separate development, the Black Consciousness Movement was an essential part of our lives.

Ela or I would not have brought them to Phoenix or else I would not have, in 1972, for instance, when the University of Durban Westville, within a year of their arrival, within months of their arrival they went on a boycott. I intervened as a banned person to say that you are not going to take the streets. You are now staying away from lectures. You come to Phoenix Settlement. I will provide the busses and I will provide the food.

IAIN: In other words just don't hang around.

MEWA: Just don't hang around. Come to Phoenix Settlement, use it as a platform, mobilise, consolidate. Think, plan what should be done and begin to do some work in that context.

IAIN: When did you first meet Biko?

MEWA: Sometime in 1969 when he was a student but politically by then he had not matured and in 1970/71 he had matured and become a national leader.

IAIN: That's what I am saying. It is wonderful because you meet him as a young student at med school and you are in close contact with him in three years of his life in Durban.

MEWA: So close in contact were we that he would take it upon himself, in 1971, to advertise a meeting in the knowledge that I would not say no and refuse the platform to speak to them. I knew him so well that in 1971 he came up with a delegation to me to say 'Hang on chap, you know?' And I said 'Yes what about it. OK we disagree with it publicly.' So much so that in 1971 in June when the mandate was sought in the Indian community, people like Biko and all placarded us saying 'Think Black, not Indian.' And yet he was part and parcel of a meeting which gave the steering committee for the revival of the NIC - which I chaired from home - the go ahead to proceed. We got unanimous mandates from whites, coloureds, Indians but what is most significant is when the African component - present there - it was not the definition of the role of the NIC, but it was the consolidation of a position that the NIC was an integral part of Congress Alliance, which was led by the ANC. Therefore to revive one component of an alliance is basically the revival of the entire alliance.

IAIN: What was Biko's view?

MEWA: Well he was confounded. Because when he realised there was a unanimous mandate, he didn't object at that stage. But almost a year later when I got re-banned and house arrested this time in 1972, he led a delegation to my house. A delegation comprising of led by himself, Barney Pitso, Saths Cooper, Strini Moodley, some Chetty man who left the country - I forget his first name, and one called Harry Singh who later in life was discovered to be a plant amongst them came up to me. An entire delegation, of some 10 to 12 people. I was babysitting my twins then, my twin daughters who were probably two years of age. And they came and helped themselves in the fridge and whatever food was there. No problem. Because they were my compatriots and I disagree with them politically but when they said they have come to share the peoples food. I said 'You don't take it too far.' At midnight when Ela and my mother in law arrived from their meeting, I went to the sitting room because then I could sit there. In case somebody walked in. I would be in breach. So I sat there and said 'Now

what can I do for you?` And they are on record as saying `For having said that we come here to tell you that we have now decided to destroy the NIC.` Because by then the BCM was launched in Pietermaritzburg. I said `Very well, thank you for extending the courtesy of telling me this today. I appreciate that and respect you for that. But could you do me another favour. The day that you succeed in doing that please come back and tell me again that you succeeded in destroying the NIC. Because if you think the NIC is like the ANC that can be killed by any force, if you think that the ANC has been killed with the might of the National Party, you are making a mistake. The ANC cannot be killed by the might of the National Party, the NIC is not a 1 or 2 or 3 or half a dozen or two dozen individuals, it is a set of ideas, so please if you can, extend the courtesy to me whether you succeed in doing that, come back and tell me. I would appreciate that.` So they laughed and they said `No, no, no we are just asking you. Aren't you using non-violence as a ruse?` I said `Look, I believe in non-violence because I see the divinity in you as I expect you see it in me.` But I didn't ever go any further than that because I was most disturbed by what I was told at 1 o'clock in the morning. But Ela intervened and much to her credit she said `Look guys, you see that photograph there hanging on the wall? That is Mewa's photograph. That's the Last Supper and that picture belongs to him. He takes it wherever he goes. It was a gift to him but he treasures it. Can anyone of you tell us who is Judas there? If you cannot tell us who is Judas there, can you tell yourselves who is Judas here?` The discussion closed. A couple of years down the line one who was present there committed suicide, shot himself with his own revolver issued to him by the police. Harry Singh and he was present there that night. Most provocative, the most radical question there.

IAIN: There is a lot of things happening. Is there any joining theme? Its mostly students you're alking about ...

MEWA: Yes and the youth league becomes stronger. And that must be measured by the participation of the youth, of that kind of youth, in the launch of the UDF. Now even the youth from the 1960's. Who were at University: who got into trouble with the police, were arrested and were sent to prison. Just like the youth in the white community who became exiles, were arrested, went to prison, served their terms. Most of them gravitated towards the position which consolidated the African National Congress. Now how did this happen? Those of our people who remained in the country like the Terror Lekota's and the Popa Molefe and ... Now today Terror Lekota belongs to the communist movement, Popa Molefe, a whole range of our people here, Vali Moosa belongs to the communist movement and those people who went out as exiles, where did they go to? Whom did they go to? Now even if there was a miscalculation on anybody's part, that the people went to their natural home, the natural political home, a political home that grew organically and not as an intervention against that home in somebody's offices in Johannesburg. In this case the USIS offices in Johannesburg in 1959. The people didn't seek out the PAC abroad, the people didn't seek out the unity movement abroad. They sought the African National Congress. Again perhaps an over simplification in my own mind that I could have been a victim of my own inadequacies in evaluating as to who our people really were.

Perhaps I was a victim of an exaggerated sense that I had of the pleasure of the ANC or the absence of the ANC in formal structures. Perhaps I had an exaggerated view of the forces picked against the ANC. I hope I was wrong in all these things. I think I was wrong in some of them because the Black Consciousness Movement did become a vehicle for the strengthening of the ANC both internally and externally. When I say externally, in 1976 when Soweto burnt, where did the youth go to as cadres? Under whose banner did they take up arms against South Africa? This for me was reminiscent of 1960. In 1960 with the PAC being created and the Sharpeville shootings taking place, and the Cape Town march taking place. Essentially it was originally designed to be an ANC programme, the burning of passes, the handing over of passes or whatever. That was hijacked and the thunder was taken away from the ANC. So much so that Albert Luthuli had to go back on the heels of the shooting to burn his passes. I am not unmindful of that and the stresses and strains within the ranks of our own people have got to be reviewed objectively.

And there are still consequences been felt for affairs from those periods. It was not too many months ago that I was approached here, in my office, by two ANC MP's and one other fellow. They were all from the younger students at UD-W. They would come to my house at Lenin Drive in Verulam. One of those persons you know: [NAME WITHHELD] As you know he holds a very high government office and is doing a very good job. Well I was asked to explain certain conducts of mine, and the atmosphere was very rancorous. I refused to be bullied. To his credit [NAME WITHHELD] later contacted me to say he was placed in a difficult position and what what.

IAIN: And it concerned the 1970's at UD-W?

MEWA: to a certain extent. But it was more about the underground organisation and politics of personalities. It was very unfortunate.

IAIN: Talking of organisational things that happened here on the ground, what happened to the students association that was started by Mbeki?

MEWA: I know that Mbeki was one of the first office bearers but sometime in 1962/63 or 61 sometime in that period

IAIN: It started 62

MEWA: In 1962. Well the only recall that I have of that... I don't know if it was President Mbeki who was a young student in those days. There were the other two people, in my car, it was a small Morris 1000 with Ernest Gallo, one called ... I forget, there were two other people, young people, I don't know if it was Thabo Mbeki. I hope I could recall, I must ask him one day.

[INTERVIEW ENDS]