

Mewa Ramgobin interviewed by Iain Edwards, Ramgobin's Parliamentary Office, Old Assembly Building, South African Parliament, Cape Town, Tuesday, 21st January 2003

Tape 1, Side 1

IAIN: Mewa, I wonder if you could just give us your birth date and where you were born.

MEWA: I was born on 10th November 1932 - according to my birth certificate - in Inanda, now called KwaZulu-Natal - it was called Natal then - of parents who themselves were children of indentured labourers. My father was born here, so was my mother.

I grew up in relatively comfortable circumstances, as a child, in a house which was built by the family, with the assistance of a neighbour, I am told who was a builder. The bricks were made at home by the family women folk and all and it became a treasure house for this family which was essentially a family comprised of the children of two indentured labourers.

My grandfather was an indentured labourer, who died sometime in 1935 or 1936, I don't know the exact date, but by then the house was built. So in his lifetime with the assistance of his children he succeeded in building this house for the family. He was one of those who chose to remain in South Africa. In Natal at that stage, [there was] the dispensation of £40 payment to return to India, or to remain in South Africa with freehold land. On hindsight today, I think over many years, I thought whose land was this that he could get it as a gift from his employer.

I schooled in Inanda. I did my primary school education in a school that was built essentially by the family, not only for us as children not even for the neighbourhood. This school accommodated only children of Indian descent. To what extent this was voluntarily and above board I do not know. But this I do know that the efforts made by these folk in the field of education was for me a political act. When I thought about this in retrospect and when I think about it today, it was the store that we place in education as an instrument of liberation and not liberation first and then education later that I learnt from members of my family, my father and the efforts of my grandfather.

IAIN: Your grandfather's name?

MEWA: Seochand.

IAIN: Did he come over with his wife, were they married in India?

MEWA: Yes my grandfather came along with my grandmother, I don't know whether he knew who she was. Whether she came from a family or just picked up along the roadside, I don't know and nobody knows this. I have been to India to identify them. There have been some measures of success in identifying my grandfather's family, but I couldn't reach out to my grandmother's family. So there is some measure of ambiguity about the background of my grandmother.

IAIN: [INAUDIBLE] when they came here?

MEWA: They came [INAUDIBLE] and their family members are still there in a little village called Baruna in the district of Baria in the state of Bihar. I have been there. I have already been there twice, and I have taken my children to meet with them, not for any political reason but to identify your roots because in the midst of what I am doing today, sitting in Parliament as third generation of an indentured labourer, I consider myself to be an indentured labour graduate seating in Parliament, not one of those IT graduates some Indians who go out to the university today.

So this family came from India; my grandmother and grandfather. I don't know why they gave up their caste name and came along with his own name. He is registered here by his own name.

IAIN: What happened?

MEWA: He didn't have a caste name according to the records. My father himself used his first name and his father's name - my grandfather's name - was his first name and he used Ramgobin as his surname, so when he signed cheques he signed as S. Ramgobin. Years and decades later when I got to university and when I got married, I still had my first name Mawalal. And I was registered as that. We've got just one name and no surname. So I had to present an affidavit to the department of interior in South Africa to include a surname. So Ramgobin become my surname after I got married in 1961.

IAIN: And Ramgobin is a mixture of two words.

MEWA: Well, well don't push me into unbecoming modesty now. Yes indeed it is a mixture of two words. The first half of the word is Ram and second half of the word is Gobin and both are deities' names - deities I am nowhere near to nor was my father - but I guess it was a way of sustaining oneself consciously or unconsciously, of relating oneself to issues beyond the immediate, beyond the relative, beyond the material and beyond the self.

IAIN: And beyond the caste.

MEWA: Well definitely beyond the caste. To that extent given ethos of the time I would consider it to have been this act of going beyond the caste, as a revolutionary option about the normal nuances of a revolution, a revolution within oneself. With the implications of the practice of the vulgarity in caste, the caste system, perhaps this was a small act on their part to renounce caste-ism and the practice of this vulgarity by dropping their own caste. I am sure it might have had some implications for them but I cannot for certain say what. But given that they did that I think it was beyond the existing ethos of the time. And I don't think they were God's chosen people nor were they in any way the ideal of a human being, because as days went on one discovered that this caste-ism could be and have been practiced it other ways, I think the relationship between my parents, my grandparents, my family as such with the environment, with the indigenous people the African people was and is reminiscent of the practice of caste-ism based on race.

I distinctly remember as a child some slight variations of this kind of caste-ism were that the practice of racialism was thrown out of the window when it came to trade and business. As a child I remember my father became a shopkeeper subsequently; that he had a good relationship with his customers, especially those customers who bought on the wholesale from him and needed the transportation of their goods. I recall him having relationships with the astute politicians of the time and the members of the royal family from Natal. The late JL Dube was our immediate neighbour and so was JG Shembe. Actually in some ways their properties remained contiguous to the property own by father.

IAIN: When you use the term `God's chosen people`, you know that Gandhi used that phrase as well, in terms of discussing the caste system.

MEWA: Did he use that word? Then he was in good company. He's in good company.

IAIN: Now, your father didn't tell you not to take the caste name?

MEWA: No he didn't, but not one of my brothers or sisters had a caste name. I think in some ways maybe the way international influences perhaps are in an alien land, to survive in South Africa being thousands of miles away from your own roots. They had to build a community for themselves and not when you said that they were in a land with tremendous opposition or tremendous and several ominous problems, but there were problems nonetheless within the mind; a fear of insecurity. So the ghastly cohesion that they required in this case in terms of race more than anything else. I mean there can be a different language groups but they cohered with the community. They sustained themselves in an alien and in some ways hostile environment because they were considered to intruders on the one hand, who were brought at the behest were the exploiters on the other hand. So the relationship between the indigenous African vis-à-vis the British who brought them was of antagonism in no doubt and it is quite logical and understandable if those people who refused to work and be exploited by the British to be in some ways antagonistic and apprehensive at best about those intruders who came from India and there was no doubt at the fact that they did come here to supply if not to substitute. I think supply is the correct word and not just to be an agent but to supplant the labour force as is required in the sugar fields and the coal fields of Natal at the time.

IAIN: In terms of that caste system, not to take their caste name is relatively unusual amongst Indians.

MEWA: There were many caste names then and there are many caste names today. I mean the word Maharaj is a caste name; the word Singh is a caste name; the word Moodley, and Chetty, and Naidoo are caste names in the Hindu fraternity of the Hindu community. There were few people belonging to the Muslim faith who came here, but they themselves have been converted from this grouping, this so-called caste system, therefore they had to shed their caste names. To what extent they continued to practice caste-ism is a different matter, and I believe they did. I mean they are doing so in India to this day. So the practice of caste was a phenomenon then and in many ways continued to be a phenomenon even in my childhood days. I mean growing days and my university days - for different reasons in this case but what has happened is urbanisation of these people have led to the harmonisation of culture so there is a homogeneous attitude as a consequence. Industrialisation and urbanisation leads to that. On the one hand it is complimented; augmented, cohered in some way by the advent of education, and communications. You may not be belonging to a new world structure, but you have to insert yourself; the world is on you, you have a common sense of insecurity.

But as time passed on people adjusted and my people were not exceptions to the rule they did adjust and became an integral part of the economic exploited industrialised aspect of our society. My father was one of them. I don't want to apologise for what he became or what he didn't become, nor do. I don't want to be

indifferent to what was at that stage. He was a product of his time, and he did take measurable advantage of the availability of a freehold property that his father had got. He himself acquired property.

IAIN: Had his father, your grandfather, adopted just the five acres in Inanda Valley? He, your father, accumulated more land than your grandfather accumulated.

MEWA: I don't know if my grandfather didn't, most likely he didn't, because I believe he came from a breed of human beings who work very hard, they became producers of edibles, of vegetables, market gardening and this was difficult work, both to live with and to accumulate wealth. But he had a start. He had a start of freehold land. Now to what extent my grandfather himself accumulated more land I really don't know, but what I do know is that on that foundation the family as such of which my father was a pivotal point in terms of the commercial activities, acquired more and more land until they themselves became owners of hundreds of acres of land, and employers of both Indian and indigenous African labour. So the second generation of this indentured labour became an employer and as is normal in all societies with that kind of scope for the so-called self-betterment, or becoming better than what you were yesterday, in pursuit of wealth, in pursuit of more and more in the law of accumulation. They were no exception; I mean they would be like any white man in the western world or any African person on the African continent today or at any time in history. So the law of accumulation did not need a Marxist to interpret, nor a Freudian to investigate and interpret, nor another interpretation of what was at that time.

IAIN: How many children did your grandfather have?

MEWA: From his first wife he had two sons, one of whom was my father and from his second wife he had five sons and two daughters. Perhaps this was part of his wealth in terms of labour.

IAIN: [INAUDIBLE]

MEWA: My father in turn had.

IAIN: Your father was the eldest?

MEWA: My father was his second born and my father in turn had six sons and three living daughters who went beyond the age of 10. I believe there were some who died before they were 10 years of age.

IAIN: And the children from both marriages, did they stay as a close knit extended family?

MEWA: Until, I don't know the exact year but just around 1950 between the termination of the Second World War in 1945, I know that one segment of the family moved from that family home into another home to run another shop, as by then they had become shopkeepers. But until 1945/6 most of the family remained there under one roof, eating of one pot and perhaps this was their strength, the joint family system.

But in 1946 my father split away with a substantial part of the family wealth in terms of the shop, the garage, the tearoom, a transportation business, all which he shared with his brothers. But on hindsight I believe it was an unfair sharing, much to my regret now. But most of them are fairly well off. Some of the members of the family became professionals: we've got doctors and lawyers, the others are business people - shopkeepers, transport operators - and some are poor and not very well off. But if they were to meet today we will have to fill the city hall.

IAIN: I was about to ask this?

MEWA: When my daughter got married in 1997 and I hope I had invited all of them but I think I have missed some of them, the seating in the Durban city hall was rather packed.

IAIN: Yes, I was invited, I was there and I was impressed with your family dynamics.

MEWA: Yes. Some of them are overseas at the moment. My own daughter is in Sweden, she is doing a sabbatical. So a fourth generation child of an indentured labourer is doing sabbatical in Sweden in the faculty of law. I think one can fairly say that notwithstanding or in spite of the difficulties and there were many that they went through. There was a - one does get - a perseverance, I believe in this, to be better than what they were and more than that I think it would be less than the truth if I were not to admit to myself that they had to justify for themselves, that having left India they didn't leave India for peanuts.

So with that kind of an extended family or within that context where I grew up, in my growing up itself nothing was but full of colour, hence the understanding that we were kids, but in a neighbourhood that knew no barriers. So whilst I came and slept in a house which is essentially my parent's home, I could wrap up with them two to a bed or three to a bed, whatever.

Conscious time would have meant at that stage that you are interfaced with a wider group of people. In a rural area like Inanda: at that stage without electricity, without tarred roads, without reticulated water. They were fairly, relative to the times, affluent - not the kind of affluence that you see today - but I guess once you felt the livelihood that you'd accumulated once you would have been considered to be a rich man.

I grew up also in another kind of dynamic, where my father employed people not only who were of Indian origin as a tractor driver, or the *induna*, or shop assistant. But in his sugar fields he employed migrant workers, at that time from the area which was then called Pondoland. As it was the practice at the time of divide and rule most of his sugar workers, his field workers, were from Pondoland. I grew up in that context also when I as a young person 15, 16, 14, 13 years of age would be interacting with labour who - we were of the same age. I don't think for children there was a distinction between the race, we were just kids looking in each other's eyes and playing with each other.

So today when I sit in Parliament there is one big agony that I do suffer, because I do not know which one of my colleagues seated in parliament with me in the ANC or which one of my compatriots seating in the opposition [benches] of African origin could be the grandchild of one of those migrant workers from Pondoland. We have so many from the Eastern Cape sitting in Parliament. I don't know and when I look around their faces I try to trace the similarity or similarities between the faces that I knew then and who could be sitting here with a similar face. It's an impossible task. I also knew them by their first names. I didn't know their surnames and I doubt it very much if my father himself knew the surnames of the people who worked for him. Perhaps he did.

IAIN: Do you think other MP's do the same?

MEWA: I don't know, I really don't, but this I do know. When I look into the eyes of my colleagues and my comrades in the ANC sitting in Parliament and outside of the Parliament; when I work outside to mobilise people to do whatever work needs to be done, I often wonder whom am I working with. That part of my childhood is in fact very dim but it does haunt me. I don't know if it is an unconscious reaction from my very young days to do what I did, perhaps this was at the back mind I don't know. I hope it was one of those conversations to redress a wrong done to migrant workers.

IAIN: The issue of migrants has been so crucial; sticking in your memory for a very long time, remembering the fact that migrant labourers helped make your father's prosperity.

MEWA: Well you know when we talk of, when I for instance mobilise people in my earlier 20s when I began taking a stand, a political stand against migrant workers in the mines and in the sugar industry. I knew deep down in me what I was talking about nobody was going to theorise about the effects of migrant workers on human beings, nobody was going to say to me that the dehumanisation of human beings did not take place as a result of the practice of migrant labour. I live through that as a beneficiary of that. And when I left home and said to my father before I reached 18 that I cannot live like this. I knew that he knew what I was talking about.

[TOWARDS THE END OF THE CASSETTE SOUND QUALITY BECOMES VERY POOR]

IAIN: It is central to your writings too. There is your relationship with you father, and your childhood life.

MEWA: Well you know my first novel is called *Waiting to Live*. It was published in America in the year 1986. The setting of this novel is Inanda. S it's rather a contradiction in terms that my title of my book is *Waiting to Live*, I don't know how a person who does not live can wait and how the waiting is done when the person is not living. But yes, you are correct. I think I was one of those privileged children, the child of a person of Indian origin living in Inanda. Yes it is true that I grew up with Siphso Dube which is the eldest child of John L. Dube who was not very much older than me - about two or three years older. I grew up with his elder brother. My father had a very close relationship with the Dube family.

TAPE 1 SIDE 2

IAIN: You were talking about your father's relationship with Dube.

MEWA: My father too was a fortunate man in that he had a business relationship both with the old man Dube - from the time he was the editor and owner of *Ilanga laseNatal* . He drove past our home every day, stopped every now and then, had a cup of tea at home, and moved on. And because of that friendship I guess after his death maybe my father believed that he owed an obligation, or he had an obligation he had to fulfil to the demands of a friendship to his widow. He facilitated the processes for her to become a bus owner, to the best of my recollection - I may be wrong. I would like to believe that Mrs Dube, the widow of the first president general of the African National Congress, was the first African women to be a bus owner, a bus transport operator. I am not saying that it is good to be a rich person. Don't get me wrong.

I am not saying that Mrs Dube was in any way deficient when her husband was just an editor of the *Ilanga laseNatal* and had a relatively smaller income. He had a good income, but relatively a smaller income. I am not saying that at all, but what I do say and what I want to repeat and when we talk of empowerment today I think of my father in both negative and positive ways. The negative one was the exploitation of migrant labour, but on the other hand he did not hesitate for a single moment to empower people like Mrs Dube, and old man Shembe, to become successful business persons. And I hold no apology for any such conduct because when I see today the concept of empowerment being pronounced by my own party and my government and which we insist on: the concept of affirmative action, which I insist on, for previously disadvantaged and dispossessed people, which I subscribe to, there was no law demanding such conduct from the likes of my father. Maybe it was to develop a working relationship between competing forces, so be it, because I cannot understand what would be the meaning of the likes of Cyril Ramaphosa's New Africa Investment Limited earning just 1% of the total asset base of Anglo American only. An act positively being viewed: it is affirmative action, it is empowerment. Negatively viewed it is having a black face to a white enterprise, racial justification to continue the system by incorporating few people of the previously disadvantaged group and to have this entire exercise called black empowerment. I mean we are nine years down the line today, what percentage of the total economy is run by black people?

And when I realise today that when Mrs Dube became a bus owner and when Mr Shembe became a cane grower what were the forces working them, who were the forces? Was it the South African Sugar Association who came to make Shembe a sugar planter. Was it the transport department of the government of Natal at that stage that helped Mrs Dube become a bus owner?

IAIN: Shembe, Dube, these are powerful people, not just in Inanda, but with a wider importance.

MEWA: It was there, yes on hindsight yes, the role of the church, the American Board Mission at the Inanda Seminary for African Girls on the one hand and its close proximity - almost spitting distance away - to Dr Gumede, old man Dr Gumede. He had a surgery and the postoffice. Not the Gumede who is the health director in KwaZulu-Natal, I am talking of somebody much more senior in the days of Dr JL Dube.

IAIN: Gumede, Archie's father?

MEWA: No, that was AG Gumede. This is another Gumede. He was there close around the road; further down we had AWG Champion, then around AWG Champion we had the neighbourhood of the Haffajee family, who operated in that area as shopkeepers - a shop popularly known as Mamba Store. Then further

down the road we had the Ohlange Institute and then Shembe's and then further down the road towards Durban in the periphery of Inanda you had my father's settlement on the one hand and across the road was the Phoenix settlement. So my father's property was across the road from Phoenix settlement. It was only a road that separated.

At a particular time in history these people were contemporaries. In 1914 when people like Ghandi left back for India as MK Ghandi, my own father was 18 or 19 years of age then. So they knew who they were sending back to India. At that stage my father was no more than a little lad working for somebody else as a shopkeeper's assistant in that area. In the afternoons he grew potatoes. Plant potatoes - 10 potatoes in the morning, reap them and sell them, and go back to work, and come back. This was the routine according to information given to me by them.

So by 1914 my father was just another worker, he himself not employed as he was working as in a family unit, planting potatoes and selling potatoes and working as a shop assistant for the Mahommeds and Ibrahims who are still operative today. Their shops are now in Phoenix.

At that stage in that historical conjunction, yes it will only be the naïve or the cynic who would say that Inanda was not the cultural bed of an ethos that we [have] today in South Africa, as we are trying to make a way of life. The spirit of reconciliation then, and the kind of reconciliation now, the kind of co-existence then with all its [INAUDIBLE] the kind of co-existence we talk of today with all its woes. Yes it is true that Inanda was catalytic if not the crucible of this kind of consciousness.

IAIN: Hence your comments about when Mandela chose to vote in Inanda?

MEWA: Well you do not know what a proud moment it was for me as one who hails from Inanda for Mandela to have done that, I didn't understand the character or courage to be standing beside him if could use that word. I was there and had the right to be there and nobody could stop me. Even Mr Mandela could not stop me to say to you, thank you for coming to my home town to cast your first democratic vote as a father of our nation, because the father of the African National Congress comes from here.

Yes it is true I do feel a sense of justified pride that I hail from there. Inanda was not God's chosen place. It is a place chosen by human beings [INAUDIBLE] historical accidents at best well it happened, it happened that was long there. And not anything especially about me, but something about that place.

IAIN: Which clearly you understood [INAUDIBLE]

MEWA: Just to illustrate what you are saying, with all the limitations of a young man's understanding. When I in turn became a counter hand as an employee, I was one of those fortunate guys who had been sensitive to my immediate environment [INAUDIBLE] and interaction, with the children thereby interacting with other forces from the outside. Because of the views that I held, which were not very popular views in my family: the view of non-racialism, the view of coexistence was not a very popular view like any middle class family in this case an Indian family living in Inanda. But this ethos was an overwhelming ought to have been an overwhelming ethos, it was not so amongst our people - like the ethos of non-racialism, democracy and unity. Is the ethos that we want to create for everybody in South Africa. I must be naïve politically to believe that it is acceptably applied for everybody.

So therefore when I transplant myself in that era in the 50's and I see myself walking from my father's home where I lived - and my mother and my father were dead at that stage - in 1951 up to Ohlange Institute and interacting with the Matebeses who were teaching then at that school; with the Ngubane's son Jordan Ngubane. They were living almost on the border of Ohlange Institute further west and the family of my friend Manase Moerane, whose father was then a member or the president of the African Teachers Association. All these people came from there.

As an Indian person I used cook, I think, fairly well with due respect to modesty. I remember I used to cook for Alena and Jordan Ngubane, I used to cook for Manese Morane and his wife. Manese Moerane is the father of Advocate Moerane today. I knew him as a little kid toddling around. But I remember cooking in his caravan when he came back from Switzerland.

These things and more I remember. Going to church on Sunday mornings. Belonging to the Hindu faith, but I had to go to church with David Matebese whose voice and singing I loved. His wife Veronica Matebese became the professor in medicines somewhere in Oxford, had qualified as a doctor in Natal University late in the 50s and left for Oxford. Matebese himself left for Ghana. I think he is a teacher. And there are several others. So this interfacing with each other.

And in 1956/57, sometime before the end of 1957, I had a brilliant moment in my life when a group of us got together and we formed what we then called the Inanda Cultural Group. People present at that stage were the Jordan Ngubane, Donald Mazibuko, David Matabese, Don Kali and others, we were all present. They passed this through their families into today. I was the youngest of them all and they made me the

chairperson of that grouping and the only thing that I knew at that stage is that we have got to live together, for as long as we are committed to live together something inside me told me we need to know each other. For the first time in formal terms I began to know some 50 years ago 45/50 years ago what was the ethos that permeated African society. I wanted to find out what is this concept called the concept of the usage of land and not the ownership of land. I wanted to know what the meaning of an *ukhamba* is, when we share *ukhamba*, what is the significance of it? That when a host takes of it first and then shares it with those who passed by or come to him. In those days you had people like Leo Kuper and Mrs Cooper; academics who are doing whatever they had to do and they did what they had to do. I told you I knew Leo very well and I wanted to find out more. In that context I had already read Krige's *Social System of the Zulus*. That was an academic thing. I was a Zulus' neighbour. Krige was writing from the towers of the university, and the towers from the 5th floor of the university interviewing people. I was not used to interviewing people. I lived in Inanda and when I realised that the customs and habits around childbirth are so fundamental to those that belonged to what I then called my community, and with the customs and habits during funerals so similar, both at birth and at death, I began to wonder as to who the hell am I? What is it that separates me and separates the other from me, what is it that separates me from others besides the colour of my skin and perhaps a bit of racial arrogance and perhaps a little kind of holiness which was considered to be peculiar to anyone group - in this case Indians. By then I had grown up to realise that we could live as neighbours because we had begun to live [like this] in the 40s. In my conscious youth days a celebration of *Divali* and *Eid*: *Divali* for the Hindus and *Eid* for the Muslims, they were done at one venue in one school called the Inanda State Aided School - in those days called the government aided community school. But they were done together until 1947 and they divided. The Partition had happened and that spilled over in South Africa. But until then those two communities could celebrate *Divali* together could share things together. And I realised one omission that at Christmas all of us could do this. The manual worker - Africans - and Hindus were incorporated in the Christmas celebrations but as somebody outside of the fold. Somebody who could not celebrate this. Together, we laughed together, and yet I realised the laughter amongst African people was louder and more spontaneous than anything that I have experienced around ourselves and I realised as to who these people were who are laughing, I used to wonder, I had the opportunity to move around because I was somewhat by then more literate than others because my father had not done Standard Two but he had succeeded in sending us to high school. In the late 40s I was already at the high school and these things must have influenced me to know about it.

IAIN: Your book and your childhood, and as a teenage with your father ...

MEWA: Subconsciously a humble tribute to the village, to what you people called the Inanda Valley. In my mind it is a mount, in my mind it is the peak, in physical terms it is not a valley, in my mind in terms of ideas, values, it has heights put very politely second to none in my country. I am one of those historically privileged people. I was born and grew up there and I feel very sorry and indeed very, very sorry for those of our people who couldn't and didn't take advantage to rise from the momentum and the floor of Inanda. And this I do not hesitate to say that even kith and kin fail to touch and take advantage of that ethos. Inasmuch I am this glowing picture of Inanda, it must never be recorded in the diaries not a word of some of the most insensitive and vulgar practices of racism at the hands of Indian people or people of Indian origin towards indigenous African people at the hands of indigenous people to other indigenous people and not be constructed as racism. That must be constructed as a class structured exploitative practice.

So and as much as I am giving you this beautiful ethos that rose in Inanda that ethos can only be seen in the perspective of what also was in Inanda. Just as the intensity of light can only be measured by the depth of darkness but the depth of darkness can be measured by the intensity of light so do ideas can be measured and perhaps grappled with in a similar fashion.

IAIN: And those dynamics reflect themselves in your family ...

MEWA: Very much so, very much so. Because the funny thing is that it was talk like this, whilst I sit in parliament today, that is talk of non-racialism. I cannot deny the existence of a practice in my own family: it was the domestic assistance of those of African origin who would wash my clothes, who would gather the vegetables, who would wash the vegetables, who would wash the dishes from which we have eaten, who would not be allowed to eat at the same table. Now these had had two practices which militated against quality. One was race, perhaps racial arrogance in part of my family, and including me, and the other one was class.

I have just come from morning tea this morning when I had morning tea at the home of very dear friend who happens to be African, and I doubt very much that the lady who served this tea, who is Africa, has ever had tea with this friend of my in that home. I don't think so, I don't think so, and he is my friend. So class stratification is one dimension, class classifications in another. Now what is it I have to do and say to my brothers and sisters who do not think like me today. What is it that I must do and say to my father who is dead and gone, to my mother who is dead and gone who in fact practiced racism? What is it that I must I do?

IAIN: Because ...

MEWA: Because what I am doing today, what I am doing today is this, I am reaching out, I am extending my hand, I am escorting my colleagues to extend hands to accommodate those very people who repressed and oppressed with the instrument of law, the army, the police and economic control. And I am left with a moral dilemma: how harsh must I be in my evaluation of my own life in relationships with the lives of my parents and other members of my family. If I can today reach out for the sake of South African not burning to even those people who have murdered my son let alone repression. If I can say to them let the past be the past they have a future to grapple you must not forget the past, but let us make choices today that would make tomorrow better than today and even the past.

In that context where do I place my parents? Who am I therefore if in my anger at times I judge them? Who am I? Do I reflect and do I go through a period of remorse, when I said to my father when I was age 18 `Thank you for giving me this education, thank you for bringing me up, I do not want to fight with you, but I cannot love you. And therefore I have now decided to leave you.` I have no right to do so in terms of the laws of the land, until you are not a minor.

There are moments when I reflect on this and I ask myself, who the hell was I to pass a moral judgement on my father? To say to him that I can no longer, for as long you employ a migrant labour. When today with all my consciousness in the 70 years behind me I am prepared live in places. There is contradiction on the one hand and in some measure a proud moment in another that I could have the strength of character to say this to my father. It was on the bases of that strength of character that I could say to the Nats during the days of deepest depression, I have succumbed to live in a group area but I would fight you wherever I can.

So with this kind of a - for the uninitiated reader it would be confusing, it would be contradictory because indeed the current situation in South Africa was to have a clear cut vision. For some interpreters it may be so for what is happening - it must be confusing, it must be contradictory - that how do I sit cheek by jowl with those very people who laid the foundations for migrant labour, those very people who laid the foundations for indentured labour, those very people who laid the foundations for exploitation of race as a matter of control and bureaucracy. How?

IAIN: And?

MEWA: I guess there is absolute truth in it. I didn't expect my father and my mother to murder me. I did not expect them to punish me. They could have, but they didn't. In turn when I did leave I went to live with an aunt who was a very poor woman. I then later on realised, months later of taking refuge in her house - not refuge but shelter. I did realise months later it was my father who has given me this gift of values

[TOWARDS THE END OF THE CASSETTE SOUND QUALITY BECOMES VERY POOR]

TAPE 2 SIDE 1

IAIN: Mewa, we were talking about your mother not having any education.

MEWA: Yes, my mother was completely illiterate and she reminds me of a very, very nice incident. We had a neighbouring farmer whose was an English-speaking white man. He had the lease to run the farm for another elderly person called Mr Miles and this man's name was Mr Phillip and there was some problem between us as neighbours in which my mother had to intervene. It was after my father's death so she is the senior most in the family. And I remember this so distinctly. This is a very important episode in my life. When my mother had to communicate to Mr Philip, she spoke in *isiZulu fanagalo* and when Mr Phillip had to communicate with my mother he spoke in *fanagalo*.

IAIN: Was that the only language?

MEWA: That was the only language available at the time because even African people were speaking *fanagalo* at that stage. English and a good proficiency in an African language is a recent phenomenon where you have it emerging especially in the urban areas in the last 15 or 20 years. I think with the rise of the black consciousness movement on the one hand and the emergence of an assertion of the African personality which is a very important thing which happened at that stage. So I recall my mother as a high personification of illiteracy and verbally not proficient in the English language. I am not [in] any way implying that she was literate in *Hindi* grammar: her mother tongue. She was not literate in neither one of them.

IAIN: And she would have been [INAUDIBLE]

MEWA: No she was *Hindi* speaking from [INAUDIBLE] She could speak, both, very fluently. That was as her mother tongue because she picked that up from grandparents from my mother's side and from my parents from father's side.

IAIN: And she had been born in Natal?

MEWA: Yes not very far from Inanda. My father was born Inanda, my mother was born in what is part of Phoenix, called New Farm, but her family moved out of her family, afterwards to Merebank. I remember my maternal grandparents to be living outside Merebank I don't remember them to be living outside Inanda. So from my conscious days in my conscious time I remember them to be from Merebank.

IAIN: ...

MEWA: So much so that every son of his, not daughters - daughters of his went up to high school - he had said to my brother just before and myself that I want you to be doctors and he actually put aside £2 000 in our names to go university. Which we didn't. But by then in 1949 the University of Natal Medical School had started - 1949/50. He had not died at that stage and both my brother immediately before me and I were at high school at that stage at Shastri College. And I loved his analyses, so the one big thing on hindsight I realised that he was right and I was wrong. Having been so educated our contribution was to be so much higher that I become a financial consultant which is part of the commercial world.

IAIN: That was the eldest son, your older brother.

MEWA: No the brother immediately before me who was number four I was number five of the living ones.

IAIN: Six sons.

MEWA: Yes six sons. I am number five.

IAIN: [INDISTINCT]

MEWA: No the first one was a son, the second one was a daughter then one, two, three, four, five sons then a daughter and then another son and the last one was a daughter. But my eldest brother died after he was married in 1937. I didn't include him in the six, in fact seven. He died in 1937: the first born son died of TB - in those days there was no cure for it. But that is another incident that I must talk to you about. How as a child - I was born in 1932 and my brother died in 1937 - how father had to buy a house in Dundee to change the climate for him to get better in a dry climate and how a chap who happened to be a very close

friend of my late eldest brother - the person's name was Mahomed Khan, belonging to the Islamic faith. My brother was isolated from his family and was looked after by this man. Even my mother and my father, who were in Dundee at the time, and I as the youngest child in that period - I was taken there with them because I was the youngest at that time. So I lived with them and I still remember maybe this is where my inclination to music came in because I used to [INDISTINCT] My brother was a singer and musician of some degree I think for that age. He could play many instruments naturally he never went to school and he was never tutored on this. And much later, 10 years later down the line, when I went to high school in 1947/8 and we were to be x-rayed then to establish our health at college I followed the queue and I was told to stand aside in my agony. In great panicking my father arrived and a certain Mr Anderson said sorry you better take your son to a doctor, his lungs are not right are not normal. And for the first time I realised that I had holes in my lungs and it meant that I had TB and had cured naturally. I never went for medication. I was one lucky guy.

IAIN: Were you smoking then?

MEWA: And I am smoking now. So I still *have* a hole in my lung, I am jumping with it but...

IAIN: No! And your father?

MEWA: I remember him, saying this very distinctly, very distinct. That `If only it could have been an instrument that I can leave you, it is not my work but your education. And the day you are educated you will have an instrument to fight whatever you want to fight, and the only time that a white man will listen to you is when you speak to him in his language and tell him very nicely where to get off.` Because at that stage the wagons pulled by horses in the streets of Durban were done by white people. My father was a successful businessman and transport operator. But I remember him calling this wagon driver `sir` and when I asked him why do you call him a `sir` he said that is the only language he understands and the day you are educated and you stand up to him to beat him you have to be better than him. I understood what he was saying.

IAIN: And by the way your father had an office in Durban?

MEWA: In Prince Edward Street. The exact number was 79A, 79 Prince Edward Street. That was his office in Durban. He successfully managed to... even though all his trading was done in Inanda, but his transport

business brought him into Durban. He had to deliver goods for merchants into the different areas of Inanda, to different customers.

IAIN: He moved from the small scale sugar cane farmer into a businessman.

MEWA: Yes he had a compound in a state at such a time - his compound - in which migrant workers lived in those days but subsequently I realised this is despicable. You cannot have compounds of this nature in which human beings live. Yes he owned an estate, he became a shopkeeper, shop owner, a garage, a bus owner and transport business of goods. He used to take goods and vegetables planted by the local farmers, Indian farmers essentially, to the Indian market in Warwick Avenue. And his trucks used to come back never empty with the goods for the shopkeepers in the Inanda area. All of them from the same as downwards from the another Dube in a place called Mapondweni - not any relative of the JL Dube but he is a shop owner in a place called Mapondweni at the foothills of hill. He used to traverse the Mngeni river and get through to a place called Khumalo's Store and then in the Mzinyathi area in different directions actually. These were where his trucks used to take goods from the merchants in Durban and deliver it to them.

IAIN: And your father is one of the biggest Indian sugar cane farmers of his day.

MEWA: Yes I think he would rank in that category of farmers who left a very large sugar estate on his death. About, well within the first three or four larger sugar growers in the province in the Indian community.

IAIN: Now this in the 30s and 40s.

MEWA: I think his massive accumulation came up to the mid 30s until 1950 and he died in 1951. There was no accumulation thereafter. In fact there was a loss, completely lost up there.

IAIN: [INDISTINCT]

MEWA: Cannot exclude it. Oh yes I mean our economy, in respect of his shop and what supply and demand was there, and the demand for this was going phenomenal for what he planted. I mean, I could walk into my father's farm with my friends and eat oranges and citrus fruit, pines in the season of

pineapples, and bananas, paw paws, and jet fruit and the Natal grown avocados, so a whole variety of citrus and especially citrus. A very large supply of citrus fruit to the market and bananas.

IAIN: Mewa, surely with a man of this stature is mixing with the other influential Natal Indians - a small group, but influential - any sense of this?

MEWA: Yes, from the sublime, if I can call him sublime: from the Dube's, and the Shembe's and the Champion's on the one hand. I remember this very distinctly, sometime in 1948, 1949 he was driving me around in his Dodge motorcar. There was a meeting in Durban. The so-called elite in the Indian community was present and the chief guest there was the person who became the prime minister of Mauritius, Sir Sewsagar Ramgoolam. His father had been the mayor of a town in the same province in Indian as my father. They could speak the same language. [INDISTINCT] you know, Sir Ramgoolam was not knighted then, I don't know if he was. He could speak in English but as a young person I could see this kind of interaction in a home in Mayville.

IAIN: Were they first speaking in vernacular?

MEWA: They have spoken their vernacular and in English, but I remember my father saying speak in vernacular and I guess because he came from the same - they hailed from the same province of Bihar he found more empathy with this man.

But over and above that I think the sugar barons, as class stratification would go, while as they might meet in their offices, but never socially. Whereas the Dube's and the Shembe's could be socially and on the business level. So there was a distinction but I cannot put it past the social practice of people in that category to say that they did not have any racially attitudes. I think they did. I think they had some veneration for the power which is manifested by the white person and some indifference and looking down upon people who are lesser people, according to them, because they are their employees and of a different colour - in this case black.

IAIN: The Natal Indian elite. Who was your father talking to?

MEWA: My first meeting with the person academic who became a principal of Shastri College, the late Dr MB Naidoo, was in my father's sitting room when I brought tea for them. [INDISTINCT] So this respect accorded to people with education as seen by others to Dr MB Naidoo.

I am mentioning him in particular as years down the line he went one way and I went another way, even though he was my principal at Shastri College for a while. He went into system politics at that stage and I went into opposition of politics. And he became a trustee Phoenix Settlement in the 60s: early 60, 61, 62, 63 I became the organising secretary of Phoenix Settlement. I don't think he ever forgot our first meetings, which I didn't.

When I got banned in 1965 I was living at Phoenix Settlement and because he was a trustee he had easy access, an inhibited access to Phoenix. And I think it was an advisory body, I am not certain what the body was called in the Indian community at that stage. But when he visited me he brings me a pocket of oranges, a tray of peaches, lots of fruit and only fruit. I think always fruit and he never hesitated to say this is for you. I was a young person in my early 30s then and he was already quite an elderly person at that stage. But I think he realised that this is my colleague's son. I remember him saying in that context to my mother-in-law at that stage because I had begun living at Phoenix Settlement. He used to call my mother-in-law ``Ben`. He said in losing a daughter to this man you have found a son in him. Now I think that is very complementary coming from him. My mother was alive at that stage, I said no he must go and talk to my mother, who insisted that I come here in preference for me staying with her. At least this way I can be nearer [INAUDIBLE] because I was living in Durban after I got married.

So the neighbours who were people like [INAUDIBLE]. I recall lots of quarrels with him. For whatever reason we quarrelled.

IAIN: From early days.

MEWA: From early days, but yes even in the 1940s. I remember this very distinctly that when Mahatma Gandhi's ashes came to South Africa to be immersed in the Indian Ocean the two cars used from Inanda were my father's and Manilal Gandhi's. I drove my father's car with him and some of his and Manilal's friends. Manilal and his kids were in the other car. We drove to the Point where we took the boat and we went to the Indian Ocean to immerse the ashes. From that level he had his, I don't know what do you call it, class determined?

IAIN: He is man, your father, of status.

MEWA: Yes a man of status. He had become in his own life time, the guarantor of three schools. They were called `manager` in those days, but he was undoubtedly the guarantor of three different schools. I think his social consciousness was there in most ways only for the Indian people though.

IAIN: Understandable, how much energy from those men of status went into serving the needs of the Indian community.

MEWA: You see in those times status was determined by two patterns. One pattern was the educated and the other pattern was the moneyed. Most educated people then, when I use the word educated I mean trained people, came from the indentured labour grouping. For the vast majority it was a rare experience. In our experience we had one doctor, Sedat, who came in from an `A` class of people, but you will have a whole range of other people: teachers, academics, whoever they were: the MB Naidoo's and who all. Such people were children of indentured labourers in Natal at that stage.

Whereas the Grey Street complex was dominated by the passenger Indian, who essentially came from the state of Gujarat. So the indentured labourer, who came from Bihar, Gujarat, and so on via Calcutta, they were in the sugar fields and in the Magazine Barracks in Merebank after the termination of their indenture, but a whole range of people become teachers. Do you know that the teaching profession in the Indian community was a very highly respected position to be held in the community? This is why when you think back some at the number of schools build by the Indian community, and the number of graduates that have come from them. There was a stage in our history that there were more Indian graduates in South Africa than the rest combined according to the population ratios. The element of building schools until 1961, 84% of all schools were built by the local Indian people, so the question arises: `Who were these people?' Given the late ML Sultan. ML Sultan was the child of an indentured labourer. You take the schools in Verulam. I remember my mother, after my father's death. At the Verulam High School she was one of the guests. I don't know why they chose her, but I believe there was a contribution from our father to education. Our schools were built by the community.

So until 1961, 84% or there about all schools that housed Indian people were build the by the community and thereafter the state. The question arises: `Was this a political act or not?' In my view it is more than a political act, it is an act that lays the foundations of a society to be born. It is not an act for the seizure or sharing or getting of power, which is transitory. Education can never be transitory as it is there or it is not there. And this is what our forbearers did for us. I am not saying that didn't happen in other communities. It happened in white communities, for different reasons. It happened in the African community in terms of

formal education through the churches linked to conversion and religion, in a whole different agenda. It happened because those who were educated could have the vote and therefore could buy liquor. I mean in the Western Cape, in the Cape at that stage the only people who could buy liquor in the black communities were the people who could vote and people who could vote in those days had to have an education as well.

It is slightly different in the Indian community who could vote in Natal at a particular stage, but they invested very highly in education. As a result of which perhaps one needs a bit understanding as to why the rebellion of 1976 was not aided and abetted on the same basis in the Indian sector. 1976 was a phenomenon in term of Soweto burning - unprecedented. Where schools were burned down, where beer halls and administration offices were burned down. I can understand the beer halls and administration offices and other such institutions. In 1976 I wrote an article on the Soweto revolt and between 1976 and 1982 when Natal erupted, I warned the leadership. I am on record for having warned the leadership of the congress movement, because I was banned and house arrested at that time, that any intervention no matter how fruitful in the long run, if ever this calls for the burning of schools of the so-called Indian people, or by the Indian people, will alienate it from the entire history irrevocably. On the one hand it would put point to whatever efforts we have made when this revolutionary option to educate people was made by our forefathers. Therefore even if one were to see a single windowpane broken as an integral part of this kind of revolt it will militate against the mobilisation of the entire community.

So we were in a difficult situation but we had to make the choice. I as one individual had advised the leadership then. I am not going to say that fortunately the leadership in Natal was arrested at that stage; they were all locked up and sent away to some prison outside Benoni in what we called the Transvaal at that stage. But I didn't hesitate to send them the food, mobilise the food for them in prison, whilst I was banned and house arrested, but this is the significance of education.

IAIN: I understand that, but is it not the case that people like your father mixed in [INAUDIBLE]

MEWA: Look I am talking not by sucking my thumb of the kind of people that my father had as associates. For example they were people like the late advocate Christopher, who was in those days called a moderate leader; the late Mr AI Kajee, the so-called moderate leader; the late Mr PR Pather, the so-called moderate leader. My father belonged to that age group and that category of persons, so that when my father died I think Kajee had preceded him, but Christopher was alive. Pather was alive. I know that PR Pater was alive. I saw them all. Manial Gandhi was alive, and they were all present at my father's funeral. 1951 right, but I think Kajee died before that. I have a feeling.

IAIN: These were important figures.

MEWA: I would think so because they were the pacesetters in many things ...

[TOWARDS THE END OF THE CASSETTE SOUND QUALITY BECOMES VERY POOR]

TAPE 2 SIDE 2

IAIN: Your father so-called and the ...

MEWA: I think my father had become part of the Indian bourgeois. I believe his gravitation to like-minded people was there, as it happens in all societies. Now his associates to the best of my knowledge at that stage became those people who became his equals. I do not believe he will forget those people from whom he came, he had relations with that category of persons from which he himself came, but his neighbours - our neighbours - were people of lesser means, albeit that they belong to the Indian community, that they had, and their fathers had come in the same boat as my grandfather had come. They use to call him *jahaaj bhaijon*, meaning `brothers on a ship`. They settled here and the respect that they had to each other was of that basis to such an extent that we couldn't make eyes at their daughters or their sons could not make eyes at our sisters, even if they were not relatives but because they were brothers on a ship coming to a single destination and they ensured that this relationship remained. His colleagues for instance: in that area naturally there are three or four other Indian bus owners in Inanda. All these guys became bus owners. And some of them still are, so that these categories of persons naturally bind to each other. As the academics would, as the educated would, as the unemployed would.

IAIN: What one is seeing now is the series of community structures have been built largely funded by Indian business. They became building blocks.

MEWA: The modern Indian community is no different from any other communities anywhere in the world. Marx would describe it as a theory but I think Marx was rooted in some ways in the economic realities of his time. The questions of rising expectations. The Indian community in South Africa is no exception, in a foreign land, away from home what were their expectations and if their expectations was a better economic life for themselves - which India at the time could not provide - and British imperialism by importing

labour to Natal could provide, they must have said `So be it`. Now we have got to rise from where we are and it's up to us to become indentured labourers type for five years in terms of an indenture, is going to be the price that we have to pay for us to be different and better than what we are, then so be it. We must be better from what we are. Starting from birth to the foundation of a dispensation which is not available to the indigenous African people at the time because by 1913 they were dispossessed of the land.

So when my grandfather took possession of the land in KwaZulu-Natal and got title deed to it, whose land was it? On the basis of that there is for me a political anachronism but an understanding economically in that he was no different from any other person in pursuit of economic betterment. Today Marx would say or the economists too `ride the devil to achieve your objectives`, and all capitalists do that anywhere in the world regardless of race, ride the devil to achieve the economic objective. I mean when you abandon all feeling to become cold and calculated that is what the capitalist does.

Now to what extent that was tempered by a community feeling, to what extent it was tempered by a social responsibility is in many ways illustrated by the experiences and expressions by the likes of my father's generation. I am not saying they are a specific kind of people, but I think they succeeded in tempering even though that tempering was in relationship to only the Indian community. That could have been to modify their own consciences if at all, that could have been to reinforce the social bondage that they have when they came here, that could have been also motivated by security in numbers of being together because by then they have rooted themselves in South Africa. They have planted their religious sticks, built their religious temples, fairly extensively. When you saw a Hindu-speaking home with a red flag flying outside you realised this is a follow up of a particular deity belonging to a particular language group.

When you visited Newlands or Merebank you saw these temples in these estates long before the moneyed passenger Indian built any such institution, because the mobility for those indentured labourers was not really there. There was very little optional mobility for the indentured labourer here. The passenger Indian who came to do business essentially around the Grey Street area, he didn't live Magazine Barracks, he didn't live in Inanda, he lived in a flat above his shop or there about or in that environment. And he still had a home in India. Indeed the indentured labourers also had a home in India, but the kind of mobility to go to and fro there was not there. So he or she had to develop within an environment in isolation because the distinctive deep lines between the passenger Indian and the non-passenger Indian in South Africa was best seen in Durban. In some ways it is still best seen in Durban. It has nothing with race, it has got to do with something, with some kind of consciousness that I am better than you are and I have more money than you have.

But that person who bought from these shops in the Grey Street complex were the people living in the sugar estates in Clairwood, in Merebank, in Inanda, in Magazine Barracks. They provided their customers with the curries, and saris, and the material and the prayer goods and whatever they required, these are the guys who supplied it and those are the guys who bought it.

No doubt, I in 2001 December to 2002 January took my wife and one son and went to Behar to pay respects to the people, the people in the village and the relatives who are there. And I suddenly realised that I was setting in Parliament here. A third generation! I am not even in the dust of these people's feet, in terms of their hospitality, generosity, warmth and comradely feel. But perhaps distance and time could have heightened. But when I got back here I told my other children please pack your bags, get your passports ready I want to take you to India to Behar to your great grandfather's village. And I took my eldest son, Imtoo. We spent two weeks together in India and I took him to this village in Baria. I've been corresponding with them. My father has never been there, my one brother has been there, my three uncles have been there and my father didn't go back. He was never there. My grandfather went back only once, sometime in the 1930s, only once. He built a school there which stands ramshackle at the moment and that is it. There is no affinity so to speak that is making me more Indian than being a South African. I am a South African.

IAIN: But the third generation is more kin than the second generation.

MEWA: Only because you want to find out as who you are, you want to find out your past and I don't think anyone person can go forward without understanding where one person is come from.

IAIN: What news did they get after arrival here?

MEWA: I think there was some kind of nostalgia amongst that crowd of people at that period. I cannot be more specific than that.

IAIN: Because there couldn't have been a correspondence.

MEWA: Oh! Yes I am sure there was correspondence otherwise I wouldn't have found them. I mean there was correspondence then, there was correspondence thereafter and there is correspondence still and it was a

correspondence that I picked up from an aunt of mine that I succeeded to this placed called Baruna in Behar.

Now this is affinity, a family affinity, in some ways it can be interpreted and must be interpreted as a cultural affinity. I am South African. There is no doubt of the fact. Nobody can take even my South African-ness from me anytime or anywhere. Neither can any South African take away from me that aspect of my Indian-ness which makes me. I am composite whole, I am not an alien here. In some ways I am an alien in India. But I am in no doubt a child of Baruna because I cannot deny me myself my own grandfather. So I might be and I think in so

IAIN: Can you remember your father ever making a comment which summarises his views on Britain and the British Raj?

MEWA: I think the most graphic thing that sticks out in my mind is in the post 1945 period, post 1943, 1944. I was at primary school then and the family has just split. My father had come away with his children into one little area, into one little space of a family property. But he ensured that he had a dining room big enough to seat himself and his six sons. My mother sometimes but not all times was always with the ladies in terms of the family dining characteristics of the time. Now and then a guest or two, but not one of us were allowed to eat our supper without being present together and that is the time we exchanged ideas. I remember fighting over trivial things, like pinching from another's plate to put on your own plate. A better looking piece of meat or vegetable and gulping it and the others noticing it and pretending as if they have not seen, waiting for the other the person from whom you have stolen to react. It was as light as that, and then your father is looking at this.

And now when I think back about those little incidents, I can imagine how happy he must have felt that his children could do that. Some of us were starting up, some of us were sometimes curious and couldn't be jocular all the time. But I remember one incident, I think it is just before India got her independence and just before Subhas Chandra Bose had died. One of my brothers was in hospital and he had said something, at dinner table. The following morning my father asked him in the car what did you mean. I don't know what he said. I don't understand what he said. I remember my brother telling me - this brother is still alive by the way - `I'd like you to send me to India because I want to join the Indian national army`. He had to explain what the Indian national army was. And after that explanation when my father came back, I don't know what he did, how he did it, with whom he did it, but within weeks he had three major pictures in

frames hanging in our lounge. In the centre was Gandhi, in Gandhi's left was Bose, and on his right was Jawaharlal Nehru.

In the 40s, in 1947, I used to wear a Gandhi cap and I was at high school taking a group picture. This was in the nature of an identification with the liberation of India. I don't know to what extent that kind of liberation of India was related to South Africa, but when I think back to that period of time Monty Naicker and Yusuf Dadoo had not taken over the NIC. Albert Luthuli had not taken over the African National Congress at that point in history. But if that was the kind of consciousness about India and if a year or two later Monty Naicker and Yusuf Dadoo went to India and when they returned I am pretty certain after they returned their news must have reached to the people like my father.

So the consciousness could not have been completely immune to what was happening around them, nationally and internationally. But remember this. In 1949 while my father was still alive the Indian African riots took place. With the emergence of the Indian African riots where was this unity between African and Indian? Was it to be built in boardrooms; was it to be built in newspapers, or in rhetoric? There must have been some social base in areas like Mayville, there must have been some kind of relationship, there must have been a crucible for Indian African relationships. The Passive Resistance movement was launched in 1946 and it is five years after that my father died. This momentum must have grown, the emergence of the leadership of Monty Naickers had to happen. I don't know if my father was sensitised by it but knowing as I do what happened to all of us for him to send me to the congress high school in 1948, which opened its doors for the first time, and created a school because there were no high schools enough for people of Indian origin. And I was one of the first students to go there, MB Naidoo was the first principal there: all unpaid. So all these things accumulated must have given rise to a particular kind of consciousness in my own parents. In 1947 when India got her independence, all schools were mobilised in the Indian community. We gathered at Carries Fountain wearing Gandhi caps. 15th August, schools were closed, I don't know if it was a school holiday, but we were all at Curries Fountain singing the national anthem and singing freedom songs that were sung in India. We became an integral part of it.

Yes that generation of people saluted India for having become free, but they also noted, I am certain, that destiny speech by Nehru. I was not big enough then but in hindsight it can't have passed them by not to have noted that Indians living abroad were identifying themselves with the vast majority of people in the countries in which they lived. That India will never be free for as long as Africa is not free. I am sure it must have reached my father's ears. Well you can go one step further, even if my father and his friends in 1946 when Smuts facilitated direct representation in Natal and indirect representation in the central

parliament for people of Indian origin. I don't very candidly know whether my father supported that or not. I know it was rejected by the Indian community, I don't know to what extent it was a virulent part or cogent part of rejection nor do I know as to what extent was it a cogent part of the support for the NIC. Most likely it could be that given the racial connotations of the time it could have been that. But I am not prepared to put my head on the block. I only got to know about this when I went to high school and to university where decisions of the leadership of the Indian Congress stood at that stage. But in 1948 for him to immerse the ashes of Gandhi and to be part and parcel of the grouping, must say something to me.

IAIN: Tell me about that moment.

MEWA: I drove my father's car. My father sat in the front seat, a limp man - a person who was lamed because some injury or disease, I don't know. A man sat on the back seat. He had to stretch his legs out straight onto my father's seat on the leather. And I said to the man I think my father would be a bit uncomfortable. There was somebody else from Durban who sat on the other seat at the back. Manilal Gandhi and his family drove in their car because their children were very small so they could manage all of them in their car with their driver. We went up to the Point together. I remember it so distinctly because I was with them. I didn't know Mahatma Gandhi, I knew Mahatma Gandhi as a great guy, through the Gandhi caps or singing the songs made in his name. You know we venerated him mostly as a result of being told. I remember my school produced a play, whilst I was at primary school, a play on the freedom struggle in India. When you had personalities like Gandhi in their rooms; all these guy's portraits, the play was acted out on stage in Inanda, in Mayville, and in Verulam, where he had `Mother India` . Standing in front of the entire map of India, this women was chained. And this were done in the 1943, 1944, 1945 period.

IAIN: From Quit India onwards.

MEWA: Yes, my eldest brother who is now late, he played the role of Nehru, a cousin of mine played the role of Gandhi ...

IAIN: Now why ...

MEWA: All these things must not seriously but rather unconsciously leave some imprints on us.

IAIN: At the same time this is going your father ...

MEWA: Against all that background he also became to the best of my recollection the vice-president of the Natal Indian Cane Growers Association. You following me now. Moving on the economic ladder was one thing. But he did, I have seen a picture of him, either an official or vice-president or an executive member of Natal Indian Cane Growers Association. So those things were achievements during those days and those circumstances.

IAIN: What do you think, in relations ...

MEWA: I can't for a moment say that it was one of antagonism but it was a relationship of what can I get out of this situation, what can I get for myself out of the situation from these white people. Maybe I am wrong, maybe it was the opposite. `How can I beat these white people?` I don't know, it could be one of the questions that these whites know best.

IAIN: Or all of these.

MEWA: Or all of these. He is not an exceptional man in terms of whatever exceptional people are characterised by. But in some ways he was a remarkable man in that he could do the balancing act and know what was good for him, for his neighbours, for his community. It is a very curious position to be in at that stage, nothing, not to something but something is very substantial economically in terms of material things, emotionally in terms of a family structure, but I think within his life time he realised that his family will not be bound together because of economics only or empathy for a joint family. His one son left my father – he got married a year or so before my father died. The disintegration of the joint family began in his life time, this is all again due to industrialisation, urbanisation, western education and third generation children became educated in formal towns structured in English. And I can't say that they were the best custodians of Indian culture. I cannot say that my father or my grandfather was the best custodians of the ethos over the culture of India. I don't know whether they were, because I do not know how many Indians were remaining in India, of that generation who could have been the best projections of the ethos and culture of India, even though they remained there. I would not know where to place the reflection of the ethos and culture of India.

[INTERVIEW ENDS]

