

J.F. politically and to relate it to the issue of non racialism - is non racialism an important topic - is it something that's kind of an additional point about the liberation movement's framework of ideology, or does it fit centrally in - these are just some of the points I'm asking about - I just feel that with the time there's - I should maybe ask you to talk about your political development, highlighting the points where working with other race groups happened along the way - does that make sense or should I.....

M.N. Well, I can get started, and I suggest you feel free at any point, if you want me to, you know, expand or develop or deal further in any different respect, to do it - but it would help if you'd, you know - did perhaps, from time to time, put in a question so that I don't get, you know, unnecessarily involved in a particular feature.

J.F. Right - O.K., well, I could just start out by saying if you could tell me where and when you were born and what your family background was, and whether - if you could handle some of the issues of how your family raised you - did you see yourself as an Indian - did you see not getting involved with the African people - they were separate - and how did you transcend those South African kind of points of departure?

M.N. Yes, I think I can do that - I was born in an Indian family on the north bank of the Umgeni River in Durban a long time ago, in 1919 - it was a Hindu family on the whole a fairly orthodox religious family. I grew up like any other youngster - did not have in my early years very much contact either with white or with African, but with no attitudes developed against the family background.

While I was still a youngster we left this part of Durban and moved into a more central part of Durban, where our neighbours were actually white Afrikaans neighbours, and when I was nine my playmates were as much Indian as white..... ('phone)....

J.F. So your father was in what kind of work?

M.N. Yes, I was saying that, you know, I played just as much with Indian kids as with white kids - in that area there were no blacks - black Africans living - and I think it was about ten years old when I was brought sharply into conflict with the colour issue, because suddenly the parents of these white kids - and they included young white girls - stopped their children playing with us - and you must remember some of these kids were next door neighbours.

Of course we as kids ignored that, both the white kids, and we ignored the parents' prohibitions - they didn't understand it any more than we understood it - but after a little while it took effect, and for the first time it brought me face to face with the reality of a colour bar -

And perhaps at this point I can touch another aspect - my father was an Indian businessman and a merchant - for the Indian population reasonably well off at that time - he was also politically active - he was a descendant, just as my mother was a descendant, of indentured Indian labourers who had been brought from India to work in the sugar estates -

For Indians of that period he had reached a highest level of

M.N.

.... education available in the country, which was Standard Four, which is a recognised level of literacy. His political activity interested me as a kid. I didn't know very much but I was a very inquisitive little kid, and I suppose unconsciously it had an influence on my own mental development, and when I experienced later what happened there with our next door neighbours, it again had an unconscious affect upon me because I became very sensitive to the question of colour.

However I was not in any way involved politically until I was at high school. By this time I was rather sensitive on the question of colour. I had by this time become aware that my people were subjected to a great deal of discrimination in so many different walks of life.

I also came from a family background that was very proud, and I was aware that advantages were placed in the laps of white so that they were regarded and treated as people of superior abilities etc., but with my background I just rejected that out of hand - I wouldn't have any superiority simply on the ground of being white.

My political development was really beginning during this period, very defused, very confused - I knew nothing about any ideology - didn't even have any contact with any ideology - but in high school I began to develop political thinking, and just as I completed high school I joined the Youth Movement.

At that time this was known as the South African Youth Movement, which was founded by whites - it was essentially a social organisation, not political, and in Durban it had an Indian branch. We - the other Indians who were in that Youth Movement didn't remain in this body for more than about a year and a half.

We were all dissatisfied with it - not with the social activities, but by this time we questioned why the need for an Indian branch, and we decided that such a social organisation for Indians was not justifiable - we decided we needed a political youth organisation and we formed an Indian Youth League, which was political.

On the whole I was up to this time still inclined to be right of centre - much more - very much more of a nationalist than anything else - but this was a period of rapid political development, because the Youth League was formed in 1937. I was beginning to read a great deal on the political history of India, and I think that had a profound effect on my political development at that time.

I was widely read as far as English Literature went - I began to read a good deal about history all over the world....

J.F.

..... (Too faint, muffled)

M.N.

More out of a hunger for knowledge rather than anything else. I was a good student, and one of those kind of students who was never satisfied to find himself not knowing something. I was very active in school debates, but always I would want to be certain that I knew the facts about my subject - I was a very proud little kid - I'd never want to be bested by anybody in these intellectual matters - it - they - I find it very hard to take it if somebody told me that I didn't know what I was talking about on any item, and of course this had a profound

M.N. development on me politically too - even though my contact with Africans was very limited right up to this time, my yearnings for wanting to be part of a democratic system automatically took me to the position where political rights meant political rights for everybody, not just for Indians.

So you can see how very soon after this I joined a study group known as the - a liberal study group - which was an organisation of people - the youngsters of my generation - where we had regular discussions weekly - we would invite people, mainly Indian but also Coloured and also African, occasionally white, to come and speak to us, and of course it was not just lectures - it was part of our plan, which I don't know who thought it out or whether it was clearly thought out - but the lecturer would deliver his lecture, and he would have to submit himself thereafter to a discussion with no gloves on, and if he was somebody we didn't agree with he would certainly know -

We'd give and we'd take, but we were very young then - perhaps - I don't mean that in a bad sense - perhaps it was a good thing - and it is in this liberal study group I begin to meet for the first time people on the left, and I begin to come in contact with what was then the Left Book Club.

It is this group that got together - there was an Indian Congress that existed at the time, but this group began to find a measure of a common ideology - a more progressive rather than national outlook - and began to, within the Indian Congress, now to formulate policy, stand for policies and take positions which identified this group, as distinct from the older generation, who at that stage still controlled the Congress.

As the war approached the political consciousness also arose within the country in the - particularly the 1939 before the outbreak of war political activity among Indians in the Durban and Natal area had reached quite a level height (of height) and with the outbreak of war the issue of supporting the war or not supporting war became a sharp issue, and my generation generally took the position that the war was not our war, and we campaigned, you know, not to support the war -

But we were actually developing and growing politically - our own ideas were being formulated. It was really, I think, in 1940 that I learned that some of the people with me in the liberal study group who were campaigning with me were actually members of the Communist Party, and by this time I was on very close personal relations with two of the leading Indian communists in Durban who, I discovered, one was the chairman of the Durban branch and the other was the secretary, but they were my very close friends.....

J.F. Who were they?

M.N. The one was George Ponnen, and the other the late H.A. Naidoo - but we had become close - in the youth movement they were both in the youth movement, in the Youth League which was formed, in the liberal study group - and I had been a worker after I left school, working for what was then the Central News Agency in South Africa - I had a personal quarrel with them because I had to leave school for financial reasons before I completed my matric -

After I'd got a job I decided to continue by correspondence, and

M.N. in 1940 I was going to write my matric, but I needed leave in the last few weeks before the examination for the final preparation, and at that time an amendment to the Factories Act had just been made which made it possible for non whites in certain categories to get one weeks paid holiday.

I insisted on a minimum of three weeks, and I wasn't interested in whether I was paid or not, but after months of negotiation they eventually said well, they will give me the three weeks but no guarantee that I'll have my job back, so I gave up my job to write the matric -

And immediately after writing matric I decided I didn't need the job anyway - my political commitments unconsciously had already taken root - I was going to go out and organise trade unions - and I became an unpaid full time worker in the political movement at that time.

Now I'm coming to a period of intense activity, in the early '40's - very intense activity, both on the trade union front, in which I was very, very active - became secretary of three trade unions which I had organised myself, which of course - I say organised myself - of which I became secretary, but which was organised of unorganised work, I said (?) but with the support of, you know, the colleagues who were there -

Also I was elected secretary of the non European United Front for the Natal region, where I was now working together with black Africans who were also on the United Front, though in the Durban area the majority were Indian - and I was very active in the campaigning inside the Indian Congress itself -

Shortly after that I did join the Communist Party - so, as I said, this was a period of very intense activity - all-round activity - and I was at an age where it didn't matter what time I went to sleep or what time I got up, whether I had breakfast or not, where I had breakfast - by this time I'd quarrelled with my father, and my father too was very anti British -

He had lost his property as a result of the 1929 crash - In fact that was why I had to give up school, because by that time there was no money in the family - but he was very anti British, and his anti British concept made him very pro Hitler - we quarrelled about nazism - Hitler's Mien Kampf had been translated and published in South Africa - it was published by the Daily News at that time in a weekly, you know, bits -

I got it regularly and read it thoroughly, and I did not like what I read, and anti British though I was, like my father, I was not anti British in his sense, and I could not agree with him - we quarrelled - and one day he slapped me and I walked out and (.....) just what I stood there (?) and I was living entirely on my own, not concerned how I lived -

I was much more concerned - you know, at that age one thinks that the world is ready to change and there's no time to be lost - I'm dealing more perhaps with the spirit in which things happened at that time rather than a great deal of detail -

The campaigning within the Indian Congress continued - I was very deeply involved in this - I had come by this stage to be playing a key role in Natal in the strategy and tactics that we were adopting within the Indian Congress in a challenge for power with

M.N. the older leadership, and I was probably the youngest in our set, but in spite of that, probably at that time the most influential - I don't think anybody else was as reckless of his own personal health and as willing to take on whatever needed to be done as I was - I think that was the - the main source of my influence, because everybody would turn to M.D. and M.D. wouldn't even dream of saying if the job had to be done he'd probably get there first - it was that sort of mood and that sort of spirit -

And when eventually we forced the old Congress leaders to have an election, and the younger set were now elected - by this time our campaigning had produced a situation where we had overwhelming support of the Indian population in Natal.

At the end of the election I was elected chairman of the committee, in effect second in the leadership structure of the new Congress in the interim, you know, controller committee that was set up, and thereafter when we had a proper election Dr. Naicker was elected president and I was elected general secretary - that was in 1945....

J.F. This is of the Indian Congress?

M.N. Of the Indian Congress - and after we were elected one of the first things we did was to ask the government to receive a deputation of an Indian Congress (?) and the then government - Field Marshal Smuts was then prime minister - agreed to receive a delegation from the Indian Congress, and a very big delegation went up - I was appointed spokesman for the delegation at the time, and I think I'm probably the only living person in the Congress movement who has met at an official level a ruling prime minister of that country.

Well, my activity involvement has continued, you know, without interruption ever since - though there have been interruptions when I've been absent from the country for a while, when I've been in prison or in detention at different times, but the commitment there's been no interruption - now perhaps you'd want to touch on specific aspects.

J.F. So you met with Smuts in 1945?

N.M. November, 1945.

J.F. And did that have an effect on you in terms of non racialism - did you feel like well - did you draw any conclusions about whites from that meeting - how did it go?

M.N. Well, you must remember I told you I joined the Communist Party in 1940 - even before that my Hindu background had played a big part together with I suppose the kind of family outlook and personal outlook, where there was no racism, though there was a degree of racial prejudice -

You can't grow up in South Africa and not be infected by it in some way, so there was that sensitivity awareness, and I should imagine with prejudice, but not at a political level - not at all - I think I was in all essential respects non racial even at that time already.

As I said, I was secretary in 1941 of the non European United Front for that province, and I'd worked with white communists, so I did not have any such racial attitude - but what I was convinced of as a result of the meeting with Field Marshal Smuts,....

M.N. even at that time - he heard our representations and the memorandum we presented to him, and he ran round to us and he says : Gentlemen, there is nothing for us to discuss - you have not come here to discuss anything - this is a political manifesto - you have brought a manifesto to me and you can't expect me to talk to you about it -

The interview lasted barely half an hour - that convinced me that we were living in two different worlds, and I personally was at that time convinced that there didn't seem to be any possibility of a peaceful development, a peaceful evolution, in our country.

That impression has been strengthened ever since - so long before 1960 I was quite convinced - though we always talked about peaceful change and always sought to make representations, I personally was quite convinced that the white position in South Africa was one which would never agree to a real sharing of power on a democratic basis with the population of the country -

Later on I began to understand it a bit better, and I understood the nature, the colonial nature of the regime - that that colonial nature was founded upon the fact that they had acquired power by conquest and they regarded it therefore as their country, and the people they had conquered as not people to be treated on an equal plane - they were there to be ruled, to be subjugated, and you know, to be exploited -

Later - at this earlier stage all that was not very clear to me, but the attitude was perfectly clear. I think that is the one thing that I can say, was the influence that that meeting with Smuts had.

J.F. I have some other questions but I think I should let you continue the chronology - that was '45 - what did you do after that?

M.N. Well, after that - we warned Smuts that if he was not prepared to talk to us we would have no choice but to go back to our people and to mobilise our people into mass action, and we did precisely that - by this time - we attended a meeting of the South African Indian Congress, and following that meeting we now met similar left elements in the Cape Province and in the Transvaal - and you must know that at this time Dr. Dadoo was probably the most important figure in the Transvaal Indian Congress - he was very soon to become the president of the Transvaal Indian Congress, and to become the president of the South African Indian Congress -

And we then developed a strategy for passive resistance, began to prepare for it, plan for it, and in 1946 we embarked on a campaign of passive resistance - I was fully involved in that, and in fact Dr. Naicker and myself were the two people who were given the longest sentences as the quote ringleaders - he was the president and I was the general secretary -

But of course the longest sentences in the context of those times was six months and seven days, which is a very different world from the one in South Africa today - that campaign led - went on from '46 to '47 - we extended it from a campaign on which we occupied certain land to an attack on the provincial barriers - we led a series of groups of people from Natal into the Transvaal, refusing to take permits to cross from the one province to the other - you know, some two thousand of us spent a substantial period in prison (in) 1947 and '48 - in '48 of course the

M.N. Nationalist Party came to power - it involved a rethinking and a realignment of strategy altogether - new situations arose - we had the riots - inter African riots in Durban in January, 1949, which was building up over some period after the Nationalists came to power - there were - it's a very vast question as to how that situation came to be, but this brought us now into very much closer contact with the African National Congress -

In fact in 1946 at the very top level they had already begun co-operation, and you must have heard of the famous statement - joint declaration made by the then president of the A.N.C., Dr. A.B. Xuma, Dr. Naicker and Dr. Dadoo in 1946, but this was at the very top level - after 1948 it moves to, you know, wider levels -

And in 1949 for the first time the Indian Congress and the A.N.C. met at executive level immediately after the so-called riots in Durban, which was a thing that concerned us both, and closer contact between the A.N.C. in Natal, which was controlled then by a man known as A.W.G. Champion -

It was a semi autonomous branch of the A.N.C. who tackled the consequences of the riots.....

END OF SIDE TWO.

M.N. I was saying that A.W.G. Champion and the A.N.C. and the NIC were involved together in dealing with the implications of the 1949 riots - that was followed by a meeting at national level between the executive of the A.N.C., which came down from Transvaal to Durban, and the executive of the NIC - oh, no, the SAIC at the time - because by this time the SAIC was also in the hands of the progressive element, not only in Natal but in Transvaal as well -

Now perhaps I might bring in something I haven't mentioned yet - with all this going on I joined university in 1943 - University of Natal - and I was also at the time a student while all this political activity was going on, and almost from the day I arrived at university I found myself in the leading role in the student organisation at the university - in '44 I was elected secretary, (in) '45 I was elected the president, and remained the president of the students union for the next three years while I was at university, and of course very active at university as well in the student organisation.

In 1949 after the riots I was sent out on a delegation on behalf of the - the South African Indian Congress, first to India as a member of the team, and then from India instructed to go to New York to the United Nations, so I was in New York for a while - and then after I had completed the mission I came via this

M.N. country and was given permission to stay here and complete my law. I returned to South Africa in 1956. Within a matter of months I had to do, as soon as I returned to South Africa, an examination in South Africa on South African Statute Law - I qualified here at the Inns of Court, but I still had to do a South African study for examination -

While I was preparing for it - no, just after I'd completed writing the examination - that was in November - in December the countrywide treason arrests took place - I was away from Durban at the time as my sister's father in law had just died in the - near Port Elizabeth - and I'd gone over to the family, and there I got the information that all the people in Durban had been arrested.

My name was not on the list, as I had just returned and perhaps for that reason - so I found myself once again right in the very thick of it, even though I didn't have any time to adjust, it just happened - and that has been continuous from 1966 right up to the present time.

I was banned in 1962, and house arrested - I was detained in '63, detained again in '64 - that was a fairly lengthy detention - this time they charged me together with a number of others - found that the charges couldn't stand up in court - no trial took place - the very - the charge itself was squashed at the outset.

Some of the potential witnesses who would have appeared against me left the country - then I was rearrested in '66 - this time prosecuted, convicted....

J.F. Of?

M.N. Being a member of the Communist Party - an active supporter of the Communist Party - and assisting certain people to leave the country without legal documents, and being in possession of a banned book.

J.F. What was the book?

M.N. It was a - a book, Guerilla Warfare by Che Guevara - they threw in a lot of other charges, you know - the Terrorist Act was not yet passed - there was a forerunner of that act - a number of charges under that - but they could not get any of the other charges to stick.

I was released from prison in 1972....

J.F. So how many years were you sentenced to?

M.N. Just five years - I was convicted in '66, but I was a rare case - I was given bail pending appeal, so the appeal was heard in '67, failed, so I went to prison '67, came out in '72. I remained in the country, but this of course - the situation had completely changed - everything was underground now - I left at the end of '77....

J.F. End of '77?

M.N. End of '77 - I was there during the Soweto period, I was there during the repercussions to the developments in Mozambique and Angola - I was there during the banning of all the B.C. organisations - I was once again of course raided in '77 - my banning,

M.N. you know, continued throughout - the only time I was not banned was during the short five years when I was in prison. The day before I left prison I had a fresh banning order, including a house arrest - I was under 24 hour surveillance - my banning orders of course prevented me from practicing law - I had been struck off while I was in prison because the Suppression of Communism Act does give them the power, once convicted, of having you struck off - I was struck off -

The banning orders did not allow me to take on any kind of legal work, work for a legal firm, so I could not even enter the premises of a lawyer, and even though my brother was an attorney - still is - I had to stand outside the door to his office to talk to him - and of course I couldn't undertake any legal work and do it at home - any kind of paperwork whatsoever....

J.F. So what work did you do?

M.N. I then tried to, you know, be a land and estate agent - the difficulty I had of course is I was restricted to the city of Durban, and the greater part of the townships that were now Indian were outside the city, so it was very difficult earning a living - and what made it even more difficult is, you know, when you're obviously under police surveillance people are not very keen on being seen with you - especially the kind of people who have money and who are concerned -

However I left South Africa at the end of 1977, not with a passport - I've never had a South African passport - came to London via Maputo, Dar es Salaam, Lusaka, and I've been based in London and I've been working from the London base.

J.F. Do you have a position with the A.N.C. in London?

M.N. I'm one of their representatives - before that I was the representative in an international organisation we had - an international solidarity organisation known as the International Committee against apartheid, racism and colonialism in Southern Africa - that was formed in 1977 after the Lisbon conference - I did not attend it - I was still in South Africa -

After I arrived here I was appointed to represent the A.N.C. on that committee, and that committee functioned for a number of years, and I remained on that committee while it functioned - but based in London because their offices were also in London.

J.F. When you were - did you serve your time in Robben Island?

M.N. Yes.

J.F. So were you with Mandela - did you...

M.N. Yes, we were in the same section.

J.F. I'm just wondering if you can think over from the different periods of your life, when you were quite young and you said you were a nationalist, when you got exposed to progressive thinking and with the C.P. - even when you were with, I would assume, lots of Africans on Robben Island, to when you came out to the kind of B.C. time, to some of the debates about nationalism and the national question, the four nations thesis and all that - I'm asking it in a big way because of time - just if you could kind of speak about them - I'm just really interested in knowing did it concern people - did people ever say to you :

J.F. : What is this business of an Indian Congress - you actually dropped the social club and yet why organise in an Indian Congress - some of those questions.....(Interruption) I think the people are so interested to know how this was debated over the years in the different periods.

M.N. Oh, this has been debated virtually continuously in different ways, you know - the problem of whether there were different nations in South Africa, and the implications of that were certainly debated and debated a great deal - were the Indians a nation, were they a national group, were they a nationality - this was very interesting and very important to us, you know -

It's perhaps not often realised that while we talk about an Indian population in South Africa that that population consists of many different linguistic groups - groups who come from different parts of India, where there is a tendency to regard them as distinct national groups - the largest single group among Indians comes from the Hindi speaking provinces of India - now that is not a single province - there are a number of provinces - Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh - right up from Delhi to the coast in the north east of India which speak the Hindi language -

Though they speak a common language it's a question of argument whether they do consist of one single national group - that is one part of it. The second largest group are Tamil speaking - now this is an entirely different ethnic group - the first group are actually descendants of the Aryans who invaded India two, three thousand B.C.

The Tamil speaking section are actually descendants of the Dravidian ancestry, which has nothing to do with the Aryans. Then we have got the Gujerati-speaking population who come from the west - from what is in India today the Gujerati Province and surrounding areas.

Then we've got the Telegu speaking who come from a more central part between the Tamil speaking and the Hindi speaking - apart from a scattering of people from other parts of India - they have a language differences, ethnic differences - even though a very large proportion of them are Hindu, the form of Hinduism that they practice differs depending on from which part of India they come -

In addition to that of course, you've got the Hindu-Moslem question as well - the non-Hindus or non-Moslems, the Buddhists and people like that were very few - there were a very few Parsees who originally came from Persia to India, and whose religion again is different - so this was quite a serious debate -

It was also a debate now taking the African population - have they developed to the level where they could be described no longer as tribes but as nations - are they developing towards a common nationality, or are they developing independently into different nations - this was being debated -

How would you define a nation - at what point in time - under what conditions can you say a nation now exists - what are the conditions that will bring that about - this was certainly debated very much - and where on earth do you fit in what we refer to as the Coloured population - are they a nation - but you

M.N. know something very well known in South Africa - the Coloured population itself can be distinguished into two very broad groups - one who are very close to the white, the other who are very close to the black African - it's not just a question of features - it is a question of the ethnic composition that has brought them about and it relates to their history -

Also it has a very important present day political significance - at any rate at - perhaps not so much today - but there was a very powerful tendency in that section of the Coloured population which was very fair, straight-haired - you know, physically it's very similar to the whites - many of them were indistinguishable from whites - to seek to play white, want to escape from the, you know, discrimination by losing themselves into the white community, and that had not only psychological repercussions but it reflected itself in the political development as well -

They tended to want to distinguish themselves from the black African and from the black population as a whole, whereas the other section of Coloureds who had no hope of, you know, being lost in the white community in that way and trying to become white, tended more and more to identify themselves with the black - a majority of Coloured people in the Cape speaking Afrikaners - the - it was a, you know - a continuous debate how does one characterise them within the concept of nation and nationality, and where does one fit in the relatively smaller population of the descendants of the Indonesian slaves, the so-called Malays -

Again that was another group - many of them had intermingled with the Coloureds, but they retained their distinct religion - they were almost all Muslim - so this debate developed and continued almost all the time I was there -

In the earlier period the debate was more, shall we say, theoretical - in the later period it became more than just theoretical - the more articulate, the more politically advanced, especially the younger generation, began to question why do we need a Coloured organisation, why do you need an Indian Congress, why do you need an African Congress - and in more recent times this has become a very sharp debate -

This of course brought us now face to face with another aspect of it - segregation in South Africa, and later apartheid, built a whole structure of laws - one set of laws had a specific application to the Indians, another set of laws had a specific application to the Africans, another set of laws to the Coloured - some laws there were in common -

Then there was the difference in the application of laws and policies pursued - these policies had changed from time to time as well, but they were always different - different policies were applied to blacks, to Asians and to Coloureds - so the debate has always been there -

It has been continuous, though it has changed in respects - in some respects from time to time - whether the future of South Africa was to be along apartheid racial compartments or whether it should be a real democracy has been an ongoing debate for a long time, and I think the argument is now more or less settled on one level - it is accepted by all sections of the black population and increasingly by whites that the future must be a non-racial democracy - the question of nationality or nations

- M.N. perhaps that debate also has become less and less relevant, but certainly, to answer your question, it would not have been possible in South Africa under the conditions of the past for that debate not to have been a very lively debate, very sharp debate.
- J.F. Did you discuss it in the '40's - were there any people who said : Why are we having an Indian Congress - why should we be separate - shall we get together with the Africans - or did you by contrast perhaps find people who felt like you and initially say : I know my people are oppressed - were there those who stayed there and just felt well, I care about the Indians only - we can't join the Africans.
- M.N. I'd put it like this - because of the specific history of the country the African was the indigenous population - the wars of conquest directed at conquering the African - the resistance of the African was the resistance of the African - and after the conquest was completed in 1906 the military resistance had to be abandoned - well, it was no longer there - and the A.N.C. was formed as a political organisation -
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- I don't think at that stage the question of nationality really received any attention - not at that stage. The Indian comes into South Africa essentially brought as an indentured labourer in the sugar estates - that flow of course had an ancillary with the Indian merchants and religious people and teachers who were not indentured labourers also came to South Africa -
- They came as a distinct separate entity who had many things in common even though they came from different parts of India, and the discrimination they met tended further to create a cohesion among them, and when Gandhi arrived there his experiences and his resolve (?) tended further to consolidate that cohesion - and as the kind of things that applied to Indians did not apply to Africans, and there was no contact between African and Indian, Indian organisations were formed.
- Again I'm quite sure that at that time the whole question of nationality and other different - other racial groups - did not receive any attention. It's only a little later with increasing political activity, more sophistication, that the question of nations - and this arises, I think, of - to any significant degree - in the '30's and thereafter - because by this time you are getting a rising generation of younger leaders who are more articulate, and more and more of them who are now developing ideology -
- In the earlier period there was no ideology - it was essentially protest against different kinds of discrimination - essentially negative in that character - ideology comes later, and with the coming of ideology the question of race begins to take shape - but it was overwhelmingly the view on all sides that the mass organisations needed to be built among the different population groups, and that can only be done on the basis of language because communication is essential, and there were many languages concerned, and the people concerned are in different geographical areas, it would not be possible to unite them under one organisation.
- In addition in a society which is riven by racial prejudice, trying to bring people together who was already being infected by racial prejudice, would not be the best way to, you know, unite them at that stage into one organisation - in the

- M.N. interests of building a mass political organisations it was still necessary to operate, irrespective of how close the leadership of these organisations may be to each other, to build them on the basis of the historical conditions in which they grew up - to a degree those views are still being held in South Africa, and perhaps are still valid and will remain valid until this apartheid regime is overthrown.
- J.F. And so - you talked about - up to the '30's and the '40's - I'm just saying I can understand how you see it, but do you remember say, in the '50's - O.K., you were away in '56, but coming back into South Africa when the P.A.C. had held its - to a certain degree an impact - did you hear people talking about : Why should we have an Indian Congress, or does pan Africanism mean - does any kind of African nationalism and the A.N.C., called the African National Congress leave the Indians out of the picture - or were you just - were these debates not in your area?
- M.N. No - you know, while the questions of nations and nationality was discussed and debated it was more in order to achieve an understanding of the reasons for the existence of different organisations - right until the emergence of the B.C. movement the question of should they exist - continue to exist as separate organisations was not raised -
- It's only with the rise of the B.C. movement that some of the younger people, not all of them, raised this question, and in fact even, you know, expressed opposition to the existence of what they described as separate racist organisations - it was not raised before - it has been hotly debated during the '70's, but though hotly debated, as you know, nevertheless the Indian Congress continues to exist, and is accepted by the A.N.C.
- The A.N.C. itself did not open its doors to non African membership until the Morogoro conference in 1969, and even then to a limited extent - non Africans were not actually given all the rights of membership for the reason that we all understood....
- J.F. Which was?
- M.N. Which was that if it is to be built into a mass organisations among Africans, and the African population is by far the largest, and therefore will be the main contender of the struggle for liberation, it is essential that the image of it being an African organisation must at all times be seen to be an African image, and historical conditions are such that though there may be fewer Indians engaged in the struggle, and fewer whites, these Indians and these whites in the context of South Africa have had much greater advantages, and with other things being equal, you know, be in a position to exercise a leadership role out of all proportion to their numbers - they've had the advantages - that would not be doing a service to the struggle.
- J.F. And the years when you were on Robben Island was it discussed - here you were coming in to them who'd been in prison for a few years by then - you were giving the mood to them - was it something that was discussed - the four nations theory - the idea of different race groups - were you with Africans and Indians and Coloureds?
- M.N. Yes - not in that form - there was no such thing as a four nations theory really - I mean you've put a concept to me - I'd like to know what this concept is and where it comes from.

- J.F. are you saying that it's just people have been talking about it but it never has been an A.N.C. theory - I....
- M.N. I'd go even further - I've never heard at any serious level anything like a four nation theory - I don't know where this comes from.
- J.F. Well, non racialism, the national question, did you discuss it on Robben Island with different groups?
- M.N. You must remember that, you know, the people that I was with, Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Walter Sisulu, you know, Ahmed Kathrada, are people who were already in the leadership of the Congress movement, and who had grown up in these discussions - I go there and I join them - I'm joining people I know, and who have had from time to time discussions on various of these things, so there would be no foundation for, as it were, a fresh - a discussion on a fundamental basis, no.
- J.F. Was it just so implicit that it didn't need to be discussed or was non racialism ever talked about as : We must build further, or : We must move toward the point that was reached at Morogoro or the point that was reached in June, '85 or - was it just not discussed?
- M.N. I would say it was not discussed because it had already been resolved - you know, the Congress of the People took place in 1955.....

END OF SIDE ONE.

- M.N. Congress of the People took place in 1955 - the Freedom Charter had (been) already adopted there - you know, the Congress of the People was preceded by discussions throughout the country that took the better part of two years in preparation for it, so all these issues had been discussed at various levels, though even before, in preparation for the Congress of the People, and that document, the Freedom Charter, embodied the widely accepted concept of a non racial democracy.
- J.F. What about when you came out of prison in '72 - you went right - you were into a period where there was far less open (.....) - as you say, it was underground, you had - if any time there was a kind of rise of B.C. it was then - you were an elder statesman - people must have, even though it was tricky to be seen with you - people must have come and talked to you - did you meet with younger people who were developing their ideas - did you meet with any B.C. people - did you ever debate with them this idea?
- M.N. Yes - one of the first things I did was to, of course, when I came out to meet the different groups, not only the Congress

M.N. people - the BCM had emerged during this period while I was in prison - the Indian Congress, too, had been revived during this period while I was in prison - and I met them, even though I was banned, and of course I couldn't travel around, but I met them in Natal - I met the NIC people in Natal -

And the, you know, BCM people at that time were hostile to the revival of the Indian Congress, but you know, not on any broad basis of any theory of nationality - no, their basis was to have a separate organisation for a particular race group is racist - that was their basis - and they resisted the idea of the revival of the NIC on that ground, and it was really as narrowly as that - it was not a broad, you know, discussion of theory.

J.F. And how did you counter that - what did you say?

M.N. What is the content of racism - the content of racism is racial discrimination where one group which exercises power uses that power to gain advantages and to exploit other race groups - it doesn't mean, you know, if I don't like you because I'm white and you are black - I mean that's what your like and my dislike it means nothing - that's not racism -

If people of a particular kind get together because they find it more convenient for them to mobilise themselves by getting together but the objectives for which they are working are identical with a similar group in a - you know, of a different kind - that's not racism - it cannot be argued on any ground it is racism - it's not group against group -

You know, it's not a kind of hidden warfare where one is seeking to gain advantage over or to exploit the other, or to suppress the other in any way - there must be a content, there must be a meaning to racism - and you know, when the people who had - the younger people who had revived the NIC, when I met them I asked them the same question - our view had been earlier that we needed an Indian organisation because we had to reach not only the politically articulate, the politically more developed, but we had to reach the people who were politically less articulate, less developed, even the conservative -

To reach them you had to find an organisation which, on the basis of tradition, on the basis of history, would be meaningful to them, and the NIC fulfilled that role - but of course as time went on and political awareness increased, you know, the need for such an organisation would be influenced -

The time might come when you'd say : No, the population in this community now is sufficiently advanced that we don't need that kind of organisation to reach them - and that was a question to which they had to address themselves when they revived the NIC, and they were unanimously of the view, you know, that NIC was still necessary because there were still large sections of the population that had to be reached and brought into the political movement, and I accepted that as I thought it was correct -

Just as much - even more so among the African population - it's not very much use for an Indian who can barely speak the language to go out to the rural areas and talk to Africans who'd see him, you know, in terms of the prejudices that the apartheid regime has promoted - he will not be able to have that empathy with him - to organise them they need one of their own - that's the reality.

J.F. And what about the crit(ique) - I'm just kind of letting you handle all the kind of criticisms - what about the criticism of the NIC and the TIC that's come up more recently, partly the criticism of this supposed non race, four nations thesis which I think let's leave - but saying this more direct critique of the class base of the Indian Congresses as they've been revived, saying in a very crude way, a lot of white people and African people would say, and even Indian people : Oh, those NIC and TIC people, there're so many rich members in them - there's members of a certain class position, a kind of the shop-keeper - not the shopkeepers, but people really business - rich Indian businessmen kind of, why?

M.N. Well, one has to then come down to, you know, date and facts - the - if you take the Indian population, the Indian population can be stratified - there's a sector of commerce, merchants - some very big merchants - there's a sector of lower management, or if you like, you can couple with them the more privileged sector of the working class - and then you've got a sector of ordinary working class, not privileged working class.

Now this commercial sector can be differentiated because recent government policy has now provided opportunities and encouraged some Indians to go into industry - you've got a number of Indian industrialists now - you've got a sector, you know, of industrialists, and that's an additional sector.

You did have an agrarian sector where you had Indian farmers - you've got very few farmers left - you had a - a smaller agrarian sector where you had a lot of Indian market gardeners growing vegetables and things like that - that's been virtually wiped out - so with essentially now the Indian - majority of Indians are working class or privileged working class.

You've got a significant mercantile sector - the industrial sector is not yet significant, though it is there - but that's the population as a whole. You take the Indian Congress - your industrialists don't belong to the Indian Congress - they are the collaborating sector.

You take your mercantile element - the great majority of them are sitting on the fence - a few of them are with the Indian Congress - more of them are collaborators together with the industrialists - they're not in the Indian Congress.

You take your privileged working class - unfortunately - I'd say unfortunately, most of them are not with the Indian Congress. They have, under recent government policy over the last twenty years, found better paid jobs, jobs carrying more skill, jobs carrying, you know, lower management levels opened up to them by this government - so that in a sense you can say they are a collaborationist element -

They are anti anything progressive - they are the people who support the participation in these Indian bodies - Asian bodies that this government has set up. The 1983 constitution provided for an Indian house of delegates - even before that there was an Indian Council -

It is that sector in the main, together with of course, the mercantile sector too, but this is the largest sector which has given support to this collaboration, political collaboration that has taken place - the main support of the Indian Congress comes from certain intellectual circles - doctors and lawyers

M.N. - perhaps more lawyers than doctors, and people of that kind, and the bulk of it is the working class - that's the Indian Congress. Now if there's a criticism of the Indian Congress, if that actual reality is taken into account, what does that criticism amount to - it's like saying, you know, what the P.A.C. said way back in 1959, when they were attacking the Freedom Charter, they were saying - the things they were saying against the leadership of the A.N.C. was that the A.N.C. leadership was being led by the communists, by the Indian merchants, you know - white communists and the Indian merchants - which was nonsense -

Because even at that time the Indian Congresses were not merchant bodies - they were merchant bodies before the days of my generation when the new leadership took over - it's true that they were merchant bodies then, but that's precisely what they ceased to be in the '40's when the new leadership of Dr. Dadoo in the Transvaal and Dr. Naicker in Natal took over -

We were no longer representing the merchants - we were not merchants either, not only not representing their interests - we represented, you know, the more progressive element and the working class - all the new trade unions among Indians that were formed during that period - you know, all their officers were with us, and we - not just with us, for us - so the - this is just projecting a prejudice, not reality, to suggest that the Indian Congress is because it's Indian it's merchant.

J.F. And what about the individuals who are there - I'm just following through on this critique that people give, like Mewa Ramgobin and I guess - or whatever - do you think there's any danger of a lack of working class hegemony by people, figures like that being involved - how do you answer someone who says : Ja, but look at Mewa Ramgobin?

M.N. Well, you see, we would be attacked whatever we were - you know, the A.N.C.'s being attacked because of its association with the communists as if it is a communist organisation - now if we didn't have anybody but pure workers in the A.N.C. that would be allowed to say : See, look at the members of the A.N.C., who are they - but from the other side others attack us because you take Mewa Ramgobin I mean - what is he - son of a - a little farmer in the Inanda area, who has been to university, who was, you know, a man of ability, who might have been anything, but for the fact that because of his restrictions he had to go into insurance, become a - he's a very capable insurance agent - he's now, in classical terminology, a petit bourgeois - so what?

The objective of the Congress movement today is the overthrow of the apartheid regime and replace it with a non racial democracy, and therefore it is a broad enough movement - they would - there's nothing wrong in having merchants from the A.N.C. - it's the merchants who feel that their interests will be better protected if they did not belong to the A.N.C., because it is dominated too much by what they see as working class interests, but it's not the A.N.C. that excludes them, but there would be nothing wrong if they were in it.

On the other hand you see, they may point to Billy Nair and say : Look at Billy Nair - not only a communist, belong to Umkhonto we Sizwe, and a trade union leader - what does that mean - does that convert the A.N.C. into a trade union organisation, you know - the NIC has people - Sewpersadh is a lawyer, my brother, M.J. is a lawyer - sure - Paul David is a lawyer (.....) is a lawyer - there's a number of lawyers there -

M.D. Gerry Coovadia is a doctor.

J.F. O.K. - I think you've answered the questions really well - I don't know if there's maybe - whether you could sum up by answering - making a statement about non-racialism generally with the national question - what's the correct terminology - is it important - if I'm going to ask you about non-racialism do you think : Ag, we've been through that - it's implicit - or do you think it needs to be discussed - is it an important issue to the A.N.C.

M.N. I think the "four nation" theory that you talked about is really an irrelevancy - South Africa is a country in which, it is true, we can identify different population groups, but to talk about these different population groups as if they constituted distinct nations takes no account of the South African reality.

They have specific cultural characteristics which you can identify, and I think the Freedom Charter deals adequately with that - that, you know, every culture shall be preserved and promoted, and every language will be preserved and promoted, and I think that is an adequate answer.

There will be no discrimination or oppression of any diff(erent) - linguistic group - discrimination on the grounds of.....
(Starting last paragraph again)

There will be no discrimination or oppression of any diff(erent) - linguistic group - discrimination or distinction on the grounds of race or religion will be made an offence in a non racial South Africa.

J.F. One thing I wanted to ask you about - Gandhi - when you were growing up, when you became political, was there an uncritical evaluation of him - has he always been just an important symbol.....

M.N. No....

J.F. Was there ever any critique of his role in South Africa?

M.N. He was not always a symbol - my father was politically active at the time when Gandhi was in South Africa - Gandhi initially came to South Africa at the request of certain Indian merchants, you know, to prosecute a certain legal issue - he was therefore very closely identified with these merchants - he came from a background which identified him with those merchants, who came from the Gujerati Province and spoke the same language - in fact that is how those merchants who had come from that area sent for a lawyer from that area to come over to South Africa, where, you know, to serve their interests -

And initially he was identified by people like my father and his category as someone whose interests were not the same - the - you know, a very large sector initially of those who were descended from Indian immigrants, Indian indentured immigrants, did not think that they had common interests with Indian merchants, and did not see Gandhi as representative of them, and many continued to think that way, so Gandhi was not such a symbol.

Later he was inclined to be treated more as a symbol - certainly my generation did not consider there was any relevancy or political value in pursuing any criticism of Gandhi, but rather we saw Gandhi much more politically, whatever the internal differences there may have been among Indians, we saw his role as

M.N. a very progressive role in the context of the conditions of the time. Perhaps some time in the future a more objective critique may be written by somebody, but the time for it would come, not now.

I think at the present time he's really regarded as a symbol, now.

END OF INTERVIEW.