

Vishwas Satgar Interview

VS: Vishwas Satgar

FW: Fiona White

FW: So I've got 5 or 6 questions to ask but it's very unstructured, so you can just talk about your views, but the first one is what your understanding of the concept of non-racialism is, and where you get that from?

VS: Ok, let me start with the latter part of the question, because I think that ideas are sort of socially generated. I come out of a very politicized and politically aware family, and in 1980, my brother was responsible and involved in organizing the student boycott movement in Pietermaritzburg and he was detained. In that time, it was a very scary time, because people were dying in detention, and there was a lot of fear. I was 11 years old and I was very close to my brother and I was affected by that experience. I went to school, I remember, after the police came and took him away, I went to school feeling a deep sense of injustice, that there was something wrong. So at age 11 I incited a school boycott with a few students and we stood at the end of the playing field, without having any demands. So it all begins there, an exciting journey into community activism, and I cut my political teeth with the Activism circle of the Natal Indian Congress. I was beginning to develop a much clearer sense of what apartheid is, and what is racism. And so in the 1994 election campaign, I was knocking on people's doors you know as a young boy, going into households, Indian households, and attempting to convince them that their future doesn't lie in supporting the tricameral parliament, their future lay in a vision of an alternative South Africa. It was an interesting and challenging experience, because there were difficult arguments for us to grapple with.

As the state of emergency kicked in, and as we tried to do school boycotts, because I was involved in school boycotts, and we came up against some very tough arguments. And so there was an attempt to very consciously think through those issues, and what was exciting was that we found a non-racialism that confirmed this feeling of black solidarity. That we were in a common struggle, that we shared a common oppression. And I think that that idea of being black, part of the black cause, I think was a very important ideological and political message. I also think that linked to that was the idea that apartheid was wrong, and that it was a social system that had to be challenged. So in that sense, for me my non-racialism wasn't just about removing the obstacles towards a non-racial south Africa, it was thinking more systemically about it. And this is where some influence from the Communist party was very interesting.

The communist party underground was very much implicated in the NIC, so we were given an understanding of apartheid that characterized it in a way that brought to the fore a host of systemic features about how apartheid was this system. The relationship between race and class and how these things kind of intersected, and served to reproduce the pattern of racial oppression. So increasingly, there was a more sophisticated appreciation of what is racial oppression, and at the same time the need for some kind of non-racial unit. And the third element to all of this was the appreciation of an alternative. So there was an impulse of a kind of utopian alternative that was also with us, and for me as

young activist, this idea that there is an alternative society to this. And of course the freedom charter loomed large as part of that imagination, and of course it had its own educative value in terms of politics, but it was also a departure point for imagining an alternative society. The freedom charter harbours many utopian impulses, you can imagine a social democracy in there, a kind of revolutionary nationalist order. But for me, my imaginings of an alternative was a post-capitalist society. But ultimately for me it became more clear in the 90s, actually, when I journeyed inside the communist party where there was a deep reflection around the failings of soviet socialism.

My generation was grappling with the idea of a new way, based on South Africa, rethinking what the basis would be for a socialist project in the 21st century. In short, my non-racialism comes out of my experience of struggle, it's profoundly about political solidarity, the solidarity of black people, but more broadly it was about a solidarity of humanity. It was also about an understanding of the structure and nature of racial oppression, and the need for radical transformation.

FW: I'm just going to ask you one question, the difference between the idea of multi-racialism and non-racialism?

VS: It goes back to a very exciting debate in the 80s. Within national liberation theory, there was no fundamental resolution of what is non-racialism, and that was part of its strength. The short hand of non-racialism was the Freedom Charter, but of course there was always a reflection on what this liberation movement was about, was it an expression of non-racialism? And I think that that context, there was critical discussion, but in terms of the kind of alternative society that people were imagining, there was healthy discussion and debate.

So the idea of multi racial sometimes featured as part of the debate, to suggest that congress organizing, part of that perspective suggested that there wasn't really a non-racialism, in practice what would be more accurate would be this idea of multi-racialism. So it was a useful current in the debate, and at the same time in the kind of post-apartheid transition, it began to gain a kind of currency around this idea of a rainbow nation, of reconciliation. So it kind of bounced back as an idea. And I think that given the kind of radical people-centred non-racialism that many of us were schooled in, there has always been an ambivalence about working within the multi-racial framework. It has its strengths and we saw that in the Mandela context, it tended to be tied to Nation Building in the historical circumstances, where people were affirmed for who they were as racial groups, but at the same time they were affirmed as part of this rainbow, and this totality of a South African Nation. It in a sense prompted us to find a South Africanness while recognizing our difference. But in the end it is a notion that is shorn off, that is cut off from a more radical historical understanding of what we are all about, the kind of racial oppression we have experienced. So working with this idea of multi-racialism can easily take us to a place where it is all ideological, it's a question of us reimagining ourselves as a nation with all this diversity. And that's why I think the kind of radical tradition of non-racialism that evolved in its intersections with liberation politics is something we have to keep alive.

FW: That leads me on to the question of what you see as the key features of a non-racial society?

VS: I think for me a non-racial society has to be a society that makes racism socially unacceptable. And I think that has to happen at various levels. I think the first is that it cannot be a society that's exclusively hinged on a kind of constitutional rights based approach to non-racialism, that's important. I think that in itself, just treating everyone as equal is not sufficient. We have to kind of locate a rights discourse within a wide understanding and approach towards addressing the racial inequities in society as we have inherited them. So we need to have a public policy that speaks about race, the inequities of race in our society. And how rights can be made to work for those who are at the bottom of society, and really in income terms Africans and colored people are at the bottom of the pile, and we have to speak about that. I think that is one leg of it, and what else flows from that is the idea that the state has an educative function.

And as I've said, I think that the South African state and the national liberation project is kind of unraveling, and we haven't been able to get it right. The state has a crucial function to help us speak about race, but also prompt us to grapple with what it means to have a post-racial society. We need to kind of work with what we have as a country, so our education system becomes important. The way the state relates to the public sphere, and this is the tragedy of what is happening, you know the media tribunal and so on. The state needs to encourage society to have conversations in our public sphere about who we are as a country, so we can grapple with racism. I think the third thing that would express non-racialism would be the transformation of all our racial inequities. That is very important. We can't consolidate a non-racial democracy without addressing those historical inequities. I think that our racial inequities are historical, in other words about 17 years of ANC rule has also contributed to reinforcing racial inequality in our society, if you just look at our income figures through a racial lens, you will see we have become a much more unequal society.

The other side to it is that we have to think about racial inequities through an ideological lens, because I also think that we still have a global apartheid, for example in terms of climate change. In the next couple of years we are going to be affected hugely by climate change, especially in the global south, when really over hundreds of years the problem of climate change has been cause by the industrialized countries of the global north. At the same time, I think within countries, if you use Katrina as an example and what it did to new Orleans, the rich were able to fly out, but particularly the poor black communities there were hit hard. So there is a kind of apartheid about the ecological crisis we are living through. In the South African context, we are seeing disproportionate impacts. We are seeing extreme weather conditions in our country, but if the Eastern Cape has a drought, it is going to hit those in the rural Eastern Cape more than those in industry in port Elizabeth, for example. I think finally for me a sort of non-racial society has to be a society that is owned by all, not belonging to one political party or one icon. A non-racial society has to be something we embrace as part of a common purpose and vision of nation-building. Each one of us has a role and a responsibility. As long as we continue down a path where we credit our liberation to just the ANC, I think we are heading for serious problems. So we have to find a way in which we can all possess our country in its present and it's future, so that we overcome what has marked all of us.

FW: Just two more questions, when you say incorporating public policy, can you say a bit more about that.

VS: For example if we look at socioeconomic grants, and if we look at housing for example, we are back to square one after almost 17 years of rule, in the sense that the target for delivery is still the same, and who has the need in this society? If we look closely, it is basically predominantly the historically oppressed, it's mainly African people, but also sections of the white working class. So there is a housing question and a homelessness challenge, which we cannot just treat in a technocratic way. If we are going to become a more race aware society, then we have a basis for this in our constitution where we can marry a discourse around socioeconomic rights and who needs it the most. And we can evoke public policy resource which basically tells us that we need to focus on this group of people and spend our money on this group of people because they need it the most. And in that way you know you are really affirming our constitution, you are confirming people's rights and so on. So we have to marry a rights based discourse with public policy. But it also means that we have to frame the conversation in which we include the rights discourse, and we need public discourse that talks about the difficulties in our society, we are going to have to talk about what the socioeconomic challenges are, and we can bring a race-based lens on this or a gender-based lens on it, or so on and so on. You know to put it another way, we could have easily challenged the world bank and we can still do it, if we evoke our public policy discourse in this kind of manner. And we can say we have to redirect our fiscal resources and these are the realities of our countries.

FW: You said the phrase to be more race aware, I just want to clarify that, how does that link?

VS: I think being race aware is to have a more kind of scientific approach towards race, and to bringing that into our conversations. So for example look at executive pay in this country. The research that is done on this shows that executive pay maps onto white male executives. And they are taking the largest chunk of income in this economy. So that research spotlights an inequity that is also a racial inequity. So we need to be able to talk about that. I don't mean that we just affirm our individual racial identities, its about having a more profound conversation about how race operates in our society, and how it is reproduced in a racialised way.

FW: You mentioned also the educative function, and I wanted to ask you more about the role of any other sectors in how they can play a role in building a non-racial society.

VS: Yes well that brings me back to the point I made, about how we all need to own it, you know. So definitely civil society and social movements and a host of social forces. But as we know civil society also has its negative side, on the one end you can have extreme right wing racist forces as well. But to answer you, definitely a role for movements that are progressive in society. The tragedy of where we are is that state civil relations have been really complicated, the state has become more and more technocratic, so citizens voices are treated with disdain. So you don't have a healthy dynamic between the state and civil society such that you can have a conversation about nation building in South Africa, and it's reflected in the protests across the country. And where politics is increasingly becoming a narrow performance around electoralism and careers. So you have those difficulties, but that doesn't mean that the state shouldn't try and play a role on an economic Codesa. I mean I disagree with Alistair Sparks that the economic Codesa should be with Trevor Manuel, I mean we really need a bottom up

conversation. People in communities, in trade unions, that is what needs to drive the national conversation. In sports organisations, etc.

And I also think that the corporate face of the South African state is also a face of failure. So I think that there is a role for state civil society engagements, and one of them is around economic transformation and building a non-racial society. The other thing is that the state itself has to, I think it is in an existential crisis, partly to do with the fact that our ruling party has an antipathy to the constitution. It's not serious about the constitution, and by the way I don't see the constitution as a narrow liberal constitution. I think that for the state to really have an effective function, it has to confront it's commitment to its foundations. If you have a state full of people who are not committed to democracy, if you have the general secretary of the ANC slamming the constitutional court and rubbishing checks and balances and what is essential for a modern political state, you have a very serious problem. At the same time, if the dominant ideology of the state, right now, is an ideology of beourgeoisement, not transformation and development, we have a very serious problem. So the preconditions of the state to play an educative function are not there. You don't have a state that is grounded in the values of the constitution, and you don't have a state that has a common purpose and developmental vision linked to nation building. So those things are necessary.

FW: And what would it look like in practice?

VS: Let me give you some examples. Germany – coming out of its fascist period, after world war 2, made a very serious commitment to building an informed citizenship. And today in schools in Germany, you have a kind of civic education such that all political parties, through their foundations, do political education in the schools. But despite that, within that education system there is an awareness around inspiring political choice in young people, and how they can impact on their society. I think that is the kind of thing that I am alluding to. I can give you another example, it's an example that comes from the Global South. In Venezuela, there are lots of slums. And so they've passed an act which allows the slums to put together councils that can actually plan their development, land allocation and so on. And central to that whole process are assemblies of people, and there you are building a conscious civil membership.

A third example is Brazil and Kerala state in India, where they have decentralized central resources. They have allocated a significant portion of the budget to popular budgeting, where people can come in and decide on their priorities and decide where the money can be spent. In Kerala, it was not just participation around fiscal priorities, citizens also defined how implementation took place. So for example you had an undergrowth of community based mechanisms that ensured that whatever resources were allocated to a community, if they were building a clinic or a highway, the community labor banks would allocate labour and everyone has a chance to work on this public infrastructure. It's not just about the state of the nation addresses that we get, it's also about building spaces for participatory democracy in which civic consciousness and responsibility and agency can come to the fore. So ultimately the educative function of the state must enable this kind of impulse, to nurture our nation building and democratic project. Ultimately democracy is never finished in any society, it is ongoing. So South African, learning from it's traditions of non-racialism, which is very much about

people's power, the idea of the congress of the people, not the congress of the ANC, where the people's voices prevail. Drawing out that current is very important for reshaping the state today, so that it is imbedded in civil society.

FW: Thanks, that's very interesting. Just to turn a bit to my questions, are there any other sectors of society, media, religion, sport, entertainment, that are crucial in playing a role?

VS: Yes, I think political parties are very important. Despite the crisis of post-colonial societies, the crisis of liberal democracies in Africa, I still think that political parties are very important. But in South Africa, I don't think we've been able to develop a party political system in which we are able to mature our public conversation. Let me put it simply, I don't think the political parties in South Africa, maybe the ANC once upon a time, put to the community political choices that really were about a project to change the country, to address its various crises. If you look at our political parties that we have, to me the ANC has become more and more populist, is kind of losing the seriousness about how do you get political conversation going around your policies. Similarly I think the DA has its package, but I think it probably speaks to one spectrum of the alternative, it is also very limited. Other political parties that we have are built around charismatic individuals or ethnic, regionalized agendas.

SO it's not about a project for the country. I think we have a serious maturation to do, and it is not just a question of whether the DA gets more votes in relation to the ANC, it is about whether we can have political parties that can embody a national project for the country and can articulate that in ways that empower citizens. So citizens must be given choices, and in that context the non-racial question is very important. Right now the kind of post racial notion of the DA vs the ANC's version of non-racialism which is morphed into a much more Africanist reflection, are not where the project is in South Africa. We really need another voice amongst political parties that is more committed to democratic politics that empowers public conversation, and treats non-racialism in a way that brings everyone into it.

Maybe lastly to say that I do think that in terms of other social forces that are important, I think one of the problems we are witnessing is the increasing securitization of the practice of the state, criminalizing actions of the state. The increasing violence we are seeing, researchers are actually being killed. I think that's very scary. We have to, there's a double challenge here. The state has to find a way to appreciate that civic action is not criminal action. At the same time, grassroots civic action has been displaying some very populist tendencies, so you can't burn a library and think you are making a statement. So there is a need for a new kind of activism that understands that blocking a road can only take you so far, but you really need to think about other tools and resources that can ensure people's voices are heard and that their issues are taken seriously. Again the non-racial question is very important because people need to be building solidarities. And I think that grassroots struggles, for service delivery are very important, and can play a crucial role in bridging racial divides.

FW: That's very interesting. We've spoken about lots of challenges, but are there any other specific challenges you want to raise that you haven't touched on already?

VS: I think the whole question of the degeneration of the ANC, I mean I have alluded to it. I think it is a cause for concern. I think that the mistake that has been made, we all in a sense in the early 90s, in our

transition, understandably so, imbued the ANC with this nation building responsibility, and of course in the Mandela period that expressed itself. But I do think that no political force is infallible, no political force has the capacity to do everything. The lesson we learn is that give a monopoly to a political party and it can really mess things up.

So I think that we all made a mistake by imbuing it with this responsibility, instead of keeping alive a people centred idea of non-racialism. Once 1994 happened, we all retreated, abandoned, in some senses felt that ok, the project is now on track. And the contradictions of a complex transition have had serious consequences, and some of the choices the ANC has made have come back to constrain it. I mean right now it is really caught up in the tides of class formation, and that expresses itself in the forms of corruption we have. And that does not inspire society, so we are in a very difficult place. So we've got to find a way in which there is a kind of renewal of nation building that is not tied to any one political party. And that's a difficult issue. It relates to the broader conversation we have been having, the role of various sectors of society. I also think the Mandela factor is something that we also have to appreciate and critically take on board in terms of non-racialism.

I think the iconisation, the man of great deeds that we place at the centre of our world partly was necessary, but again it had it's functions, and the South African transition was better for it, but I also think that there is a people's history of struggle as well, and it is related to a radical idea of non-racialism, and that is crucial for us to retrieve. I mean the demise of apartheid was a very complicated process, and if we reduce the end of apartheid just to the ANC and reduce it even further to Mandela, I think we will be making a mistake. I think they all played essential roles, but at the same time if we are to go forward with this non-racialism, then how we understand our history is very important. So the place of a people's history of the struggle is crucial to imbue a confidence in our society and country, in a way that ensures that we all own this project.

FW: Yes, that's actually something that hasn't been raised. My last question is if you have any views on what you think the foundation should focus on further in its work.

VS: You know we did talk about political education, and civic education. And I really think that there are various examples in the world that the foundation can look to. But I did mention Germany, and the political foundations there have a conscious commitment to citizen based education, and that can play an important role in the foundation of non-racialism. I think the foundation can actually provide a very important contribution through managing a resource agenda, around two things. There are two sides, the one is, maybe tracking race inequities and empowering public conversation, finding a way of helping us think about how we are talking about race, how we are understanding the inequities of the past, so some kind of research project which grapples with how race features in our society. But the flip side of that is how are we departing from racism, that's also important. We need to be able to also affirm breakthroughs, given our history of apartheid, for a long time we are going to be haunted by race, but it's a very serious issue that we cannot escape. It gets boring when it gets used in opportunistic and banal ways, but I think where there are kind of departures from racial structures, racial behaviors, and ways in which we are constituting a new citizenship, ways in which we are building new values, if you take the mining industry for example. If you look at the racist practices that still prevail on the mines,

and that has to do with the imprint that comes from the past, how a shaft boss treats an African worker going down that shaft. We need to find a way in which that particular mine, that industry is confronted with the challenge of new values, for it as a mine. So there's an interesting project there, to find new spaces in our society where we leave behind racialised practices and racism particularly. So it could manage a research agenda which does both these things, and then maybe finally it could host an ongoing conversation, a set of critical dialogues, it could host conferences, or it could even host a research fellow for a year who writes something interesting about race issues, and that gets presented in a public forum, which stimulates us to think about race and racism and so on, and how we grapple with it. I mean theory about race and racism, there is a lot of work to be done.

FW: Yes, what fascinated me is how little there is out there, in terms of academics.

VS: And maybe they could empower institutions out there with resources, you know universities, to kind of develop this kind of work, they could build networks, but they have a very crucial role to play.

FW: That's very, very helpful. Is there anything you want to add as a sort of last point on the whole topic?

VS: I really think that the whole race, non-racialism question in a strange way haunts all of us in this country. So we can always transform that, away from a kind of nightmare into a kind of positive vision of something different. So we don't have to be trapped in the past, we don't have to be walking around with these injuries which were very painful, and let our lives be dominated by that. Because the new context we are in is very important. We have made a major advance as a society, breaking with institutionalized and ideologised racism of the apartheid era. The question is, what do we do with our freedom? Can we really get it to break new ground, not just for ourselves, for the world in many ways. So there is an exciting challenge in our midst, and we shouldn't lose sight of that. South African can just be a beautiful and amazing country, it it does have some amazing and talented people that can resolve the difficulties of our past.