

UNIVERSITY OF DURBAN-WESTVILLE

DOCUMENTATION CENTRE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

“VOICES OF RESISTANCE”

INTERVIEWEE: MR VISH SUPARSAD

INTERVIEWER: M NTSODI

DATE: 17 OCTOBER 2002

PLACE: DURBAN

MN: Good afternoon, and welcome to another session of our Oral History Project, UDW Documentation Centre. Today we are blessed with the presence of Mr Vish Suparsad. Sir, good afternoon and welcome and thank you again for welcoming us to your place.

VS: It's a pleasure.

MN: Sir, let's start where it all started, when and where were you born?

VS: I was born in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal in December 1948, but my birth is due to my grandparents and my parents. Grandparents came as indentured labourers to South Africa and my grandfather came as an indentured labourer at the age of 17, in a ship called Canada, and arrived in 1870, in Durban. He wasn't involved in the sugar industry, but he went into the Midlands and it was there that he probably was indentured to a farmer and after serving his period of indenture, then was settled in a place called Plessislaer, which is outside Pietermaritzburg where currently we're having Imbali township established, and there, he was a market gardener for many years, with his wife, and they had three children, two boys and a girl and my father was one of the three children.

Through their market gardening activity, they educated the two sons, the daughter unfortunately wasn't sent for formal education and I'm not sure what the reason for that was, and my father and my uncle became school teachers and eventually ended up as school principals. So from very humble beginnings, through involvement in education, they were able to establish professions and raise their families. My father and uncle lived together for all their lives and in fact, they died three months apart in 1976/77. My father had eight children and I was the youngest of eight, and we were brought up in a very happy home in Pietermaritzburg, but that happiness was shattered in 1965, when, as a result of the Group Areas Act, we had to relocate from the area that we were born in and very happily grew up in, and had to move to a place called Raisethorpe, which was on the other side of Pietermaritzburg, which was the designated Indian area. And that scar was quite a deep one, because we couldn't understand the rationale for that kind of disruption of our lives, at that stage, but then as we grew and understood the politics of Apartheid and the kind of impact it was having on people's lives, we recognised that we were victims of that policy, of an aspect of that policy. And ja, I grew up in Pietermaritzburg and did my primary school and high school there.

MN: Yes, do you know, can you tell us some more about your mother, where was she from?

VS: Yes, my mother was a very important part of my life as well, and in fact, was a very politically conscious person, Interestingly, she grew up in a place called

Westville in Durban, and went and obtained her formal education up to Standard Four in a small community-run school in Westville, and was married by arrangement to my father and she was a very powerful influence in all our lives; a very strong woman who had been exposed to the reform tradition in Hinduism led by Swami Dayanand; who was the founder of the Arya Samaj Movement, which had its' roots in India, in the mid 1800's when the huge challenge was being launched in a popular way against the impact of colonisation in India and the call for these reformed traditions and things like Ramakrishna Movement, the Bramha Samaj, the Arya Samaj all have some of their roots at that time, and here we had a whole new tradition emerging which really recognised that in traditional Hindu society, woman were co-equal to men and this reform movement put great store on that and my mother picked up this aspect, and my father was particularly encouraging in ensuring that women had their place, an equal place in society, and in the household. Maybe we could pause there I'd like to say a little more about that.

PAUSE IN RECORDING

ON RESUMPTION

MN: Welcome back Sir you were telling us about your Mum.

VS: Yes, yes so she had her philosophical and training in some of the development of her own consciousness rooted in religious and cultural traditions, which came out of the reform movement in Hindu society, and when she came to her married

home in Pietermaritzburg, brought those concepts and ideas

with her, and had the full support of my father who also embraced the reform tradition and I think that, that played a very significant role in shaping and guiding our own social consciousness about people around us, respect for humanity and interestingly, my mother maintained her philosophical position throughout her life and really, it was not very difficult to explain to her when we were involved in resistance work, why we were engaged in that kind of activity and she supported us wholeheartedly, and in fact, at the height of the repression in the '80's, was seen standing in the middle of a highway calling for the release of Nelson Mandela, and opposing the Apartheid Government. An old lady in a white sari, standing with this banner in the middle of a highway it was quite a sight, but it's an indication of how her own consciousness emerged, and just to acknowledge that she was a very powerful person in our household and helped to shape us in terms of our values and our commitment.

MN: Your mother being politically conscious like that, did she do any work or was she a housewife?

VS: My Mum stayed at home for all her life but she read the newspapers, watched the news, was monitoring what was happening, all the time.

MN: Okay.

VS: Active with the Natal Indian Congress.

MN: Okay. How old were you when you moved?

VS: When we moved in 1965, I would have been about 16/17-years old.

MN: Sixteen years old?

VS: Yes.

MN: Can you tell us about your community before you moved, because I would like to take it that when you moved you were already in adulthood.

VS: Yes. , The community we grew up in was a little village, it was called Plessislaer and had its origins as an area where market gardening took place, but then over a period of time we had a leather tannery established in that area and adjacent to the tannery, shoemaking factories were constructed, and so a number of people living in this village either worked in the tannery or worked in the shoe factory, and so that's where the principal economic activity took place and people were settled there, but it was also quite a cohesive community in that, as I indicated, this reformed tradition had established itself quite strongly there and so around the Arya Samaj, which was the cultural centre, we had all these people gathering and fulfilling their religious obligations and following those tenets. So there was a lot of cohesion, and a lot of positive interaction amongst people, but as in a community you would find there'd be tensions and little fights between different families and so on, but that was all part of the richness that existed there, but it was a very happy place to grow up in.

MN: Yes.

VS: We still think very nostalgically of that place. We were also interestingly, very close to the Edendale Valley, and had very warm and close relationships with people of different races that lived in that valley, because principally we would be interacting

with people in that direction, rather than people in the city because that was the domain of the whites.

MN: Yes. The area that you grew up in was it Indian only?

VS: It was largely Indian, it was largely Indian, but it was a mixed area interestingly you had, this was prior to the Immorality Act and you had a number of white males who were working for the railways, who were married to African women and so were living in this community. You had African people living in the community and we were adjacent to a fairly large African settlement in Machibise and Edendale, so there was all kinds of interaction that was taking place.

MN: How was the infrastructure?

VS: There was really very little infrastructure, gravel roads, pit toilets, stand pipes on the roads, but over a period of time people extended water into their homes but essentially you didn't have water-borne sanitation and so on, ja free-standing units, basic infrastructure, as you would find still you know, in the rural areas in settlements in the rural areas.

MN: Tell us about your beginnings of your education, where did you study?

VS: I studied at state-aided Indian school and I think the phenomenon of state-aided education would have been covered I'm sure in some of your interviews, where the community contributed towards the establishment of schools and so I was at a state-aided school and did my first eight years at the Mount Partridge Stated-aided Indian Primary School, and thereafter went to the Woodlands High School in Pietermaritzburg, and from there went on

to do teacher training at the Springfield College of Education: and after teaching for a few months left the country. Ja, but there's a whole history around that, do you want me to follow that through or do you still want to focus on the earlier parts?

MN: No, let's take the high school.

VS: Okay.

MN: At the high school most people in those days, it was - I've learnt through these interviews that there was Republic day.

VS: Indeed. [laughs]

MN: Please tell us about those days at your school.

VS: Republic day, yes. 1966, our, my first act of defiance was to be part of a group of people that stole the school bell so that the school couldn't be brought to order around this Republic day. We were also part of a group that produced pamphlets in 1966, five years for the celebration of the Republic, and we had them reproduced and we, it was done by somebody else, we picked it up at a DLB [dead letter box], and we distributed it into people's school desks, rolled up surreptitiously, no that was certainly the start of our political, awakening of our political consciousness.

MN: Ja, so that was your political turnaround?

VS: Certainly in the high school period, you know, the way, still remnants of the SACP and people of the Congress Movement, who extended their thinking to some of the students in the high school and can you imagine, I mean the middle of the '60's it was really one of the, it's the dark period in our history.

This is after the huge repression at the end of the '50's and the early '60's, so you still had people

who tried to nurture a level of resistance and that extended into the high school, I was part of that and that's certainly where it started, a consciousness to resist the Apartheid system.

MN: Can you tell us about some of your contemporaries at school during those days as well as the results or if there was any punishment for stealing the bell?

VS: No, no they didn't catch us, we were very clever [laughs], but certainly the police came and you know there was fear in our hearts because of the terror that they could instill but nothing came of the investigations so we managed to get away lightly, at that time.

MN: Any contemporaries that you still remember whom you knew?

VS: Well, Yusuf Bhamjee is in Parliament at the moment; Yusuf's brother was Hanif Bhamjee, he was very vocal and active with us, ja, those were some of the names in terms of persons who are currently politically active from Pietermaritzburg.

MN: Lastly on your family, you being the youngest, so many of you at home, did all the others get the equal opportunities that you got?

VS: Well in terms of education, my eldest brother and eldest sister became teachers. Another brother became a photographer; another didn't pursue education although she had the opportunity to do it. I had another brother who became a medical technologist; a sister became a medical doctor; another sister who's become a librarian. So there was certainly an emphasis on trying to get formal education and get post-matric qualifications, they

were encouraged principally by my mother and father.

MN: Okay. Can you take us through the chain of your post-matric?

VS: The post-matric experience in terms of education was, I went to Springfield College of Education for two years and I got a primary teachers' diploma, and this was in the period 1967 and 1968 and then, in 1969 I got a teaching appointment with the Department of Indian Education in a school called Howick West Primary School. I taught for three months and decided that I wasn't going to continue as a teacher; principally because I felt I needed to further my own education; and decided that I would do this outside the country and left South Africa with the help of my parents to go to the United Kingdom; went to London; and in 1969 did studies for the British A Levels and O Levels; and wrote exams in January 1970; passed them; and was admitted as an external student of the University of London; to start in September 1970. I was working three jobs in the UK to pay for my keep, but also was fortunate in that there were relatives, who I stayed with, and who were very understanding. Then I had an opportunity to go and spend the summer of 1970 in Canada, as a summer student. This was through an enquiry that I made with the Canadian Embassy, and they allowed me to come in and work as a student and when I got there, I was able to work as well as I went to the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon because I had a brother who was there, and I went to stay with him and through his assistance, I enrolled at the University

of Saskatchewan and they asked me to do a course in French as an additional language and then they would then accept me as a full-time student at that university. And so I enrolled. The day I enrolled, I got a job filling petrol at a filling station and the owner was very understanding and he would allow me to come after my university lectures to continue filling petrol at the petrol station and over weekends and working at the petrol station, I was able to gather enough money to pay for my school fees, university fees. And then I stayed; I was

accepted at the University of Saskatchewan and did a degree in Political Science and Sociology at the University of Saskatchewan from 1970 to 1972. And thereafter enrolled in a post-graduate course in community development at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, and at that time, during that period was involved in the creation of a structure called The Free Southern Africa Committee in Edmonton, and we created this committee to raise awareness about the atrocities that Apartheid was inflicting on the people in South Africa.

MN: That is in Southern Africa as a region, or South Africa?

VS: In South Africa.

MN: Oh.

VS: Yes. So we were based in Edmonton, in the middle of Canada, and going to the schools, high schools and the radio and talking about the ravages of Apartheid and we had a film; it was done by a chap called Nana Mahomo, and it was called "The Last Grave at Dimbaza." It was a very emotive film

about the way in which the migrant labour system impacted on the communities in the Ciskei. We would use this as a starting point for discussions. It was quite fascinating to be involved in this kind of educational work. But also interestingly, at that time in Edmonton, we had the opportunity to host the ANC and Yusuf Dadoo came, representing the ANC right across Canada and we were the hosts for him in that city. And we also had Freni Ginwala [Speaker of the South African Parliament] come across in 1975 to the Habitat World Conference and we hosted her and in hosting her we would arrange a public meeting, we would advertise it, we would get media for it, media attention, we would get her onto the radio and local television stations to talk about South Africa and what was happening there, and the ANC and so on.

So it was quite an interesting time while I was studying. And then in 1976, June, 16th of June erupted. And after having lived in Canada for six years, I told my friends I'm now leaving to return to South Africa.

MN: That is after 1976?

VS: Yes. I came back on the 20th of June 1976, after having been away for six years in the UK and in Canada.

MN: What made you leave, I mean I'm sorry to say this but somebody with you living so largely in a country like Canada to come back, is it, was the love of the country that pushed you so hard?

VS: It was to be engaged in the revolution.

MN: You believed it had started?

VS: The revolution had started. It had started. There was a long road to go but it had started and we needed to be in the country because that's where it was going to happen.

MN: What happened to the organisation that you left it with the - ?

VS: Yes. There was a chap called Ken Lukeheart and others, who continued it and Ken Lukeheart eventually wrote a book on SACTU. He was an historian as well in Canada, and he was heading up the Free Southern Africa Committee.

MN: Is he a Canadian?

VS: He's Canadian ja. There's Barbara somebody and Ken Lukeheart wrote a book on SACTU; ja and they continued it; but there were little groups all over Canada that were trying to raise consciousness and awareness about what was going on in Southern Africa and there was a network of those people ja, so I returned in '76.

MN: So you came back to the hot bed?

VS: Yes.

MN: What happened then?

VS: Oh, it was very interesting coming back in '76. I was looking for a job. I also spent some time with my parents and my father; we travelled in South Africa and we went to Botswana. I had the opportunity or the option of working in Francistown in Botswana as a Canadian University Service Overseas Volunteer; it's a Canadian version of Peace Corps type activity although, you know, Canadians wouldn't want to be associated with the Peace Corps, and that's why we went to Botswana to meet with the Canadian people there. But eventually

decided that I wasn't going to accept that option, I would prefer to work in South Africa and so spent a fair amount of time with my family and looked for a job. and then I saw an advertisement for a programme called "Give One Year of Your Life." It was a church programme, an interdenominational church programme, and I went to the organisers and I said, "I'm Hindu, but I'd like to be part of this programme." And they said, "No problem, come and join us." I spent three months in 1977, in a very intensive programme called The National Youth Leadership Training Programme, and it was a tremendous experience and an opportunity to reintegrate into South Africa. It was a whole; it was a non-racial collection of people and we had an opportunity to be exposed to political education; designing educational events; understanding theology of liberation; a whole range of things; which was very helpful, and then after the three months training you need to be placed somewhere; and I was fortunate at that time to get a placement and this is also where the start of the intense political activity began. I saw an advertisement for a job for a community worker at the Tongaat Child Welfare Society, and I was debating on whether I shall apply for it and my sister-in-law worked at the clinic called the Beatrice Street Clinic in Durban, and at the Beatrice Street Clinic, my friend Praveen Gordhan was the pharmacist. So my sister-in-law said to Praveen Gordhan, "My brother-in-law's just came back from Canada, why don't you talk to him?" So I remember going to Beatrice Street Clinic and having a chat in the pharmacy of the

Beatrice Street Clinic with Praveen Gordhan about what I was doing and where I came from and so on and I said to him, "Here's a job here at Tongaat Child Welfare what do you think, do you think I should apply for it?" and he said, "Apply for the job." And so, you know, but I was going to be a big revolutionary how can I work at a child welfare society? I wanted to be involved in the struggle, but he said, "No just be calm, just go and apply for this job." And so I did. And I was accepted. Mr BA Naidoo, Mrs Ramesar interviewed me; and the Tongaat Child Welfare Committee, and they said "Yes, we'll take you on as a community worker at Tongaat Child Welfare Society." And so that appointment began after my three months with the National Youth Leadership Training Programme, so the "Give One Year of Your Life" started with the three-month training and then I was going to do that component, the nine-month component at the Child Welfare Society, but I was going to do it as part of my full-time work with the Child Welfare Society. So I had the job there and it was a very fascinating period in our history, and the people that we interacted with there, and it was very clear through my association with Praveen and further discussions with him that my presence there had many dimensions to them. Overtly, I was the community worker for the Child Welfare Society, but essentially there was a need to be involved in the creation and strengthening of mass organisations in the Tongaat area. It was an area that had a long history of political involvement and political work and they were many conscious people there, but the

youth were particularly keen on being involved in political activity. Then there was the question of developing the political underground, and then there was the issue of building cadres for the ANC. So there were many facets to that work.

MN: That is '77?

VS: '77. So I stayed in Tongaat from '77 to 1982.

MN: Okay. When you started working at the Welfare, by that time, did you have a political home?

VS: Yes, very much so I mean, we were located within the ANC. Yes.

MN: It was banned though?

VS: The ANC was banned, but you know I had been exposed to the ANC abroad and coming back to South Africa, knew about the Natal Indian Congress which had its' affiliations with the ANC and the NIC was active at that time and so, and Praveen Gordhan was associated with the NIC, so there was an affinity to the Congress Movement.

MN: You also said that- I would like you to tell us more about it- you said that your joining the Welfare was the turning point or the most where you started the intense involvement with the or your activism started, please tell us more about it.

VS: Sure. As we were saying, there were various dimensions to the work in Tongaat, but it was principally rooted, or the emphasis of our work in the '70's, was trying to see how you could - we had this term called the three aspects of our work. It was organization; consciousness-building and mobilisation: OCMS we called it. And Praveen Gordhan was the man who drummed those things into our head. Organisation, consciousness and

mobilisation, OCMS, I think the terminology is still used today, you seem to recognise it. And we had to give effect to those things, it's how do we organise ourselves? And we recognized, at the time, that you couldn't go there overtly on a political banner, you were still in a very repressive climate and this is 1977, it's after '76, the clamp-down has begun, a new clamp-down has come from the regime, but you still had to organise people. And so, we said we would work with the organisations that exist in those communities so the Child Welfare Society was a legitimate, established organisation. The civic organisations were very established in that area- had a Tongaat Civic Association, and so we worked with those structures. But we had to shift the thinking within those organisations to a more progressive way of thinking, and so it needed a new injection of leadership into those structures, and it was the corps of those wonderful young people in Tongaat who understood that we were not going to change this thing overnight, we had to go and establish ourselves as members of the Child Welfare Society, even though you might have revolutionary aspirations, you go there and you sit there and you work with those committees and you do the work that has to be done, in terms of responding to the welfare needs of people.

MN: Can we pause please?

VS: Sure.

TAPE SWITCHED OFF

RESUMPTION ON SIDE B

VS: Ja, so we recognised that we had to give effect to OCMS and we had to work with existing structures,

and the Child Welfare Society was one of the structures, the youth had to understand it to go and make that structure work. Similarly, with the Civic Association. It became, it had its own style of working, and it needed to be a lot more conscious about the other bigger issues, so again you needed to inject that into the structures and that's what the youth did. And they made a tremendous impact on the community, and they then also established the Tongaat Youth Club and they tried very hard to build bridges between Tongaat and Hambanati so you could have a non-racial youth organisation and they were very committed to doing that and interestingly one of the things that we did in Tongaat was a child health screening in 1979, it was called, it was the International Year of the Child and we mobilised maybe a 150 volunteers, mainly young people, to come and bring children and we must have examined over a 1000 children and established their weight and their head circumference and through all kinds of measures to look at their state of health. We worked with the Department of Community Health at the University of Natal, and they turned it into a manual of how to do child health screenings which other communities could use. But coming out of the Tongaat experience we had some- the current deputy mayor of the Unicity was one of the Tongaat Youth Club members, ja. The whole bunch of other people, who made tremendous contributions in the underground. Thiruth Mistri came out from Tongaat, out of that experience, and left to join the ANC in the

underground and he was trained, and joined the MK and came back as part of Operation Vula.

MN: Okay. The mobilisation of youth, you said the youth was very eager, was this attributed to the fact of 1976?

VS: I think that this definitely was a - that '76 had an impact on the youth and '77. You had an active, the non-racial sports movement also contributed to that, the thinking that was going on at the university, and the student organisations there now wanted to bring some of those ideas back. The impact of the Natal Indian Congress, all, I think all of those things had contributed, but you had a whole atmosphere nationally, where you saw that the groundwork being laid for making the country ungovernable. It had its origins there certainly from Soweto, and those things now began to spill over into other parts of the country.

MN: Were you now comfortable with working for the Welfare?

VS: Yes, yes, I understood that there was a political purpose for my being there. I also enjoyed my work with the Welfare Society; and we helped to establish the youth organisation; the women's organisation; we did the child health screening; we did a socioeconomic survey of the entire area; we did a household subsistence level study in particular parts of that area; we contributed to promoting the non-racial agenda; the National Council for Child Welfare; and obviously in collaboration with many other more politically conscious people from other Child Welfare societies, who were also keen to promote the non-racial agenda.

MN: If we go back two years back- in '77, the death of Steve Biko, most people, most activists claim that Steve Biko's death brought two things to them: it brought fear, it also influenced them to go further, how did you - ?

VS: Yes. From our side, you know, we saw the regime engaging in huge acts of brutality. Steve Biko's was one of those, and the most atrocious ones, to think of, but you could see thousands of other people being the victims of state brutality, you know, of the worst kind. And our response to it was, "We've got to work harder in terms of building our organisation, building consciousness, mobilising people to resist this regime." We have a long struggle ahead of us, and you can't just have an emotional response to that, it has to be a planned, conscious, organised act of resistance. So that's where the energy, as I understood it, we were trying to focus on, rather than an emotional outburst at what, at the acts of violence that they were committing because, unless you tackled that rat its source, it was going to continue to inflict that kind of violence on thousands more people. That was our approach.

MN: Do you remember some of the youngsters that you worked with at Tongaat?

VS: Ja, there's a whole bunch of people, I mean Segi Pillay, Siva Naidoo, Logie Naidoo, Shirley Raman, there's a range of people, who really put in a lot of time and effort, to contribute to changing people, people's attitude to the regime and looking to the future. And the consequence of that, interestingly, is that, when the ANC had its' last election- local

government elections- the ANC won all the local government seats in Tongaat, where in other Indian areas they were not successful, as successful. So it's those people who continue to work quietly and patiently in the mass organisations and raise people's understanding of the issues that we're faced with.

MN: The integration or the harmony between the Tongaat and Hambanati community that, did you achieve the goal?

VS: Well it was very difficult I must say, there was certainly a willingness and an awareness and a keenness to do that and we had people like Ian Mkize and others, who were leaders who paid a bitter price. I think the culmination of non-racial unity came up through the '80's through the UDF and we had a joint civic structure called JORAC, with people in African townships, Indian townships coming together, and through Ian's involvement in the UDF [United Democratic FRONT], the state's repressive machinery attacked, and the people in Hambanati were the victims of savage violence from the state, extensively led by the IFP [INKATHA FREEDOM PARTY.] It was real massacre of the people who were committed to non-racialism and supporting the UDF, and they routed that leadership; they physically chased them out of the township if they didn't kill them.

MN: Let's go back a little, you told us about 1979, how long did you stay with the Welfare?

VS: I worked at the Tongaat Child Welfare from 1977 to 1982.

MN: 1982?

VS: Yes.

MN: Then in 1982 that's the year follows, that was the formation of the UDF...

VS: 1983.

MN: '83, can you take us through the '82 period to '83, in your activism?

VS: Right, well essentially our activism activism started in the mid-70's and one of the major emphasis that we were giving through this late '70's was the creation of Civic Organisation. And so we saw the emergence of Civic Organisations and because of the racial compartments that we were working in, we had to, we could focus our energies in the Indian areas. So in Chatsworth and Phoenix and Merebank, and Tongaat and Pietermaritzburg, you saw people creating and establishing Civic Organisations, and that was a very important public structure through which we could then set up a network of people. We saw through that period the establishment of the Durban Housing Action Committee, DHAC, - some people might have referred to that - again huge amount of effort in setting up that structure, training people, making sure that that structure worked well as a representative body of people in those areas. That laid the basis for the UDF work. And thinking around the UDF started in that '82 period, and by this time, from 1979 we had established a very direct relationship with Swaziland, and so the political underground work was now beginning to also consolidate.

MN: Can we pause?

TAPE SWITCHED OFF

ON RESUMPTION

MN: Welcome back Sir. You were telling us about the –

VS: Yes, that in 1979, we had established contact with Swaziland, again it was through Praveen Gordhan who, at that stage, I mean he had known people like Sonny Singh, Mac Maharaj, others who had worked here, after having been released on the Island and then having gone and Vis Pillay, Ivan Pillay from Merebank and Rajes Pillay, who were in Swaziland and so, in 1979 he'd asked me to go with Thiruth Mistri to meet with Ivan in Manzini, and we met with Mac and with Ivan and with Indres Naidoo and established a communication plan for regular contact between the ANC and the mass work that we were doing in South Africa. Interestingly, at that time, we were involved in the debate in 1979, about whether we should participate in Apartheid Institutions or not, The South African Indian Council, and we had proposed a position, "Let us go and take over this Indian Council" and it was a fascinating debate, created tremendous heat and challenged us. The argument that we were proposing is that it would help us in our OCMS strategy, by using the state institutions.

MN: Working from the inside?

VS: Yes. And it would give us a little more space because we were still committed to the objectives of the ANC. Ah, we got very seriously challenged by people who would not even tolerate this an inch and so, there was public debate about it and eventually through the intervention of the ANC, and we discussed this at length. I remember discussing it in 1979 and I remember Praveen going to London to debate it, and eventually it was

agreed that we would withdraw that position, and we did. But it left a legacy of suspicion about these young people who are involved in this political activity for opportunistic reasons. [Laughs] So we had to convince some of the opponents of that position that, that wasn't the case; that we were just trying to think about this thing in tactical ways. But it left an interesting challenge to us to intensify our work, and it was around that time that we then laid the basis for the UDF and were involved in the thinking around that. Interestingly, I omitted to say that we had also in the latter part of the '70's and early '80's worked with people like Bobby Marie and Shameem Meer, and others, really had an opportunity to work with them as wonderful, but we formulated the idea of establishing the Community Research Unit, CRU, and we were able to secure some funding from Holland, from Nova for this structure and it was going to be an NGO that would serve as mass organisations, principally civics and it would do research work. So the research work that we started in Tongaat, in terms of socioeconomic surveys and household subsistence levels and so on, all that information and knowledge that we had acquired about how to do it, we took into the Community Research Unit. The idea was that we would use research as a point of entry into communities and we would be able to say we want to do a survey in this area, we need students and we need volunteers and we would be able to train them in how to go about doing this thing, they would go interview people and the process of interviewing people and meeting people in their

houses, they would get an insight and understanding about what the conditions were that people were living in. We felt that if you wanted to have your own consciousness shifted, it must be on the basis of understanding the reality that existed in the world around us. And what better way of understanding that reality by going right to where people were?

MN: Door-to-door.

VS: Door-to-door. It was really something. And so it was a very interesting instrument that we developed as a way, as a point of entry. So we had this Community Research Unit started, launched in 1980. Jerry Coovadia, whom you interviewed was the chairman of the board, Nesa Pillay, was a researcher at the University of Natal came, sat with us, Paul Azulu was there and Franci Lund, Noddi Ginnabhai, and they were our board. They gave us the space to go use research techniques and, but it was really very much action research, it was not academic research. Ja, ja and there was an explicit political agenda, well not an explicit a covert political agenda to what we were doing. The Community Research Unit was established in 1980 and interestingly this last month, we're in the process of closing the structure down.

MN: Oh.

VS: Ja, because it evolved from the Community Research Unit with the Labour and Economic Research project into the Centre of Community and Labour Studies, and we're now closing it down because it served its purpose. So after twenty-two years, we're closing that chapter.

MN: You're finally closing shop.

VS: Yes.

MN: Yes. Now the formation of the UDF, what led to it?

VS: Well, it really was the interesting convergence of forces. We saw the ANC really putting a huge push into the country with its four plaques of the political underground; the international isolation; the military intervention; and the mass organisations within the country. So it was an element of the ANC strategy. We saw in the country, civic organisations emerging; we saw progressive trade union organisations emerging; we saw people in the churches and religious organisations emerging; and it indicated that objectively, the conditions were there to be able to create a fairly wide umbrella structure that would provide a home for all these different formations that were so dynamically operating, on the ground. That home would be able to present a very interesting challenge to the regime. And was the culmination of the mass mobilisation work, not to say culmination, but a new stage in which you could take the mass mobilisation work to 1983. I mean you couldn't think, I mean I remember trying to see how we could work with Cheesa Tsnoli and Jabu Sithole in Lamontville, in taking this research approach into Lamontville and seeing how we could get the civic structures in Lamontville going, but the repression was horrific, you know in the African townships. We had some space, but there they were merciless, the regime. But once the UDF was established it gave you an opportunity to have an auspices under

which you could operate. But again the repression came, but it was a new initiative which might have put the regime a bit off guard in terms of how they were going to respond to it. And the popular support for this structure was quite phenomenal. It was in terms of the launch in 1983 in Cape Town, and we all went in the buses to Rockville, and we saw the launch and we were a part of it, and interestingly the UDF declaration was drafted in the Community Research Unit offices, and it was taken to Cape Town. We did a lot of preparatory work as well and made our contribution. You know obviously lots of people were making a contribution to it. But the UDF was a very interesting initiative, in terms of creating some cohesive approach to challenging the regime and giving effect to this notion of ungovernability. I mean the Koornhof Bills and the Tricameral System. And the Koornhof Bills you had the opportunity of bringing the African people on board, the Tricameral System were the Indian and Coloured people, and this was a mechanism to create unity. It was a challenge; it was an amazing challenge. And my sense is that the efforts of the people who were involved in the UDF and the ungovernability campaign was one of, I would rate it as a bigger challenge to the regime than even the armed struggle. Ja, because it was so widespread and so popularly based the regime didn't know what to do with it. The armed struggle, it could mobilise its army to squash it. It could create a cordon outside South Africa, but in terms of the mass mobilisation and the resistance on the streets, I think it really shook them in terms of not knowing

how to deal with this, and the culmination of it I think you know, it was a significant contribution to what happened in 1990 and the release of Mandela and the process. I think the UDF was a very significant contribution.

MN: The launch what, how was it like?

VS: The launch was wonderful. I mean we all mobilised in the buses and we organised to get people from the different communities, I mean it was a sense of recreating the Freedom Charter - [laughs] - you know and getting people involved and, it was wonderful to see ordinary people from townships coming together. Again; the non-racialism element. You know, people from the townships of the Indian and Coloured and African communities - all coming together and going to this thing and saying: "We are uniting behind one banner."

MN: Mr Suparsad just - [interruption].

VS: Vish, Vish is my name.

MN: Okay. Vish for interest, women, women don't seem to be - [interruption]

VS: On the fringe.

MN: Yes, where were the women?

VS: Well you know, I think you've spoken to Daya Pillay, and when you spoke to her she spoke to you about the work in Phoenix in doing organising work through civics and so on, the backbone of a lot of that organising work was women doing that work, organising it and pulling people together and so on.

MN: The reason I'm asking when I get, when people paint this picture of revolution, late '70's, '80's, you find that it was a macho thing, it seems like men - where were women?

VS: Ja.

MN: Because even when I hear of speakers on the launch, it seemed to be it was only males who came and spoke.

VS: I think that you know people like, you know the new leadership of women, I think hadn't emerged yet, but you still had Lilian Ngoyi and Helen Joseph and other people who came from the '50's. The new leadership hadn't emerged yet, as I would understand it. I think in our own mass organising work as we saw it from the window that we were looking at, women were part of it, ja. But in terms of the leadership we didn't see many women. But just remember that a leadership to emerge out of a repressive situation was a tough one. You're dealing with a tough enemy, and even in the UDF, to get African leadership into the UDF was a huge challenge because the way in which the state acted in its' repressive form especially against Africans, so that's why we had to- it was Archie Gumede and Terror [Lekota] came out, but the allegation then was made you know with these Indian people, you know not allowing the African leadership to emerge, but the reality was that the repression was so, so severe, that it was very difficult for them to emerge, whether it's you know, women or African leadership and so on, I think it was in that context that we need to understand that.

MN: 1983 it was formed; then can you take us through that, through from '83 onwards.

VS: Ja.

MN: As far as your activism is concerned.

VS: Ja, '83 I think we were, you know, we were really beginning to see how the, our approach of getting mass organisations going having an impact. And so there were many mobilising campaigns and they would be you know, this Saturday we will all get together and blitz the city and we'll just throw, give pamphlets out, you know, and so you could do that mobilising. While all this was going on, the underground work was continuing - was in fact increasing, and my function was to maintain our link with Swaziland. I was instructed to maintain a very low profile, so any time anything happened, I had to be observing it, I had to record it, because I had to pass the information on to the outside, but I should not be visible. So it was a very interesting kind of challenge when all these things were happening. But there were some important events. 1984 the elections came, Tricameral elections, huge, huge mobilisation, one 1500 volunteers were mobilised to monitor, to see how we could get our pamphlets out and to resist, and make sure that people stayed away. And again, not through coercion but by talking to people and saying this thing doesn't work, but I suppose it's easier to ask people not to do something than to get people to do something.

MN: I mean you campaigned right to their queues?

VS: Yes, yes but also we're able to monitor. We had every, just about at every polling station say in a township like Phoenix, we would be able to try and identify a house that was close by that would be seen counting the number of people going to the polling station and they would then 'phone to a

central location, where we would get all this information about as many polling stations as possible, and we would then collate that information and we would feed it to Capital Radio to say, “Our campaign is working because at this hour, only so many people have gone.” So that was the level of information network that we’d set up.

MN: Now, when you report these happenings, were you reporting it as UDF or as Civics?

VS: I’m trying to remember who it was. The UDF was leading the campaign, so it would go as a UDF press report, yes, yes, ja and interestingly, Mike Suttcliffe, who was the Unicity Manager, had just come back from finishing his PhD, and he was familiar with Apple computers, so we had a Hong Kong Apple and he was putting all this information into the computer and we’d be printing the stuff out, and we’d be feeding it to the press. And we had a central place, six lawyers gave up their offices in Field Street and said, “Here, you can use our place as a central information point, netting point.”

MN: And the success?

VS: Huge success. Nobody went and voted for them or hardly anybody. It was a failure.

MN: Even though it went ahead.

VS: Ja, ja, they went ahead. They were committed; they’ll do it, regardless.

MN: Yes.

VS: And you had people like Rajbansi and others who supported it, you know. So you can understand the emotive sentiment that people have against those who participated in those structures when there was this huge resistance.

MN: The Alan Hendrickses?

VS: Ja, ja.

MN: Okay, now they came in '84 these elections and won and so the Tricameral was established, what did you do after that?

VS: Interestingly, '84 for the Tricameral, there was the people who went and sat in at the Embassy, the British Embassy.

MN: Tell us about that.

VS: Ja. Well what happened in terms of myself is that the ANC said I needed to go out for training, in terms of intelligence, and so I'd applied to the British Council to go and study at the University of Manchester, to do Adult Education. So British Council paid for me to go to the University of Manchester to study education.

MN: Can we pause please?

TAPE SWITCHED OFF

RESUMPTION ON TAPE 2A

MN: Right, welcome back again.

VS: Okay so I was telling you that I was enrolled at the University of Manchester for a few months and the day that I was to leave for Manchester, Praveen Gordhan said, "We've got a big problem on our hands now. The night before we're going to be putting six people into the British Consulate." So I was able to watch the whole, the action on British television, and I mean, I knew all those people who are there. So that particular event happened while I was abroad. But as I said ostensibly I was going to work there, to be in Manchester for 6 months, I was there for three months. And I then, we had arranged through the ANC and through Aziz Pahad, was able

to get a ticket to go to GDR [German Democratic Republic], East Berlin and one of my dear friends Busky Desai, who was a doctor, was part of our unit, and he went to visit his sister in India. I flew from London to meet him in India, in Delhi, and from Delhi the two of us got an Aeroflot flight to Moscow into Berlin, in January 1985. So for all intents purposes I'm still in Manchester but all this is happening in Berlin. And the ANC felt that it was necessary for us to increase our Intelligence capacity, and principally to understand how Intelligence systems work, because again there's a lot of mystique about the Special Branch and the security police and so on and if you understand their methodology and their thinking and the, techniques that we would use, it would be empowerment to the people who were involved in the resistance work. , So that's what German Intelligence taught us for six weeks, gave us an understanding, of how Intelligence systems operate and to the extent that they knew the South African system they tried to expose us to that, and we found it fascinating and very useful.

MN: The two of you?

VS: The two of us ja. We were treated in absolute secrecy and managed just the two people and we had four people with us all the time and they would bring in special lecturers.

MN: When you say it was very useful - [interruption]

VS: No question about it, in terms of understanding that aspect because principally you know, Intelligence, if that doesn't work, you can be very debilitated to an organisation and you've got to find a way of

infiltrating the enemy. And the ANC was successful in doing that, ja. So I got back in 1985 and that was the start of the Rubicon speech from De Klerk and then they started a new round of attrition in 1986.

MN: In '85 it was also the significant one, the formation of COSATU.

VS: Yes indeed, indeed the formation of COSATU was indeed the labour organisation to get a million members, ja.

MN: Now, the Rubicon speech, where were you, what were you doing?

VS: We were at a mass meeting; we were at a meeting of some civic structure meeting, planning for something that evening. We used to be having meetings every night of the week trying to help some area with a civic or planning some media campaign, or doing some preparatory work with the Community Research Unit for this, so it was at the meeting I think I was at David Landau, ja. But we thought something would come up, but we also knew that we were in a long protracted struggle so if this guy doesn't give us anything, we have to carry on in our struggle.

MN: Yes. What were your expectations of the Rubicon speech?

VS: I must say, you know I mean, the mode of our thinking was that we've got a tough enemy here, and we are in here for the long haul, and nothing is going to change easily, so please brace yourself, prepare yourself, for being in this thing for many years. So we had very little expectation and the media hyped it up that this guy was going to make some significant changes and so on. 1985, I

personally didn't have any huge expectations on what this guy was going to give.

MN: Because what I was asking was, some people might have expected him to announce changes.

VS: Well I think that was the expectation, and it didn't happen and so the Rand plunged and all that sort of thing. But from the side of the activists, you know, there was no expectation, I mean the head of the regime is not going to create the change that we're looking for, he was going to make incremental changes that were to his advantage, so our level of expectation was not high.

MN: Why Durban for the Rubicon speech?

VS: Ja, I'm not sure why he chose Durban I must say, really we didn't understand the rationale of it.

MN: There was the general feeling among other people is that it was because of the UDF. UDF itself was very sharp in KZN.

VS: Is that so, well that's interesting, it could be. It could be you know and so wanted to reassert his presence while this resistance was going.

MN: The other thing, the UDF in the townships, it was blamed by the government you know and all the other people before the violence that was happening during that, that was the most violent period in the townships. What's your take? What do you think?

VS: I think it was a really orchestrated attack by the regime on people in the townships, principally. I mean, the state had mobilised the Army, they had drafted people who had brought in new recruits, I mean they were really throwing resources at this. It was in the context of this nation of ungovernability and the only way they knew how to respond to this

thing was by being repressive and so they, either initiated the repression, or when they saw active resistance, they came and dealt with it severely. But also the way in which I believe they manipulated some of the homeland structures, I think was quite despicable and used black people against black people, and it's a tactic that oppressive regimes do and it results in the context of colonisation, but we've seen that happen.

MN: What did you make of the fact that here was Phoenix, under the UDF and next to it and here was Kwa Mashu which was under the KwaZulu Government - [interruption]

VS: It was an absurdity. Absolute absurdity you know that you had a different government managing Kwa Mashu, and it was not a democratic government, elected councillors and so on. If they had to buy a desk for the Kwa Mashu administration they had to make a requisition to Ulundi. It was absolute nonsense. And you could see, I mean that's part of how in terms of our understanding of the Koornhof Bills and so on and the local government structures that they were trying to impose in the urban areas as elements of reform, we denounced. And certainly worked hard as part of laying the groundwork for the new local government structures to see how we would dismantle those formations.

MN: Now, still on that one generally. Here was Kwa Mashu. People of Kwa Mashu were expected to I mean, as a KwaZulu subject, were holding a different pass of some sort, same thing with the - your township, let's say Phoenix - being under the South African government, do you think it has to

do with finances, or its financial abilities in the area that the government chose? I'll tell you why. Where I'm coming from, which is Matatiele, you find that the towns belong to South Africa, yet the surrounding areas were under Transkei. What was the logic behind the thing?

VS: It was very much the notion that South Africa belonged to 4-million people who were principally white, and the rest had to find their own way, and you could create a separate system for the rest, who were actually in abject poverty and the least people were in the privileged position, had separate laws, separate advantages and so on which had to be secured. And the mechanism was that homeland system, which they just imposed on people and the resistance to that, it was relatively easy to resist because you had the Pass system and you could see the apparent and the blatant inequities in the way in which the system was working, and you could go and tell people that here you are; you're living in Kwa Mashu; you work in the city of Durban; you helped the city of Durban to become rich by giving your labour there; by buying there and so on. How much of whatever you contribute to the economy of Durban gets back to Kwa Mashu? It doesn't make sense.

MN: To the government of KwaZulu?

VS: To the KwaZulu government it means, really [interruption].

MN: It was then when it was under the government of KwaZulu?

VS: Yes.

MN: Yet as soon as they go out they - [interruption].

VS: They're in South Africa and they're contributing to building the economy of South Africa.

MN: By buying there?

VS: Ja. And working there. So ja, it wasn't difficult to make the case at a mass level for the inequity that apartheid was imposing on people.

MN: Do you feel like Mr Botha and his government succeeded in winning the hearts and the minds of Indians, as it was its' goal with the Tricameral Parliament?

VS: I think he won a few hearts and minds. We'd like to think that it was just the opportunists that he succeeded in attracting to the structures that he created in 1983, '84, but I think that the 1994 elections and subsequently, indicates there is a serious problem in the minds of the minorities about where and how they locate themselves in the new South Africa, I think that, that's the reality that we have to face up to, and see how we can begin to address those insecurities and fears that people have as a minority. And I think it's not unique to these minorities, minorities all over the world and I think that's part of why, you know I think the role of the leadership is such a critical one in terms of being magnanimous and welcoming and reassuring, but you can't keep doing that I think it needs to come from both sides as well and the people from the minority sector need to put their foot forward in a more assertive way, as well.

MN: Now tell us about '86, the State of Emergency, what were you doing, how was your activism?

VS: 1986 - I had to go to Holland to meet the funders for the Community Research Unit and I was going to

be gone for a week, it was in that week that the repression began and our unit was attacked by the ANC unit. So separate from the mass work that we were doing, the ANC unit now, because of their own infiltration into ANC structures, they discovered some of the communication and contact systems that we had established and so they came and detained Busky Desai, Yusuf Vawda and well obviously separately but these two people principally, who I was working with very closely, were detained. They came to my flat to detain me but I was overseas in 1986 and I was in Holland and I was then asked to remain overseas and then I made contact, went back from Holland to the UK, made contact with Aziz [Pahad] and stayed in Holland for a month, and then the comrades here said, "No, you can now come back, but you have to come back via Zimbabwe." So I flew from London to Harare and we had two friends come up to meet me in Zimbabwe two women, who work for the Durban Indian Child Welfare Society, and they met me and the three of us came by train from Harare, via Botswana into South Africa. Another social worker friend came and then met me and brought me by bus to Durban and from that time in August 1986 to 1990, stayed underground and helped in Operation Vula.

MN: For three years you were underground?

VS: Ja, ja.

MN: Are you at liberty to talk about - ?

VS: Ja, it's not a problem.

MN: Please tell us.

VS: I mean Operation Vula had its' origins quite a long time ago in terms of trying to bring the leadership,

more of the leadership people, into the country and to strengthen the military hoop effort and to intensify the mass mobilisation and reach some mass structures. Because I'd been sought by the police; I was asked to do a particular piece of work and it was to establish a propaganda machine, printing press. So we set up a printing press in Chatsworth, and we got the machine for the printing press from the Community Research Unit and the machine was an offset, it's a Ricor desktop offset machine. But before we took it from the Community Research Unit, Operation Vula gave us R1 000 for it, we said we need to pay the Community Research Unit, so we took the R1 000. No, before we did that we advertised in the Daily News: "Offset tabletop Ricor machine for sale, R1 000." We took the R1 000 from Operation Vula and deposited it into the account of the Community Research Unit, we had the deposit slip and we had the advertisement, we kept it. Took the machine, went to Chatsworth set up the machine in an outbuilding. Dr Rajan Pillay was kind enough, a good man, to arrange for a person who owned an outbuilding to rent it to us. And we operated it, we were producing the pamphlets, we were producing the ANC pamphlets and SACP pamphlets. I was working this machine day and night, to get the stuff out but we would produce mountains of it and get it to different DLB's so people can pick it up and distribute it. Then we discovered from our own Intelligence that the Security Branch were onto this place. A message came to me, "Don't go back to this house." I was almost ready to go there, and

Intelligence said: "No they had discovered this place." I suppose you know, you're working at 2 o'clock in the morning; running your machine; people will get suspicious of you, you know, so we need to be a little more skilful about how we ran this. Be that as it may, we stayed away, the police had occupation in it and we were told that their instruction was that whoever came here should be killed. So I, we were just lucky.

MN: So nobody was caught?

VS: No, but then when the UDF had launched, it was in November 1989, they had this huge resistance march in the city of Durban, and on the day of the march and I was in the march, the placards of the Daily News read: "Biggest underground press discovered, ANC underground press discovered." All it was, was a tabletop offset machine, but it was now you know, headlines, this thing was discovered and - [interruption].

MN: And you see it among the crowd.

VS: Ja, I was there and there, was arms there and everything and all – and it wasn't a fact.

MN: It was a counter-propoganda.

VS: Ja, but it was big, you know that the Regime was successful in uncovering this but it was three weeks after they had discovered it, they had to make the right time to announce this, and they announced it on the day of the UDF march. So ja, these people can be marching, but we know what they're doing, so it's how propoganda works. So we were told now, again our Intelligence guy in the, yes now they're going to, they've got the machine, they know it's the Ricor offset machine, they got the

reference number there, they're going to Press Supplies to find out who this machine was sold to. So they get to Press Supplies, "Yes, it was sold to the Community Research Unit." Our Intelligence man says, "They know it's a Community Research Unit." So I went to Jerry Coovadia and said, "Jerry, the Security Branch are going to come to see you, please, this is the advertisement of the machine which were in the Daily News; here's the deposit. All you have to say to the Security Branch man is that yes, I'm the Chairman of the Research Unit, we didn't need this offset machine, we advertised it, I went there, some Indian guy came, gave me R1 000, I asked the office staff to deposit the R1 000, here's the deposit slip, here's the advertisement." They came, he showed it to them, he's a professor at the university so they had to, they couldn't do much, they knew it was a story. They went and bombed Jerry's house, he nearly died, his family, that's what they did. But I mean look at the courage of Jerry; he didn't have to do this. I just went to him and I said, "Jerry we are in trouble," and he said, "No problem." - without hesitation. For me those are acts of heroism and courage that don't get recorded anywhere. Rajan Pillay, Dr Rajan Pillay, he was detained because the man who rented the house to us and Rajan was taken to Bloemfontein, not Bloemfontein, Bethlehem and he was detained in that jail for a considerable period of time while all this stuff was being unravelled. And he discovered there, that they were going to bomb Jerry's house, so that's how we knew that these guys did it.

MN: Did he inform you, he couldn't because he was in jail?

VS: Ja. You see because they would have said, "We're going to teach that Professor a lesson."

MN: So now, you are still underground doing all these?

VS: Ja, ja, 1986 to 1989.

MN: '89?

VS: Ja.

MN: And in '89, things started to happen?

VS: Ja, we were active, 1990, you know, we are in this thing for a long haul, we've got to stay underground, so we must just be prepared for it, I mean it was really quite something.

MN: Did your hopes get raised when, I mean, in '89 that's when the guys, some guys from Robben Island were being let out.

VS: Yes, yes you know, and then discussions happened in Dakar and so on, and you know recognition that you know, that things are going to happen in this country, it couldn't continue, the level of ungovernability was so serious. And I think the turning point was with the release of Mandela, 1990 and the unbanning of the organisations. I mean we just couldn't believe it.

MN: What do you think made De Klerk do the - [interruption].

VS: I principally believe that they couldn't continue, I think there were economic imperatives; the South African economy was taking a serious beating. No jobs were being created and so on, not getting the, the political pressure internally was unmanageable; they couldn't contain it in terms of the resistance of masses against the regime. The internationalised

isolation campaign had certainly worked. The level of, the number of disaffected youth who were outside in the ANC's ranks and so on, was a factor and the MK initiatives, because you didn't know where it was going to come and hit you from next. But those were all the four planks of the ANC's campaign had an impact, and the earlier comment that I made to you, I suppose I'm a bit partial to it but I think it was the mass resistance that we saw in this country from ordinary people all over the country to the Apartheid Regime that was the turning point for these guys. They couldn't, they'd lost legitimacy.

MN: Then the negotiations started?

VS: Ja.

MN: At Kempton Park?

VS: That's right.

MN: And the composition thereof on the table, how did you feel seeing freedom movements sitting opposite their sell-outs and the Bantustans.

VS: I think you know, it required considerable political maturity, from our leadership to manage that process; and I think they did it very skillfully certainly; and they recognised that we had to go through that period.

MN: Were you comfortable with that?

VS: Not entirely, I mean you're dealing with people that you saw as your enemy but I think you also recognised you know, through your own political training and so on, that it's not individuals that you're dealing with, you are opposed to a system you know, and that what we had to do was dismantle that system and shift it and that's what we were

going to do. And I think they handled themselves wonderfully, the leadership in managing that process. I was not directly involved in it, I did go to Kempton Park and some of the sessions, as an NIC delegate, but I was asked through that process to serve on a thing called the Provincial Committee for Local Government in KwaZulu-Natal, it's called the PCLG, it was a committee of six people, three from the statutory side, three from the non-statutory side and I came as part of the non-statutory delegation with Jabu Sithole, and it was a friend from Pietermaritzburg, I forget his name now, but three of us sat on the non-statutory side, and from the government side you had Heygarth, and Derrick Waterson and somebody else, Mansfield, I think. And we were tasked to work with the MEC for local government. At that time, it was Peter Miller, to manage the process of transition for local government, because while 1994 happened for the national and provincial government, the local government process was taking, was going to take longer. So the PCLG was seen there as a transitional mechanism created by Kempton Park negotiations in each province to help oversee that process. So I sat there for two years, understanding how the local government structures worked and things like Matatiele and so on and how we're going to shift the boundaries and so on, certainly we addressed in those discussions. And there were some harrowing moments when there were things that the IFP was demanding or the National Party was demanding and the ANC was opposed to it and I was part of the non-statutory

delegation and we had to be phoning the Minister, Valli Moosa or speaking to the Deputy President or the head of the ANC who was Jacob Zuma and the province said, "Please comrade, you know, we've got to sort this position out," and so on and so it was quite an intense time.

MN: Then the negotiations went higher than concessions were made?

VS: Yes.

MN: There was a general opinion that some day we will be saying, "The ANC gave up a lot, compromised a lot during the negotiations," what's your opinion? Especially when one considers the fact that, here was a freedom movement coming into power, wanting a, with a totally different microeconomic policy that they were holding, their policies in general differ from them, but keeping the people who had been working for the oppressors I mean, there was a job guarantee, which is one of their compromises, what do think of that? Do you think they compromised a lot or do you - ?

VS: Ja, I think that through a negotiation process there has to be compromise, and the scale of the transfer of power was of such a magnitude that some of those compromises, in my opinion, had to be made. I mean we're seeing some of those oppressive, these reactionary forces- a couple of weeks ago still plotting to undermine this government. And at that time, you can imagine in 1994, the level of reaction and resistance that you were going to get from the old regime, was going to be phenomenal. And you had to find a way of being able to keep this country functional as we managed this transition and shift to

majority rule. And you had to make change in motion, you were not going to have one day one regime and the next day another regime, it was going to be a managed transition, and in that process you're going to have to make compromises. I think that, my own view is, that I believe that the transition was handled very well. I think that we might have made some mistakes, there are all kinds of questions about economic policy, there're all kinds of questions about the way in which we are managing the resources of this country and responding to the needs of the poor, but nobody has the monopoly on how you're going to actually meet those challenges. There are different approaches to it. But my sense is, that the government is committed to responding because that's the principal constituency of the ANC, and unless it handles the needs of those people on the ground, it would lose its constituency at one level. But I also, the consciousness of the people who sit within the ANC having come from a struggle background know what it is that people are going through and that's why the push for black economic empowerment. That's why the push for improving the infrastructure, that's why the push for putting those houses into the ground, million houses for people. There are all kinds of programmes that the government put into place and went and implemented it. You know, my position is that I think we've created a miracle in this country and we must be proud of it.

MN: Still on the negotiations and the compromises. Apartheid was declared a crime against humanity.

Do you think it was proper for the ANC to sort of, accept the responsibility of the countries that continued to trade with South Africa. I'm talking here about the carrying of the debt of the Apartheid regime from the IMF, the IMF gave them money even though the international organisation which is UN said no country or organisation should deal with South Africa. Do you think we really had to take the debt? I'd like you to answer; can we pause for a moment?

TAPE SWITCHED OFF

ON RESUMPTION

MN: Vish, welcome back.

VS: So Musa, you were asking about the issue ...

MN: Compromise and debt.

VS: Yes, and the issues of debt. Ja, I think that the, it'll be very interesting well, there's a couple of aspects, there's the whole issue of foreign investment in the time of Apartheid and the obligation of those companies and there's a legal case that's unfolding at the moment in the United States and it'll be interesting to see how that unfolds. Certainly in respect of the debt again I'm not an international expert on trading matters, but the impression that I had, was that a lot of the debts that the country incurred was that borrowed, money borrowed from workers Pension Funds and so on and if the country decided that they were going to renege on that debt, one of the people, one of the sectors that would have not been honoured in terms of the commitment of the state would have the workers themselves. So I think that it's quite a complex issue, again I'm not an expert on it but I

would suspect that, that would be some of the things that might have impacted on how the South African Government was going to respond to the issue of debt and honouring any loans that had been borrowed by the regime, and to further the Apartheid cause. I would think that there would have been bigger concern as well about the credibility of the South Africa Government in the international financial arena and the kind of credit-rating that it enjoys and it had to be careful about how it conducted itself, and that's just the way in which big capital works and they still decide to isolate South Africa, South Africa is isolated and then is not part of the global trading system.

MN: Some of the ANC activists of Indian origin have said, have been saying that there was no need of the NIC to fold or to close shop, it should have been kept, it would have helped in the ANC among the Indian supporters, now that it seems like if we're losing to the Minority Front and others, what's your opinion on it?

VS: I think it's a difficult position for the NIC to exist side by side with the ANC, and to then compete for political support - just my personal view.

MN: No, not competing per say; but existing.

VS: Existing and then complementing and being part of the Alliance. You know, I think it's a similar sort of challenge that even the workers are facing right now and the SACP, about whether it should create their own political party and they could exist in alliance with the ANC as well, but I don't think there's an easy solution to that problem and the existence of the NIC fielding candidates in the hope

they would be able to win a lot more support for the ANC, I'm sceptical about that position.

MN: You are of the opinion you needed a home thing like their home organisation like the ANC to counter the Minority Front in the Indian suburbs or whatever. Because now it seems like the Minority Front is gaining momentum among the Indians because they come as an organisation that represents their needs.

VS: Ja. I suppose you know, at this stage, we've got to understand a lot more of what are the minds of the Indian people and how we're going to respond to the material and other concerns that they have. And it may, in the short term, be attractive to have an organisation like the Minority Front apparently championing their causes and speaking for them and so on. Maybe at the end of the day a structure like the Minority Front will gain a lot more support I don't know. I think that we should be looking at more fundamental issues about how we build non-racialism in the Indian community, how we interface with what's currently happening in the high schools and so on, and how those young people Indian and African are interacting with each other, how we can more substantially utilise opportunities for rebuilding South Africa with the skills that we have from all the communities, working together. I think that competing for political support, that's not where I'm particularly interested in focusing our attention, I think that there are more substantive ways in which we can rebuild the country, rather than being seen to be part of one or other political organisation.

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MN: Now, looking at the ANC as it was, now and looking at NNP and the Minority Front, its' alliance, the parties with whom it has made an alliance do you think it's a holy marriage?

VS: I think it's been a - politics is about expediency you know how to get advantage and how do you get into a leadership position. I think all kinds of difficulties and compromises that people in the political arena have to make. It's tough out there, I really don't envy the people in that arena, I'm just fortunate that I've been able to move my own emphases elsewhere. So I'm not particularly preoccupied with what's happening at that level in our society.

MN: Do you feel like you're being used? Do you see "Kort Broek" surviving?

VS: Ja, I think he will.

MN: Out of the alliance

VS: I think he will I mean he's, again there's a level of political opportunism there, and interestingly today Tim Modise was saying he wants him to come on his show and answer for himself. There are lots of people were making very harsh comments about the way in which he has conducted himself and presenting himself as holier than thou when he was part of the National Party that was involved in tremendous atrocities and so on.

MN: But personally though, being a person who listened to the Rubicon speech and watched the Bengal Tiger [laughter] - from the inside, how do you feel now seeing the Bengal Tiger walking hand in hand with Thabo Mbeki?

VS: Well, I think it's, you know, I mean it's a political arena and you have different kinds of people who want to operate in that arena and you know, there are people who have those skills and propensities and they must do this, our society is free. You know, we've created a new environment here and if you have a Rajbansi who thrives in the political arena, then he must have the freedom to do that. Ja, I think that the past is now behind us. We need to be looking at new ways in which people can get excited about rebuilding the country, that's what you know, what I really think that, that's where we should be focusing our attention. The manoeuvres of what happens in the political arena have, I think we should be focusing our energy elsewhere.

MN: For those who support floor-crossing, what do you think the motive is behind that? Those who are advocating floor-crossing? Because here we have the voters voted, but then the individual who's voted in is allowed to cross the floor, what's your opinion on that, what's the motive behind the supporters of that, including your organisation?

VS: Ja, interestingly the voting was on the basis of a party, and the people didn't vote for an individual except at the local government level, there would be a constituency in local government elections. So at provincial and national government level there was a party list that you and I as ordinary citizens have very little influence over who will be ultimately sitting in those institutions. So you would vote for a party, and you make an assessment about which party is going to best represent your interests when you put your X-mark. What happens then is you've

got people in Parliament deciding that they would prefer to sit with another party because as individuals that party has a greater resonance in terms of where they are.

MN: Even though they didn't go as individuals?

VS: They went as part of the party yes, and they, so they decide that they want to join that other party. I think personally, I'm saying give them the space to do it you know I mean, we're talking about a new way of doing things and a situation of considerable freedom of expression, of philosophies and so on.

MN: Doesn't that amount to corruption? Corrupting the voters?

VS: I don't know how you - [interruption]

MN: You voted a party in, and then individuals decide to jump.

VS: To jump?

MN: To jump the ship, because he has been in agreement with the other side.

VS: Ja, I think you should start bringing the voters in then you need to look at the whole system by which people vote for people to sit in, in institutions like that. If you decide to create a constituency-based model and if, in my constituency I voted for somebody that person then went to the local council and if that person decides that he wants to go and join somebody else, then I think it would make sense to have a new election there. That would be the most reasonable way of preventing the corruption that you're suggesting and then that model then would need to be extended into the provincial and national level as well, so then we want to go to constituency-based system, rather than

the proportional-based system and I think that there are moves afoot to re-look at whether our system is the appropriate one or not having survived two national elections, and so on. Let's see what comes out of that examination.

MN: Okay, Vish the TRC were you called to - ?

VS: No I was not involved in the TRC I mean. I attended some of the sessions where some of the people who were involved in Operation Vula had been detained and they brutally killed and thrown into the river near Tugela and saw the people who are involved in that action, and I think it's very emotionally demanding, but again I think an opportunity was created to air what happened. Some people choose - ja, I think that you need mechanisms to let people express their emotional grief and pain that they've suffered. To create an opportunity for people to acknowledge that they've done wrong, and I mean it's like the kind of crime situation that we have right now, I think it would be important for people who are perpetrators of crime to meet with the victims and explain why they did what they did and understand the consequence of their actions.

MN: But do you think the TRC achieved its' goal; I mean considering the fact that up to now we don't know who killed; the who made the Kwa Makuta Massacre; because the guy was acquitted; Malan was acquitted of the crime. We don't know who killed Steve Biko; because Gideon Nieuwoudt says the other thing. We don't know many things; we don't know who started; I mean the 1976 rebellion; I mean from the state side they say different things; you

never got the guy who gave the orders. Did the TRC achieve it's goal, according to you?

VS: I think it was an impossible task to be able to unravel all these things. I think that we would not have been able to resolve each of these issues; because you had a regime that destroyed files; destroyed evidence; they knew that this was going to- the change was going to be happening. So we would never get to the bottom of it. And so, whatever way you structured the TRC or a mechanism to be able to get to the bottom of things; you'd not get to the bottom of many things; that's part of the problem; unless, I mean just the nature of this transition just didn't allow us to be able to take control over all those files, and so on. So you are not going to resolve this issue; the problem is we've got to deal with the grief; deal with the people who were the victims of apartheid atrocities principally; and see how, you know, you can mitigate some of that. And I think that the delays in getting compensation to some of those families and so on, is something that has to be addressed very urgently.

MN: Don't you sense some sense like the planners and organisers of the TRC lack vision of some sort, the reason being that, you find that files were being destroyed while the TRC was going on, the military was destroying files, don't you think that probably some mechanism should have created to stop those things?

VS: Indeed. You know there should have been mechanisms put in place as soon as, in fact, it should have been part of the TRC process but we were not in

control over those institutions so you would say it, but who was going to effect it? You can say when 1994 when the institutions came up; again you didn't have people in there to oversee it. I mean you had thousands of places where all these dastardly deeds were being formulated and recorded.

We didn't have people who could go in there, so you could create a mechanism, but if you didn't have the capacity to police it and enforce it, what were you going to do? I agree, but we could have tried, we could have tried a lot more, to be able to save some of that evidence but I mean these guys would have destroyed it even before the, you know the it's '94.

MN: Lastly on the issue, what you as an ANC member now, how do you make of the fact that the TRC finally stated that- equaled the freedom movements to the state, saying the ANC and others also killed civilians in their raids. What do you make of that?

VS: Ja, I suppose you know, there's tests to be made for that and they also made allegations that in Quatro camps and so on, that people were treated very harshly. It was a situation of war, you know, and I think that there were, it was tough on all sides, and in a situation of war you're going to get casualties, and that's what happened.

MN: That's the same argument they're using, the former state.

VS: But the state hadn't declared a war.

MN: But they say they were against terrorism.

VS: They hadn't declared a formal war, and they used all the instruments of the state to oppress people and, through the legislative mechanisms. The ANC had

declared a war through their commitment to armed struggle. It was publicly known. This regime projected itself internationally as a peace-loving regime that was managing the country without having declared a war on people, but in fact they were at war, and atrocities were atrocious.

MN: Should we have gone for a Nuremburg trial style?

VS: Again you know, I really haven't done a lot of thinking about what was the most efficient mechanism and the most effective mechanism to deal with the people who had done a lot of the wrong things that people suffered. We made the choice to go the TRC route, and we've tried I think, people have tried to expose some of those things and I suppose I'm personally more in the mode of moving forward, because it's things that have happened in the past it's very difficult to undo, it's history. We can record it as you are doing, we can try and respond to the pain that people have suffered, but we'll never be able to adequately do that. But you've got to find a way in which we now move forward, and that's where I think we've got to be focusing our attention- on the present and the future, the past has been really horrific in many ways, it's been very challenging. I think there were heroic acts that people engaged in to change the regime. The change has happened; and let's see how we can positively utilise the environment that we've created for the future.

MN: As an ANC member again, what - [interruption].

VS: You know, I'm not a formal member now I mean I contributed to creating change, I support the ANC, I felt it was necessary for us to be involved in the

struggle for change in South Africa and very proud that we contributed to and very privileged to have been a part of that process of change. Ja, and really respect the contribution of the ANC to try and manage this process.

MN: What is your opinion on the government's stance on HIV/Aids?

VS: I think that it's a health issue and you must leave it to the health experts. I think that the President might have put himself into a disadvantaged position by pronouncing on whether it was, you know, the nature of the virus but I, it's interesting that his advisers have now told him that he should refrain from making comments in that regard, which is I think positive. I mean it's a health issue and it must be left to the health experts.

MN: Now, the HIV/Aids thing, we hear people saying the drugs are expensive. Shouldn't we be going, do you think the government; our government should be going the Brazilian way of manufacturing their own drugs?

VS: I think we must certainly look at those options, but I think part of the problem is that we're in an international trading environment and we need through the WTO, World Trade Organisation, see what kind of rules that exist and if there are ways around those rules and if the Brazilians have made progress in that regard then I think we need to cooperate with them, certainly to try and see how we can cheapen those drugs.

MN: Sure, if Brazil survived and India survived, shouldn't we survive?

VS: No I agree. I agree, but let's apply our mind to that and again I'm not sure how they're doing it, I expect that they would be looking at generic drugs and I know that the Minister of Health had taken on those drugs companies and they had to withdraw in some instances and I think that, ja the drugs is a major issue.

MN: Vish, throughout your career, I mean you being an activist, being and working underground for the whole three years, what has your family been like, support-wise and otherwise?

VS: Ja, as I said you know, my mother was very supportive and very helpful. All my family have been understanding and been there as a support system, and interestingly I got married in 1989 and it was an underground wedding and there were 50 of our close friends and family because both my wife's father and my mother insisted that we get married, so it was an underground wedding, and we were only able to surface as a married couple after the un-banning of the ANC, and ja.

MN: Where did it take place?

VS: It took place in Durban at the APS Hall- ja, but there were 50 people there. It was quite an event.

MN: Who is your wife?

VS: My wife is Vidhu Vedalanka, ja, and we've worked together for many years, ja.

MN: You have children?

VS: Ja, I have a son who is twelve-years old. Ja, so we are a happy family, very fortunate, in that regard.

MN: Glancing over your shoulders, your political life; is there anything that you can put your finger on and

say, “This is what I did wrong, if I get a second chance I’ll do it otherwise?”

VS: Tough question, we all make mistakes in life, you know. It’s hard to think of a particular mistake, I suppose that the kind of person that I am I’m really looking at all the positive things that happened in my life, and just again as I said so fortunate and privileged that I was able to live through all these different phases of the struggle, make your little contribution, see South Africa in this transition period. Ya, I think it’s been absolute privilege for me.

MN: What do you do on your leisure time when you, what sort of music do you listen to, who’s your favourite artist, what do you do?

VS: Not too much into music, I do some reading and I like walking, so it’s an activity that we do as a family, and we’ve been very fortunate to be able to do some very interesting walks. South Africa is a beautiful place to walk in.

MN: And your favourite author?

VS: I don’t have a favourite author; I find some of the Indian contemporary writers quite interesting; there’s a lady called Arundhati Roy, whom I find very exciting to read. She wrote a book called “The God of Small Things. Ja, but I am interested in history, interested in looking at contemporary developments in the world.

MN: Mr Vish Suparsad, thank you very much for inviting us here.

VS: It’s been my pleasure ja, and talking, and I wish you well in your project.

MN: Thank you Sir.

INTERVIEW ENDS

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