

PART ONE AUTOBIOGRAPHIC WRITING

Document 1 MR, "Some Glimpses" [Undated, c. late 1980's]

Childhood

I grew up in an extended family. And this for us was not only my father and mother and their children, but my uncles and aunts and cousins.

There was conflict, no doubt, among us. But with conflict there was co-operation and lots of love and a "hell of a lot" of kids to play with. We were more than twenty five people under one roof.

The good thing about this time, was even though we were relatively well off, we kids had a lot of improvised toys. Whilst wheelbarrows were there for work, we also used them as "play things". On hindsight, I wonder now, whether my people were actually good psychologists. Allowing us to use wheelbarrows to play with and in fact cart soil, sand and stones from one place to another. On reflection, I am glad they did allow us the use of such things – we can today appreciate labour and work.

In the countryside, Inanda, there weren't many things that young people could do. Besides our neighbours, family and the staff on the fields, contact with the outside world was "limited". I remember so well my style of dressing, for instance, was so distinctly different from the "city slickers" in high school. I with my fellow "countryside" students (in the 1940's) stuck out as "discordant" units in the midst of the "smartly dressed city lads".

But by God! There was another discordant note. By the 1940's my father and my uncles had become successful sugar cane farmers. They, like most other farmers, depended on migrant labour from the then Pondoland.

Standing in queues in Sydney Road, these "Pondos" were ready to sell their labour to anybody. My father's father had come from India, as an indentured labourer to work in the sugar fields. I don't know the exact date of his arrival. But I do know that my father was born in 1894 and in the forties, almost fifty years later, here was my father employing migrant black labour to work on his sugar farms. My grandfather, who had participated in the Gandhi-led campaigns against the Natal government, had his own son employing migrant labour, with all the ramifications of it.

These migrant workers lived in compounds provided by my father. They were provided with food and medical attention. The staple food was mealies, with Beans and Meat once a week. Hessian bags were provided for sleeping purposes, as mattresses. But the glaring thing was "Hessian Bags" were also used by these "sugar cane workers". In Greek style the "majesty" of the worker was seen by these Hessian Bags draped from their shoulders.

So the "country bumpkin" look at high school in Durban couldn't have been worse than the Greek look on the workers who made it possible for me to be at high school. Who cared? I was at high school and I was sixteen.

Then as a Std.V11 student "Congress" struck me. There were not enough places at Sastri College to "take" in all the new students. The Natal Indian Congress began the Congress High School in 1948 as a community effort. I was in the first batch that was taught after normal school hours at the Greyville High School, in Osborne Road by teachers, teaching us at a nominal cost. In this same year the Nats also struck SA and we are stuck with them to this day.

But, then Congress became the household name and its co-operation with the ANC to challenge the government also became an almost automatic and integral part of our education. Here was a classic experience of the influence of politics on education and the influence of education on politics. As children, and still at primary school, there were very few things that we could do during weekends and holidays. If we were not busy helping in the garden or filling the shelves in the shop we were quite fruitfully occupied.

There were, always, fruit in the garden. An abundance of mangoes, pineapples, bananas, paw paws, oranges, naartjies, jackfruit and guavas. These I can remember. With the kids of the neighbours, the younger staff members working in the fields and sometimes with some "city slicker kids" we would gleefully spend hours swimming naked in the Piesang River, which traversed my father's land for miles. When tired of this we would pool our ticeys and sixpences together to buy a live chicken from one of the peasant families, "dress" the chicken and have it boiled or braai-ed in the field. Then for dessert we would walk the fields with loads of fresh fruit. Then into the river again at almost dusk.

It was in such circumstances that I learnt to smoke. My late brother, about 2½ years my senior, and I first smoked wrapped dry banana leaves. From this I graduated to CTCOC cigarettes, which I pinched from my father's shop. My brother kicked the habit but I have stuck to this filth.

It was safest for me to smoke in the company of our black staff in the compound, where braai-ed mealies garnished with green chillies, both fresh from the garden, were eaten, all rounded off with deep puffs at the CTCOC.

On the heels of the Nats coming to power in '48 came the Indo-African riots of 1949. This was traumatic for me. Suddenly my parents, like so many other Indians, became suspicious of and angry with fellow Africans. The riots coupled with the different kinds of responses, shattered me in some ways. I was not even 17 years of age when this happened. I was with other children for weeks, separated from my home situation.

And, I was separated from my smoking partners, my mealie and chillie eating partners and mates in the compound and the neighbours. I was separated especially from Kaampaan, with whom, I think, I spent the best parts of my fifteenth and seventeenth years. He was from Pondoland. He and I actually sang Hindi songs together. Heaven knows why I didn't learn Pondo or Zulu songs?

I began making choices and today, thinking back. I know that these were political choices, based on moral considerations. I couldn't stand the agony of killings and hated the Nats, the indiscriminate shootings by the naval forces of Africans and the rape and brutalization of women. But I think now, essentially I could not tolerate the compounds and hessian bags too, the mealie pap and beans, and the Billy cans full of "Amahewu".

I realized I was right in the middle of an area called Inanda, where J.L. Dube, the 1st President General of the ANC, the Rev J. Shembe and other leading African personalities lived almost contemporaneously. These people were different not only from the Kaampaans in my father's compounds, but they were so much more different from my own father. I began seeing Ohlange Institute differently and the Shembe Kraal with more insight. Until then they were just a school and a kraal, where annually the "July" dance took place. My political leanings and affiliations began growing organically.

Until the mid-forties or a little later, the Late Dr J.L. Dube was for me just another elderly, well-dressed person, sitting on the rear seat of his chauffeur-driven Oldsmobile Sedan. I didn't know whilst he was living that he was an editor of a newspaper and a renowned "educationist".

Strangely enough, I didn't stop to reflect on the school in which I, myself, had my primary school education. From my eldest brother (who if he were alive today, would have been about 70 years old) to children right into the eighties, were educated at the Inanda Indian State-Aided School, which was established by my grandparents and other residents of Inanda in 1928. Today there are scores of teachers, lawyers, doctors and social workers who had their primary training there. My father was the grantee of this school. *[It was here]* that we as children celebrated the birth of Lord Krishna; that we as children acted in plays to highlight the question of T.B.; it was here that we celebrated the independence of India and it was here the community held its mass meetings. This school, built of wood and iron, had additional classes built of wattle poles and iron sheeting. In many ways it was around the school that we experienced living – a community spirit.

I was born and grew up in a Hindu home. In formal terms both my parents had limited "education". I doubt whether they, who took us through the rituals of Hinduism, really understood the basic tenets of Hinduism. Yet, it is astonishing how many of my life's fellow compatriots lived a kind of life then which is absent today. In those days Hindus and Muslims in Inanda shared their celebrations. It wasn't out of step for Hindus to engage in Muslims celebrations, like Eid or the Muharram; or for Muslims to participate in Hindu celebrations like Krishna Asthree. Perhaps, it was in ignorance of each other's faith that people did this. I am glad, today, that they did. As children we had the benefit of their habits. Today no such thing exists with all the "education" at our disposal.

On reflection, I think the finest memory as a child I have is of my late brother Mohan and his Mohamed. I was no more than five years of age when Mohan died from tuberculosis in 1937. There was no medical cure for this disease in those days. My father could afford taking Mohan to Dundee, in Northern Natal, where the weather was better suited for tuberculosis. My parents, my little sister, Shakuntals and I accompanied Mohan. Mohamed came with. Mohamed was not only my brother's "pal" but his nurse, his doctor and all. These two could sing and play the harmonium and Tabla. Mohan played on string instruments too. Mohamed would not only nurse Mohan and be his constant companion; he would tend to my needs; "running noses" and all. This kind of caring and loving, of a tuberculosis *[sufferer]*, when members of my family were reluctant to come anywhere near him, was for me later in life a source of inspiration.

Rather ironically Mohamed's younger brother, Nunkoo and I became "hard" friends in the forties. Both Mohamed and Nunkoo are still around but urbanization has had its toll and much to my shame I haven't seen them for years.
