

Herby Govinden, interviewed by Danny Massey in 1999

[Govinden attended Fort Hare and later taught Chemistry there. It was during his time as a lecturer, 1959-63, that the university came under government control.]

DM: I wanted to ask you a bit about your student days first and then move into your lecturing days. Can you first tell me a bit about your family background?

HG: Well, I come from a family of teachers and musicians. My grandfather came to SA originally with a later group of immigrants, Indian laborers. He came from the University of [??] mainly to teach the new sugar cane planters. He did it by compiling a dictionary, which gave the English equivalent of Hindu words. And he opened up a night school. That was his role. He was a Christian and so our whole family has been Christian. I grew up in that kind of background in Pietermaritzburg.

And then of course when I got through my matric, being an only son, my parents were concerned about what I was going to do. And my cousin was at that time already at Fort Hare. Fort Hare was the only tertiary institution that we could go to for science. [He majored in Physics and Chemistry, then completed a PhD in Chemistry at Rhodes University.] So I finally got my PHD in physical chemistry. But what was I going to do with it? There were no openings. But there was possibly an opening in industry. So one of the lecturers wrote a contact in Durban at an oil firm. I went for an interview and got a letter saying I was high up on the list and they would let me know in due course. They notified me that they couldn't offer me a position because there were no toilet facilities for non-whites. Laughable, huh.

And so I stayed on at Fort Hare for 6 months and did work in a technical lab. Then I got a call from a Swedish firm in Durban who were turning out chip board. They gave me a position as a research chemist. I worked there for about 21 months. Then there was a position at Fort Hare, junior lectureship in chemistry. Professor Galloway asked me to consider it. He thought me suitable material for academia. I was appointed junior lecturer in January 1959.

But you know all Indian students couldn't move from Natal to any other province. We were restricted. So when we were students, we all had to apply for permits to go there. The permits were for 6 weeks and were extended every so often. The same thing applied to me with this position. They were worried about whether I should go there as a lecturer or whether I should remain in Natal. But there were no opening in Natal. Finally the immigration people worked on it. It took them 6 months to give me a permit. Finally, when I went to Fort Hare it was in July of 1959. I went straight into my junior lectureship....

HG: I will be honest [that as an undergraduate, I did not take part in politics at Fort Hare.] The Indian students as a group were not too keen about participating in politics. There were just a few of us. We did take part in discussions and so on. When I went back as a lecturer, I joined the NEUM. So I was part of that. This other lecturer, Mr. Nadessem, had done his degree at Fort Hare later than I. He got an honors degree and was asked by Professor Davidson to remain as a junior lecturer. Both of us were the first Indians to lecture at Fort Hare. He was also very politically aware.

We stayed on after the new regime took over in 1960. Where else could we go? I was then appointed senior lecturer. I got a post-doctoral fellowship in Canada. I left in 1963. While I was in Canada, I got a letter from the rector to say that I no longer had a position at Fort Hare because an Indian university had opened in Durban. So I had to come here. I had to come to an Indian university. I was forced. When I returned, I didn't return to Fort Hare. I returned to the Indian university here, which later became Durban-Westville....

HG: At the end of 1959 when the whole student body together with the other constituencies met as a final sort of meeting of Fort Hare as it was prior to 1960, there were some very memorable addresses. Amongst them was one given by one of the senior lecturers in English, Ms. Darell. She referred to it not as a university, but as a diversity. Because it was one of the only universities that had representatives of every race group. And then the bombshell was when they took over and many prominent members of staff were asked to go.

DM: How did you feel as a staff member seeing all these others leaving?

HG: It was quite shocking. We didn't know how to react. We were young on the staff. If we left, if we sympathized with them, where would we go? And some of them, the ones who left, asked us to remain. They said some of you are the only ones who can remain who haven't been victimized. We think your presence will do some good. So we were asked to remain.

We got into trouble, Mr. Nadessem and I and some other lecturers. We had meetings in what was called the bachelor's

quarters in those days, where the younger lecturers were housed. We had the special branch keeping an eye on us. We had secret meetings. We had meetings with students. We had meetings with other groups coming from other universities. We had the big controversy about NUSAS and we formed the Progressive Students' Union. Me and Mr. Nadessem. So I became more and more active as a lecturer there. I was on the files.

There was one rather ugly incident. We had informers amongst us. And my briefcase one afternoon was stolen. One of the lecturers saw this happening and caught the student. I don't know what they did to him. I was later called by the special branch and detained for half a day. They wanted to know what my political affiliations were. What did I think of the students at Fort Hare ? What did I think of other lecturers? And I kept mum. Fortunately for me, Professor Galloway's wife being an Afrikaner, he was very concerned about this. She made some approaches to the police and I was let out after half a day. That was fortunate. That was towards the end of 1963. After me, one of the younger lecturers was caught with subversive material and was fired. There were lots of things that happened in the course of those 4 years that I was there.

DM: Can you talk a bit more about the special branch presence. It seems like the government was terrified of the possibilities inherent in the Fort Hare student body.

HG: Oh yes They were looking in at us from the sports field. They were lurking around the bachelor's quarters. They had informers amongst students who were asked to listen to what we said during lectures. What we did over weekends, who visited us, where we went during our spare times, what kind of relationships we had with students. Were we calling them to meetings. They were always very suspicious of us.

DM: And this was also post-1960?

HG: Yes, post-1960. So much so that when I went to Canada, the embassy also had a file on me, knew where I came from and watched the activities I was involved in. In my final year at Rhodes, when we learned that universities were going to be taken over, particularly Fort Hare, we were very concerned. We had meetings to protest against this takeover. The feelings then, the reasons why the government was taking over Fort Hare and instituting other ethnic universities or bush colleges, was because they felt this mixing was no good. We felt that once we were separated, each university would become a hotbed of student politics. The Indian university was the last to be established. There was resistance from Indians in Natal. They wanted to setup an alternative. But it didn't work out. All of us were forced to the bush colleges as they became known.

DM: In the late 50s, there was vociferous protest against the [Transfer of Fort Hare] Act. You spoke of Mrs. Darrell's speech. Can you talk a bit more about the farewell to Fort Hare. I know they unveiled a plaque.

HG: That's right. And of course there were some amusing incidents. The registrar-elect and the rector visited Fort Hare towards the end of 1959. And the students of course gave them a hard time. We were all part of that group. We gave them a pretty rough time. So they got a taste of what they were coming into. There were lots of protest meetings....

DM: Did people feel like Fort Hare was dying in 1959?

HG: Oh yes! In the rooms where lectures met, there was talk of impending doom, there was talk of what was going to happen. Were things going to remain as we knew them. We had Professor Burrows. He did his utmost to expand the university, physically and otherwise.

DM: Someone was telling me that once it became clear they were going to take over the university, that they admitted more Indian and coloured students than ever before.

HG: Oh yes. That's right. Burrows was all out to do that. Of course, he had no place after '59, together with the registrar, Flak Agnew. People like that disappeared....

DM: You said you joined the NEUM. When was that?

HG: That was more when I was a lecturer.

DM: So it was later on.

HG: Yes, later on. Although I attended NEUM meetings in Durban after I left Fort Hare. But I only became a member when I was a lecturer. And we also formed APDUSA. We more or less started that at Fort Hare. A lot of our literature was considered subversive.

DM: You spoke a bit of your political involvement as a lecturer. Was it a difficult position being a university authority

and also someone who wanted to be politically active?

HG: Yeah, it was. We had to do it undercover. Either at the bachelor's quarters or weekends when we had meetings undercover. It was difficult. We knew the special branch was lurking. It was very uncomfortable, let me put it that way.

DM: When the takeover occurred in '60 you had staff members either resigning or being fired and all these Afrikaans-university educated people taking over. Between 1960 and '68 the university became 80% Afrikaans. What was it like for you from '60-63? Some have described it as being transformed into an Afrikaans university with black students.

HG: Look, it was growing. You could see the Afrikaans element more and more. We didn't want to identify with what was going on. But we did have a very interesting development. This young Afrikaner was appointed lecturer in Botany. And he was in love with the rector's daughter. But he showed a lot of interest in us as a separate group. And we were very suspicious of that at the beginning. We felt that he was a plant. But he identified with us completely. The special branch went after him. And I think he broke all associations with the rector's daughter and he was also sent away from Fort Hare. We had one or two white lecturers who also identified with us. We were suspicious of that at the beginning. We tested them. And when they proved themselves, they became part of us. There was Nichol Charles from Rhodes University who has since died. There was a young lecturer in philosophy. There was also a young lecturer in the department of Afrikaans. There were three or four who identified with us.

DM: How would you compare the atmosphere from when you were a student to the atmosphere of when you were a lecturer?

HG: It was different. It was very different. It was tense. The students didn't feel free. There was that wonderful camaraderie that was disappearing. There [had been] so much freedom of movement. We protested against the administration, yet we were free to move around. There wasn't that tension in the air. There was no special branch activity. But the special branch activity after 1960 made life very, very uncomfortable for us. We became suspicious of other students, other lecturers.

DM: Some students post-1960 have said they chose their majors and their paths of study based on which departments had monstrous professors.

HG: That wouldn't surprise me. Could be.

DM: Post-1960, how did the multi-racial nature of the college change?

HG: We could see some elements disappearing and more and more the Xhosa students being sent to Fort Hare.

DM: If you look at '59 and '60 as the death of Fort Hare, can you speak a bit about the activity surrounding the takeover? I know that before the takeover the students and staff united. Can you describe what was happening?

HG: Well, the SRC was still politically active. We were aware of student leaders. They did it at their own peril. Some were expelled for political activity. There was a definite clamp down on political activity by the administration. The special branch was there, so whatever was done, was always done under cloak of secrecy. It wasn't as obvious during that time as to what was going on. There were young lecturers getting more and more involved. The staff was more associated with students, the non-white staff, and their political activities. They identified with students far more after the takeover.

DM: Was Andrew Masondo there with you?

HG: Yes. We were always together. We knew that he was also trying to sabotage. That kind of thing was going on.

DM: One of the provisions of the Separate Universities Act was a separate non-white advisory council.

HG: Oh yes. I'm glad you raised that. There was an advisory senate. We began to protest against the disparities in salary scales and the fact that senior positions were no longer available to non-whites. We were not part of the decision making bodies. So I was chosen to address senate, the main senate body made up of whites, on this whole matter of salary scales and the fact that we were being discriminated against. So I was part of that deputation and that was my only contact with senate. Otherwise I didn't know what was going on with senate. And I'm not quite sure what went on with advisory senate either. And I don't think it was an effective body anyway. It was just a token.