

Transcription

Ela Gandhi EG

Fiona White FW

FW: So the first thing I wanted to ask you is really what your understanding is of your idea of non-racialism, because everyone has different ways of understanding it. So do you have a particular way?

EG: well, I think basically for me non-racialism is looking at people, understanding people as people and not as a particular group. So from me, racism is not just about different race groups, but it's much broader diversity when you look at you know, these sort of, people tend to look upon different religious groups in a different way, so that the more you divide, you know, the smaller the circle gets. And then if that circle is a circle that wants to keep everyone else out, then it becomes a problem, because that's when this group begins to think that, you know, they are superior, that they have all the answers to everything. So basically for me, my understanding of the whole concept is the idea that you know each person has only a particular perspective, that none of us have that broad spectrum, you know. We can only see what we have learnt to see. So over the years, you get socialized, and in the process of socialization, you begin to understand your world in a particular way. And then when that is challenged or you know, then you tend to sort of become defensive. Like, this animal that draws upon its legs inside, and becomes small. That's how it is. So that's my understanding, you know, for people to become non-racist, you have to allow for other ideas. And in that way, you broaden your horizon, you become a better individual, you become more knowledgeable, and diversity is a good thing. That's my view. That it's only through diversity, through learning about other, you know perspective. For me it's not about race, it's about perspectives. And in that way, you see the world in a different way. And that's what we need to develop, you know. The other issue that concerns me is that you always have the in group and the out group. Insiders and the outsiders. Whatever terminology we use, the point is that you have a particular group based on ideology, based on race, based on various other things. Now that group, if it considers itself as having a superior knowledge to other people, of being superior to other people, if it hierarchical, then it becomes a problem. If it's horizontal, it is something that's understandable, because people do gravitate towards people who have the same views. And that goes for, it's beyond race, because you take people with the same religious background, they gravitate towards each other. Now race has been a particularly a major issue in South Africa, so what you find is that you may have the same religious background, but if you're a different race, within that, there could be that as well, that keeps you apart. But on a general level, it's more understanding that, you know a common understanding that brings people together or takes people apart.

FW: That's a very interesting way of looking at it. Do you think, how you feel that the idea that you've expressed, has the idea, the concept around it kind of travelled from 1994. Do you think, I mean it's a very broad question, but do you think within the country, did the ideas of understanding each other, has it worked or not?

EG: Its South Africa in particular? Well, in South Africa there always has been an economic issue as well. Cause race has been related to the economy in the country because in the past what happened is that a

particular group had access to all the resources whilst others were kept out of it, so where you have that kind of a situation, then all the issues that we facing in this country, become sort of tinged with the economic issue. So it's not just about race, it's about haves and have nots. And when that happens, then you have many different kind of outcomes from that kind of a thing.

FW: Do you want to elaborate a bit more?

EG: well, the xenophobic attacks is one of them. And you would think why xenophobia, and why is it against African people in particular, the same race group attacking each other. But again, it's about access and it's about more, people who want to establish their own fiefdom, you know. Like druglords, because that's where it happens, not on campuses so much, or in other areas. It happens within informal settlements, so there you have people who have their own kind of agenda, and they use xenophobia, racism and so on as a way to detract from what they are doing, into something else. I mean I think that is exactly what happened with the Hutus and the Tutsis, you know, to get access to resources, they used racism there. Or ethnic identity. If you look at India, and the Hindi Muslim, the Jewish, all over the world, the holocaust and all that. At the end of the day it's all about resources, it's about wealth. So you were asking, where have we come to today?

FW: How close have we come to achieving a non-racial society, based on the ideals that were espoused?

EG: Well I mean, we haven't come very close to achieving the kind of society we want to see. And largely its because, apartheid put us in these different areas, and unless you've lived together, you grow up understanding race in a particular way, because large areas, like Mlazi, and other places around South Africa, you see where people are living in a community that's largely one race group, they are not experiencing you know neighbours, school friends, of different race groups, and where you see the people going out together, going to school together, living in the same neighborhood, things have changed. But largely in communities where that is not happening, you still find that there is a lot of racism. So, how does unravel that, you know? I mean you've put your roots in a particular space. I for instance have school friends, and because I was forced to go a purely Indian school, and a girl's school, my friends are all Indian girls. And we still meet, I mean that was your first friendship and it stays. So for me, I don't like the idea of having only Indian friends, but that's how it is.

FW: And let me ask you, what you feel would be the features of a non-racial society?

EG: I think, you know that we need to develop the spirit of understanding, of tolerance. I don't like the word tolerance because it has a connotation that I don't like, but Ill tolerate it, whereas respect is a better term. I think that is largely what on paper, anyway, our constitution, that is what South Africa is trying to achieve. For instance, in terms of the education policy, you're supposed to look t gender consciousness, at all religions and so on. But it's not really happening in the way it was meant to happen, in the sense that if I'm Hindu and I'm trying to teach in a class with Muslim and Christian students, I'm teaching from the perspective of a Hindu. Simply because I've been already grounded in a particular ideology, and I think that is the only ideology. So when I'm teaching other religions, I'm already prejudiced against them, so how can I give balanced view? And it's largely unconscious's you can say that I respect all religions and believe in all religions, but at the end of the day you are not conscious that

you've got this prejudice. Like we had an incident at a school here, where a Christian teacher was teaching Christianity to a class, and she talked about heaven and hell. And she said you believe in Christ and you go to heaven, that was your understanding, and a Hindu child said so what happens to us? And she said, inadvertently, you'll go to hell. And this made a big issue. So what I'm saying is that to you and me it might be a simple thing, to a child it's not simple, when you say something like that, it makes a big impact on the child. And to the teacher, that's her understanding, that is what she was grounded in. So I mean firing her from the job is not the solution to the problem, the problem is much larger. And we tend to do that sort of thing.

You have racism in the Free State, and you want to expel the students. Is that the problem? Is that going to cure? There's racism all over, and that's because of years of indoctrination, people have been taught to believe that we are different, and that god has ordained that there's a superior race and an inferior race. Now, you know it's going to take many years before you can change that attitude, in for instance the Dutch reformed church or you know. They may say that no that's not what they believe, but beliefs don't change overnight, they take a long time to change. And I think, you know, it's more getting to understand, being with people.

The other thing which is happening, there is that economic issue as well, so it's not just about race, it's also about class. So you find that when they go to school, two different race groups, some of them have access to a lot of resources, they have cars, you know, while others don't have. So what happens, you know? How do you become friends? And you look at people at that level, in terms of class. I've got this, and I make friends with other people who have this, I can't make friends with a person who lives in a shack, for instance. And I think that that is wrong, but it is there, and it's ingrained in people. Also people don't understand the experiences of a person who is living, for instance, in an informal settlement. And in terms of their own economic positions and so on.

FW: I suppose what's interesting about that is that wealth is still predominantly racially divided. When you talk about how these beliefs are ingrained and they take a long time, is there anything else you can think of that would break down these beliefs?

EG: I think for us, what we are doing at the moment, we've got a little lesson to learn. And what we are looking at is the whole issue of prejudice and discrimination, what does it mean? And I think the mindset is where we have to start changing things. It's like gender issues, and we talk about gender and race, because it's the same kind of prejudice. And what happens is that we socialized, we begin to see things, we begin to understand that a women's role is a particular role, a man's role. So you begin to understand from early childhood in the same way that black people are only supposed to do certain types of jobs, white people other things. We don't understand that we have had access to many things to make us understand the world differently. If you have access to a computer you are able to look up things and know about many things. About nature, science, technology, about people, about literature. You need to teach this from early childhood. You see, we look at roles in early childhood, and actually we're still developing that right now, you know, the ECD. We are based at the Durban University of Technology, but I'm retired.

FW: Yes, that's what I was wondering. Because I thought you were retired.

EG: I used to do all these things, you know, I produced the little booklet. It has to be tested, and it has to be taught differently to different age groups. So it's called non-violence, I'll show you the book. It deals with HIV and AIDS, because at the end of the day we are talking about prejudice. It deals with gender, with race, broadly with discrimination. So that's the lesson plan we're talking about. But at different age groups you approach the topic in different ways. So now there are educators and professional people, and people who are working in the field, the ECD field. So we are looking at bringing them all together, and drawing up a curriculum. At the moment it's mainly learning through play, there's no emphasis on values, on tackling issues like prejudice and discrimination.

FW: I'm just curious as well because I have a 3 year old, and he just seems far too young to even begin to conceive the difference, or have prejudices yet. Or is it something that's so intrinsically biased in your early childhood?

EG: there's a lot, yes. Because immediately she will begin to think about roles, she will identify to you, so in the home, it depends on whether you are equal partners or unequal partners, a lot depends on that. And then how you socialize the child, so that she learns that everything is done in partnership. That I'm a girl, but that doesn't mean that I have to cook and I have to clean, that we do it together. And those are some of the things, that when you're talking about gender consciousness, that is what brings in the gender consciousness. Why do I have to wear pink and not blue? I like blue, why can't I wear blue? Why do I play with dolls and not with cars, why can't I build something? The thing is not to force the child, but if she likes to do something, she must have the opportunity to do it. But all around us, they are separating, at the toy shop there's boys games and there's girls games.

FW: It's completely separate. So that's one area, in particular in early childhood development, which you think could play in role in breaking down those beliefs.

EG: Yes, just a simple exercise I'll tell you about. When I was talking to some teachers, and we were talking about getting little children to take responsibility, you know in each group to take the responsibility of cleaning and serving food, milk and biscuits. And I said, well I read a book where they said the child writes, today is my turn to serve the food, and I'm going to give all the best biscuits to the other children and keep the broken ones for myself. And the teachers all said but that's not how it is – when it's my turn, I have the right to keep all the best ones for myself. And I said, immediately, do you know how you impacting on that child's mind? The child is always going to think that I must acquire the best and other people must have the rest. And if you build that kind of mentality in the child, the child is going to grow like that. And that's what we are doing in our materialistic society today. And consciously you can change that, and a child can learn. If a child does something every day in school, they can learn. Thinking about other people, I mean that is what our scriptures teach us. So you're learning religion, you're learning good values.

FW: Going back to looking at key features of non-racialism, are there any particular elements of society that you feel can play an important role, you've already spoken about education.

EG: well I think economic equality is a very big thing, where people are at the same level economically and educationally is another important thing. But good education, not education that teaches you to be prejudiced, but rather education that gets you out of the prejudice, you know. I'm not sure if you know this, they call it Jehadi's window, a psychological thing. It's about human beings, and how they see what happens psychologically. Each one of us has a certain portion that is like 4 windows. The one is where you know what you are, and you know what other people think about you. Another one is where what you think about yourself is different to other people, so you've kept out, you are within yourself. The third one is when you have allowed yourself so that everyone knows where you are, and you know who you are, so that's an open personality. And so if you look at those four, the fourth one is where you don't know exactly who you are, and you have kept other people out completely. And one is where you have allowed yourself to know. So I'm not sure if I'm explaining it correctly but the bottom line is that when you are open to other people, and you see and listen to other people, if for instance I am prepared to listen to you and think about it, and my mind is open, and I don't mind if you criticize me because it's from criticism that I learn. And if I have that attitude, I will learn. Where I'm not prepared to see that and I keep myself closed, if you allow that unconscious part of your life to shine through, in that way you broaden your perspective. With prejudice, with discrimination, you close in and you don't want to allow any other views to come in, you're not open, and you're not even open to yourself, you're clamping up. Then you're never going to broaden your perspectives. The first thing is to get people to understand that, to get people to be open, to allow others to say – so if you're interacting with another race group, and say I feel that you know what now you are being prejudiced, you said something that hurts me, I must be able to tell you that's not on, this is where you've made the mistake.

FW: How can one build this sort of self-insight and lack of defensiveness? How do we build that in society? But also the idea that being self-reflective is a positive trait, because it doesn't seem to be very common in South African society. How can one perhaps develop this perspective?

EG: we need to have honest, open discussions, we need to have forums where we can sit and talk honestly and openly, say things without fear of being attacked or something, I think that is the important thing, to be able to have robust discussion, but not antagonistic discussion. In our society somehow what I see is very antagonistic discussion, where people come with very, an idea that what I'm saying is the truth, and I know the answers to everything. It's just a way of thinking, you know. And I think that each one of us, each race group, has that kind of arrogance, you know I see it in the Indian community, I see it in the white community, where sometimes people think that only whites can do things. You find people who say that during the soccer world cup everything went smoothly only because a white man was controlling South Africa. The guy, whatever his name is, who is head of FIFA. They said that he was in charge during that time, and he's the one who prevented all kinds of things from happening, that's how people think.

FW: I think that in particularly KZN, I feel that there is much more racial tension down here than in Johannesburg where I'm from.

EG: I think it is, it is. There is a lot more tension in KZN in many ways. In the Indian community, between white and Indian, between African and Indian. I can't pinpoint why, but I also see that here there isn't,

its possibly just that idea that people are not prepared to look at another perspective. And you find, well it's not just KZN, but if you go to other places like Limpopo for instance, there's been killings and all that, political killings and that sort of thing. Now why? Why do you have to kill a person just because they believe in something else? But also, there's that view in particularly in KZN, amongst a lot of people, that African people can't run a country, they don't have the ability. Which is, I think, I mean that's the height of prejudice, because I've seen very good African leaders, and one or two bad ones don't, I mean in every race group you see the bad ones and the good ones. It's got nothing to do with race.

FW: Let me go back to asking you, if you've got any comments in terms of building a non-racial society, in terms of media, religion, business, anything you want to talk about.

EG: Well I think media plays a very big role. The entire issue of gender, race and all that. I think media is particularly bad, it can be good sometimes, but on the whole our media presents a very prejudiced view on things. Prejudiced in the sense that the media is not a court of law, but its playing the role of a court of law. It condemns people, it character assassinate people, and that sort of thing. And once you start doing that sort of thing, then that prejudice goes on, because you generalize. You think that because this person did this, that all the people who belong to that group are the same.

FW: And how could you see the media changing this role, or doing things differently?

EG: I think you know, we have to tackle that question and we're not doing it in a good way. Like tackling it from the point of view of the people who train journalists, what are they training them to do? Is it about selling your paper or is it about giving.. What is the role of the media? Are they actually looking at that? Are they actually looking at ethical issues? Because there's ethics in everything. Without ethics, you can go and do research and produce things, but at the end of the day if you don't have ethics, how are you helping humanity? So it's the same with journalists. No journalist will be able to tell you what their role is, because they don't learn about ethics in journalism. You know the Sowetan yesterday printed this photograph, photographs of people, very explicit photographs, of people involving in sexual conduct, on the front page. It was on the news, and people were commenting, whether this is being done to sell the paper, what is the intention behind printing pictures like that on the front page? And there was a time when gender activists had asked all the newspapers, especially the Sunday papers, on the last page, where they put in pictures of women, to ask them for at least one month to not put women in that position, because it puts women in that position of being sexual objects. And they refused. The Sunday times refused to do that. So it just shows, what ethics is there, then? And what do they understand by ethics? Every journalist will stand up and tell you, the public has the right to know, but the right to know what? When you ask them that, they say that you are now practicing censorship, and you mustn't ask that question. But it's an important question, because what are we teaching? What are we teaching our children? We need to know how and when we say what to children. Like you asked me what it is you teach a 3 year old. Well, it comes in progress; you teach certain things at that age, so it's the same way with a newspaper. There has to be a what, and that's my view.

FW: We've spoken a lot about the challenges to building a non-racial society, but is there anything else you want to add?

EG: Well, you know Archbishop Tutu came out with this whole idea of wealth tax. I don't agree with the way it was publicized, I don't know exactly what he said, but my view is that you know, a few years back I went to Ethiopia, and I met a South African person, and he told me that in Ethiopia the law works differently, and he told me of an incident once when he was travelling and he knocked down a man accidentally. His side of the story was that this man was jaywalking and he knocked them. Then he was arrested, put in prison, because it's very serious. So he was trying to tell me how difficult it is to drive because the pedestrian's rights are much more than the drivers. So he was brought to court after that, and the magistrate told him, you have knocked a person who was a breadwinner for a family, so now every week for 2 years you have to take a goat to this person's family. Now that was the fine he had to pay, and I thought about it, and I said in our country, if you knock someone down you're probably going to pay a fine to the state. But what happens to the victim? And you know we had the truth and reconciliation commission, did anyone ever think about the victim and what reparation means/ does it mean that the state plays the reparation, so that everyone as taxpayers have to give that family something and you give them something. Is that enough, I mean you've taken the breadwinner, you've done lots of things, at the end of the day, where is that family. Whereas if you matched, you know what you did to my family, you have caused me damage, now you pay reparations for that. In some way, it doesn't have to be monetary, it can be anything. And they've done it, in Rwanda, where people had to go clean up other people's gardens. They had different forms of reparations. So if something like that was done, on the one hand you would change, and I would change by seeing that you know you are repenting now, and I can see it. And that makes a difference. That brings us together. But where you don't see that, I mean this man was telling me, taking the goats to the family every week got him to understand the family, and eventually it was a pleasure to go to the family for him. So it's not about wealth tax or something, the way I see it, this is how I see it, and we haven't done that in South Africa, we didn't do anything like that. So we don't know how many people out there are still bitter, still holding some kind of pain and grudge and you know whatever.

FW: It's a very interesting perspective. The last thing I wanted to, well two questions, well is there anything that you personally do in your own life that might be recurrent, that builds non-racialism in a way that others could learn from?

EG: Well I think that for me it's just a question of looking at people as people, as human beings, seeing divinity in humanity. And I think for me that is something that's important. No matter what the person is, whatever they do, in terms of race, class, gender, but you see that each person has that divinity, is a human being like you and I, and has feelings and has constraints and so on. It makes you understand. Like sometimes you wonder how people survive, you know, and if we take the trouble to understand that really, can you survive on this amount, or something, do you need more, how can we help, and how can we develop individually, develop other people and help people. I think that compassion, that humanity in us is fast dying, you know. Nelson Mandela said when he was asked what ubuntu is, he said in the old days we used to walk from one village to another, and on the way if you had to stop at a village overnight, people would take you in happily and give you shelter and food. That is ubuntu. But that spirit, does it still exist? To me its modern life, materialistic life that has put in imperatives that we have to tackle now.

FW: And that leads me on to my last question, and is there anything that you feel the foundation should be doing in its future work to build non-racialism?

EG: Well I think this building consciousness, at all levels, is a very important issue. Building consciousness in the community. You see very often a lot of us begin to say, we try to think in terms of government, of big issues, how do we get rid of informal settlements, that's not our job, we can't do it. So you sit at home and you do nothing at the end of the day. To me, there's a lot of things the ordinary people can do if they get together, and they go out, and they develop an understanding, I mean that is what I used to do when I was a social worker, and even though, you know we were told that you can only work within a certain race group, I didn't. I went out and I worked with everyone. So if there were communities living within the area that I was operating in, and there were predominantly African communities, I went there and I had discussions with them, got to understand what their problems are, got to understand what it is that we can deliver, and what we can't deliver. SO in other words, we have discussions with them, organise the community, tell them to march to the offices, to make sure they get, for instance, water, tell them which authority to go to. So I had the knowledge, they didn't. so I could share the knowledge, but at the end of the day they fought for their own rights, and we supported them. We helped them. So that is what we need to do - we need to help people. And we can help, you know for instance we could put in a borehole, and we did that. We got people to sponsor and put in a borehole, so they had their own borehole, they weren't dependant on anything else. In that way, the community develops its own skills, knowledge, about simple things, you know, you don't need to have a degree to know where water comes from.

FW: I know and that obviously feeds in a lot with the kind of work that I actually do, where it's very much participatory, community-driven, and you're just there to facilitate.

EG: yes, you have resources on the one hand, where things happen, so you link people, but you don't got here with answers. I think that is what we need to do. And also this ECD, actually psychologists, I believe that in the first years of the child's life, the child learns everything of importance you know. Behaviour and understanding and all that. The skills come in after 7, but in those first birth to 7 years, the child gets grounded. And those are the crucial years of the child's life. You make a mistake in those years, and you know... it's... So we need to talk to the teachers who are looking, we have so many informal schools now, helping, women who are saying they will bring children together, and have a crèche, and you find them all over the country. But there is no support for those people, and the more we have gender awareness, women are going to work, and what is going to happen to the children. The government is big on saying that we must have so many women in business, and in parliament, but what are they saying about the children? You know, the kids? It used to be and it still is predominantly a women's job, you know. Men haven't learnt, that's the truth. Very few homes where you'll find the man is sitting and looking after the child, as his responsibility. It's either the grandmother or the mother, or a caregiver, and usually it's a woman caregiver. So what support are we giving to them? Because otherwise we have another generation of people who are going to be a burden to society and not an asset to society.

FW: Thank you so much for your time, is there anything else you would like to add?

