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Key:
SO: Dr Sue Onslow (Interviewer)
MB: Madhuri Bose (Respondent)

SO: This is Sue Onslow talking to Madhuri Bose at Senate House on Friday, 23rd May 2014. Madhuri, thank you so much indeed for coming in to talk to me for this oral history project. I wonder if you could begin, please, by explaining how you came to be recruited to the Commonwealth Secretariat – to what post and for what purpose?

MB: Thanks, Sue. I'm sure you'll excuse me if I ramble a bit because it's going back more than twenty years. I was based in Geneva through the 1980s. I studied there at the Graduate Institute of International Studies, which has always been considered the temple of international law. During that period, I worked for the ILO – the International Labour Organisation. Earlier, in the late 1970s, I had worked briefly in Geneva at the Centre for Human Rights. Now it is the High Commissioner's Office, but before it was called the Centre for Human Rights within the UN Geneva system.

A very good friend of mine, Peter Davies, was the Director of the Anti-Slavery Society for years – in the 1980s for sure, [and] maybe even earlier. I had done some work for the Anti-Slavery Society from time to time, including a big project for them on bonded labour in India, so I knew Peter very well. Some time in 1990, he told me about the Commonwealth Secretariat Human Rights Unit and asked me if I would be interested to apply for a position there. I have to admit, I knew nothing about the Unit and not much about the Commonwealth Secretariat. So, since my good friend Peter asked me to consider it, I applied and came for an interview sometime in late 1990, I think. There was some competition for the position. There was an Australian lady who was apparently very good. Anyway, I was chosen.

Pera Wells was the first Head of the Human Rights Unit, and I think she was quite alone in the Unit. As I had mentioned to you, at the best of times, the

Unit had only three officers on staff. I'll come to that a bit later in terms of the challenge with resources, but going back to my recruitment… I joined the Secretariat in January 1991. Paul LaRose-Edwards was the Head of the Unit and he was by himself at that time. One of the first things he told me was that he had gone to New Delhi to start a dialogue with the Indians about their participation in the Human Rights programme of the Secretariat. He said, "They just showed me the door." The Indian government has always taken the position that India is quite capable of dealing with human rights challenges within the country and did not need any international organisation to 'interfere' in their human rights issues. So, poor Paul was sent off. One of his first instructions to me was, "Madhuri, you have to develop and implement a Human Rights programme particularly for the Asian members of the Commonwealth," and he added, "As an Indian you have an advantage, but perhaps also a bigger disadvantage." That was the main job that he said I had to do straight away, and I was also put in charge of the *Human Rights Update* – the Unit's newsletter. I have brought a few copies for you.

SO: Thank you.

MB: I think the *Human Rights Update* used to be published earlier but it had stopped, mainly because there were no resources to run it. I came up with the suggestion that if we were going to begin a programme in Asia – South Asia and Southeast Asia – I should first go and talk to the governments. So, I prepared a proposal – a consultative mission for South and Southeast Asia – and it, my proposal, went up through the system.

SO: Which governments did you approach? India, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore…

MB: And Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Having worked in the UN system, I was used to NGOs being part of human rights work and human rights dialogue. So, I had stupidly – put that in! – assumed that I would be meeting with NGOs in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka – I was asked just to focus on South Asia first. I got a response saying, "Oh, no, the Commonwealth does not deal with NGOs where human rights are concerned." So, I said, "Then it won't make sense my just going and talking to governments." So, for several months, nothing happened. I was just told I couldn't go.

SO: Who told you that you couldn't go?

MB: Well, my proposal went up through the system. Sir Anthony Siaguru was the Deputy Secretary General-Political at that time. He explained [it] to me: "Madhuri, I know you have worked for the UN, but here we simply don't have a relationship with NGOs where human rights are concerned." It was not that they, the Secretariat, didn't work with NGOs, but not in human rights. I insisted and I finally got my way, and – I have a full report on my mission – sometime in the latter half of 1991 or early '92 I was finally allowed to go on this mission.

SO: Was that the product of getting the political support from the Secretariat and the Secretary General in your approach to governments? Or was it

that you managed to persuade individual governments? I'm just wondering about the dynamics of that process of achieving your goal of being able to talk to governments *and* NGOs.

MB: Well, I was told that the South Asian member countries had, until then, stayed out of the Human Rights programme of the Secretariat. They hadn't been involved since 1985 when the Unit was established. So, I knew that I had to break the ice and I had to talk to the governments, first of all, to find out their own priorities.

SO: Madhuri, excuse me, but you are a Bengali. Was the very fact that you had been appointed to the Human Rights Unit in itself an indication of a lowering of Indian resistance to the human rights work of the Secretariat? There is a degree of a government imprimatur for appointments to the Secretariat, across the Commonwealth.

MB: Absolutely, but my background was rather different from the more usual or diplomatic ones. I had been an independent researcher and officer with the UN, so I had no government background at all. And, in fact, I was unpopular with our Indian mission in Geneva because I had done this research document on bonded labour when that issue came up at the UN Human Rights Commission. I was challenged by Indian government officials who claimed that bonded labour did not exist in India – and, of course, I had to deal with that.

SO: And defend your research.

MB: Exactly. It was easily defensible because it was based on my field research. Peter Davies from the Anti-Slavery Society knew my background. Peter also knew Paul LaRose-Edwards well, so they had talked. So, I think they knew that my candidature wouldn't help in relation to the Government of India.

SO: So, once your determined approach of talking to governments and NGOs had been accepted, how did you start your tour?

MB: Well, I'll tell you. I will be very frank, because this is history and I'm sure nobody will mind. My first stop was Islamabad, Pakistan. At that time, in fact, wasn't Benazir Bhutto in power? She had appointed a human rights officer in their Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I was received very warmly. The officer – I forget his name – said, "I'm very new to this business," but he did have a certain amount of background in human rights. I recall that we had a good discussion and he said, "Let us carry on with this dialogue."

My next stop was India, and I can tell you, my government gave me a very hard time. They couldn't show me the door as they did to Paul, but they gave me the same lecture. "You know, we don't need outsiders to come and tell us about human rights." So, I said, "No, that's not the reason why I am here. I want you to give the lead within the Commonwealth system, since I know our human rights activists are better and more experienced than many." So, they said, "Fine, let's keep talking." My idea was for India to hold the first Commonwealth regional workshop or conference. They said, "If you want to hold a conference here, we shall participate but we are not going to host it."

And they argued, "What if Pakistan raises the Kashmir issue?" So, I explained that the Commonwealth's was a purely promotional mandate: we could not do any investigations; we could only promote human rights through education and training and that's all. Therefore, I said, Kashmir could not be an issue. They, the Foreign Ministry officials, at least gave me their word that if a South Asian regional conference was held, they would participate, but no, they would not host it. I'll come back to that.

Then I went on to Sri Lanka. Again, I was very well received and they were keen to talk. They wanted to conduct some human rights education for public officials, which was one of the key programmes of my Unit. With regard to hosting the first regional conference, they said, "You can consult with us." I mean, they were not negative, but they didn't want to commit. Then I went on to Dhaka, Bangladesh, and I met with this wonderful man – I'm sure you've heard of him, Farooq Sobhan?

SO: Indeed.

MB: [*Laughter*] And I could tell… I didn't know him before then, but he had been briefed, and one of the first things he said after my opening words [was], "Tell me, Madhuri, what topic and when? Bangladesh will host the first Asian regional conference." And that's how it happened.

SO: This was from the 2nd to 4th of June, 1992: the 'South Asia Regional Workshop on Protecting the Rights of Women and Children with Special Reference to International Trafficking and Labour Migration'. So, this was in collaboration with the Women In Development programme of the Secretariat and was the first South Asia workshop. It would have been enormously important, then, to get a leading government official's support for your work.

MB: Absolutely. I was, of course, thrilled. I met with some local human rights defenders and they were also tremendous, especially the women. I must say, this was so inspiring. We just facilitated the workshop. The local NGO participants were the experts; they knew much more than I did, or we did.

SO: The Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, Mustafizur Rahman, opened your workshop. To have that stamp of approval was in sharp contrast to the Indian Government's treatment of your particular work.

MB: Exactly.

SO: And yet the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative had moved to Delhi in the early part of the 1990s. It had been established as a leading Commonwealth NGO in London and was in the process of moving to Delhi.

MB: That's right. Richard Bourne will be able to tell you the inside story better than I. But actually, I was approached: they wanted me to be the Director there, but I decided to stay on with the Secretariat at that time. Soli Sorabjee, who is a very senior advocate of the Supreme Court of India, was extremely supportive of this move to Delhi and the one individual who almost compelled

the initiative to go to Delhi. But I would leave it to Richard to tell you how it actually happened. Soli talked to me then and asked me to join as the Director. He was also trying to help in many other ways.

Interestingly, what I found from 1991 was that the Secretariat – and especially Chief Emeka Anyaoku – tried to involve India more actively, not only in human rights. In fact, not so much in human rights, but in other ways, and perhaps that explains the subsequent history. In fact, I know that there was a senior Malaysian official whom I had met at one of my workshops who was very interested in the position of the Deputy Secretary General-Political but he didn't get the job. Mr Srinivasan did, and I think this desire to bring India more into the Commonwealth and its work played a role there. But this is with hindsight.

Anyway, coming back to that first meeting… Then, of course, there were many other human rights workshops where India always participated. In this connection, I just want to jump a few years and tell you what happened in 1997.

SO: Yes.

MB: I never gave up the wish for India to host at least a training workshop or conference. As I said, I'm very stubborn.

SO: A fixation, perhaps?

MB: A fixation. And until today, I feel India has so much to offer in the field of human rights – not necessarily through the government, but through our human rights activists, and I've always felt the Commonwealth has lost out because they stayed away. That was not the decision of the activists, but rather it was the decision of the government. So, in 1997, I had a mischievous plan. I knew Chief Minister Jyoti Basu of West Bengal – which is my state – quite well. He had been involved in the Indian independence struggle and knew my father very well, so I had a personal relationship with him. Whenever I went to Calcutta, I usually called on him. So, sometime in 1996, I just raised the matter with him in conversation: "What about Bengal – which had been in the forefront of our freedom movement – holding the first Commonwealth conference on human rights for our region?" He asked me a few more questions and then he said, "Yes." I was pleased. It was to be a workshop to bring together officers of national Human Rights Commissions. I contacted the Indian National Human Rights Commission and the Chairman then was Justice MN Venkatachaliah, former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India. He asked me to see him in Delhi. Jyoti Basu was one of the most senior of the Chief Ministers in India and highly respected, and when I told Justice Venkatachaliah that the Chief Minister of West Bengal had already agreed to host it in Calcutta…

SO: [*Laughter*]

MB: …Justice Venkatachaliah said, "Wonderful, I am coming with my team!"

SO: Superb diplomacy!

MB: I also turned it into an inter-regional workshop. The South Africans came. I mean, it was mainly for the Asian Commonwealth, but I got a few experts from other regions as well.

SO: Madhuri, what did you see as the purpose of these workshops? Were these to create a forum for the exchange of ideas, a cross-fertilisation of experience? This is the promotional quality of your work, but I'm just wondering how you saw it in the diplomacy of the Commonwealth.

MB: As you must have noted, the foreign minister of a host country usually inaugurated a workshop or a conference, so the host country's government became centrally involved, irrespective of whether the event concerned public officials or human rights commissioners or any other human rights issue. And since the foreign ministry was our line ministry for human rights, it was always involved. So, the government automatically got involved and you make contacts – you make personal contacts – and I found that helped a great deal over the ten years that I ran these training workshops. The two last training workshops were in Cameroon and Mozambique – they had just joined the Commonwealth. They were very keen for us to run training workshops for their public officials. The respective foreign ministers inaugurated the workshops and other senior public officials participated. So, we became known. Clearly they found us useful, to whatever degree, and I think there was a kind of confidence-building. At that witness meeting you had in Marlborough House [24 June 2013], I had said that the Human Rights Unit – or the Human Rights programme of the Secretariat – was really the 'Cinderella of the Secretariat'. I will explain.

SO: Yes, you did.

MB: Coming from the UN background, I want to highlight something here: the difference I found between the UN system and the Commonwealth system as regards the politics of human rights. Human rights are essentially very political. Even when we're talking about economic or social rights, they have a very strong political colour. But what I found within the UN system was – especially since I was working in a more technical field dealing with labour standards in the International Labour Organisation, where there has been a lot of codification of standards – quite a bit of *de-politicisation* of the subject of human rights. I found that to a lesser extent at the Centre for Human Rights. But you have these standards – Human Rights Conventions – and member countries have to report through a very established procedure. Member countries had to come up with statistics, and you had standards against which to compare the performance of different countries.

What I found in the Commonwealth, first of all – and here I'll be treading into some tricky areas – [was that] human rights in all its aspects – social, economic and political – was considered *entirely* political, and thus remained a highly sensitive issue. I mean, I almost…[*Laughter*] I'm of course exaggerating here, [but I almost] had to talk in whispers within Marlborough House when I was talking human rights.

SO: Madhuri, what you've outlined is the educative purpose of training civil servants and of getting, in hierarchical terms, the endorsement of the

government, the involvement of the foreign ministry, [and] the involvement of key civil servants. They should all be educated in the process of standardisation [and] codification of labour standards as a human right…

MB: Yes, also using the example of the UN.

SO: Yes, and it also seems you're identifying that – for the Commonwealth and within the Secretariat – there was much more of a classic approach to diplomacy, together with a suspicion of NGO activity as by non-elected groups. You seem to be suggesting a Secretariat view that it was *for* government officials, whereas NGOs risked complicating government control, autonomy and indeed sovereignty. An understanding that human rights equated to political rights is a minefield.

MB: Yes, and I believe the Commonwealth or the Commonwealth Secretariat didn't need to adopt that approach – i.e. a conservative or narrow approach – because human rights incorporate political and civil, economic, social and cultural rights, and in that NGOs are key stake holders.

SO: But how far was the Secretariat reflecting the wider views of individual and key members of the Commonwealth? Or did it have its own internal bureaucratic attitude? I'm wondering where this resistance came from.

MB: Well, during my time NGOs participated fully, starting with the first Asian Regional Workshop and in subsequent activities. Coming back to it… Now, here I'll be a bit critical of my colleagues. I think civil servants, essentially – and that has been my personal experience – tend to take a very…

SO: Cautious?

MB: Yes, cautious. A *very* cautious approach to human rights. As I said, I was a fish out of water in the Secretariat because I was not an ex-bureaucrat by any means, and I found that my colleagues who were seconded from their different ministries or governments had almost a conceptual limitation. I mean, though they knew about the two International Human Rights Covenants – the Commonwealth is, in any case, committed to apply the same UN standards – given their predominantly civil service background, they had this very limited view. I could be wrong. And also, I think that it was a kind of reactive thing because the Secretariat was dealing with governments such as India, Malaysia and Singapore who were opposed to or at best reluctant to support a human rights programme at the Secretariat. When I come to the World Conference of 1993, I can elaborate on that a bit. I think the Secretariat wanted to be, or felt that it had to be, very cautious where human rights were concerned because of the attitude of key members. These were some of the aspects at play.

SO: This is a time when the Commonwealth was facing challenges in the 1990s, with the end of the Cold War, the success of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, and also the rise of civil society as a product of globalisation. So, this input from civil society activists into international

diplomacy was, importantly, different for individual governments. In the period before this, although there was important civil society activism such as the anti-apartheid movement, international diplomacy was more top-down and hierarchical, managed by governments, which privileged the role of the state. This upwelling of points of pressure, points of mobilisation, appeared more and more in the 1990s. These were challenges for governments – as well as the Secretariat – to have to deal with.

MB: Yes, and I think that the Secretariat was not keeping in step. It was very frustrating when I was actually trying to get things moving and, as I had mentioned, I was not allowed to go and talk to NGOs in South Asia for six months or more because, "the Secretariat [doesn't] talk to NGOs on human rights matters." So, I had a bit of a culture shock there, coming from the UN system. I remember saying, "But governments don't promote human rights. It's the civil society organisations which are promoting human rights. So, how can you do any promotional work in human rights minus civil society?"

SO: Madhuri, did you also take the Harare Declaration as part of your 'mandate', because it emphasised good government?

MB: Absolutely. But what I found was this artificial divide, and now I have to be very critical. I found that my colleagues in the Secretariat had no problems discussing democracy and good governance. But human rights? That's going a bit too far!

SO: So, wait. How did they see democracy and good governance if not intimately connected with human rights?

MB: I don't know!

SO: Did you have energetic debates with them to say, "There's a fundamental contradiction in terms in your attitude and practice here. You're trying to put democracy and good governance into a particular silo and resisting, in fact, important cultural and societal inputs."

MB: Yes, but as you know, the Secretariat was – I don't know if it still is – a very top-down system.

SO: Yes, and your unit was three people.

MB: Yes, and we didn't have much of a say! All the big decisions were being made by the Directors in consultation with the DSGs and the Secretary General.

SO: So, you weren't involved at all? As the 'Cinderella', you were…

MB: No, not that, but the official line was [that] human rights should be somewhat in the background, otherwise there will be problems with governments. So, I myself couldn't believe what happened in 1993, and that's why I want to talk to you a little bit about it. Although I would like to point out that, as far as the Unit being treated like Cinderella was concerned, I don't think that really changed fundamentally.

SO: You are implying the fact that it stayed a Unit, rather than a division with its own director. The allocation of funds indicated its junior status.

MB: Exactly. And even worse than that, the Unit had Cinderella status, a step-child status. And we were kicked around also. We were part of what was then, in the 1990s, the International Affairs Division, which later became the Political Affairs Division. We were subsequently thrown out of the Political Affairs Division and sent to the Legal and Constitutional Affairs Division. The reason [was that] Political Affairs is very high profile, so we don't want the Human Rights Unit to appear there with the Political Affairs Division.

SO: So, you weren't part of the Human Resources and Development Group?

MB: No. We were sent off to the Legal Affairs Division with the unwritten message [to], "Deal with human rights in a legalistic fashion." I feel that, again, was another move to somewhat sideline human rights. We were not doing any of the codification work that was being done by the UN. So, what should be the role of the Unit within the Legal Affairs Division? Given our mandate, we couldn't really shift from what we were doing in terms of promoting exchanges of expertise through workshops and training of public officials. That did not stop, but it became increasingly difficult to find funding. By 1992, the one other person in my Unit, Paul, left.

SO: So, *you* were the unit?

MB: I was the Unit. And the World Conference on Human Rights was coming up, in 1993. So, I was being asked, "Are you sure the Secretariat can actually play a role here? You are the only one. We don't know when anybody else will be recruited." So, I said, "I want to take this up as a challenge, and I would invite participation across the Divisions. In that way, we can deal with it, because I'll have the expertise and resources from the other Divisions." I argued [that] the Economic Affairs Division should be part of the team, since we're talking about economic rights, [and] the Women's Division must be part of it, we're talking about women's rights. And I was lucky, I must say. I got a very positive response from the Directors across the Divisions: Rumman Faruqi was heading Economic Affairs; Eleni Stamiris was heading the Women's Division; Political Affairs was headed by Max Gaylard. Other Divisions also joined in. We had somebody from CFTC as well. So, I started these internal dialogues with my colleagues and I found that, for the first time, they were actually very interested.

SO: Did you also recruit specifically the Information Officer?

MB: Yes. I have found this photograph, so you will see. Information Division, of course, was involved. This [*pointing to photograph*] is a special consultative meeting held in Geneva in connection with the World Conference. Once I had got the Secretariat Divisions together, I realised – much to my dismay – that there was a big fight breaking out between the Western countries and some of the key Commonwealth members, including India and Malaysia, in the World Conference process. What was being promoted at that time was this integrated approach to human rights and development: that development makes no sense unless you have human rights in place. The developing

countries were objecting to that approach. They saw it as 'conditionality' in development aid and interference in internal matters.

SO: Absolutely, yes. The whole drive of the Washington Consensus…

MB: Exactly. So, there I was, faced with this row. Well, I was sent off to attend the preparatory committee meetings. So, I was at the Bangkok meeting and I found that this divide was just growing. Then I got another idea. I came back and talked to my colleagues. Stuart Mole was then the Director of the Secretary General's Office and he was very supportive. I said, "The Commonwealth is all about consensus building. Why don't we try our hand at this? The UN can't do it and they are having real confrontations among members within the UN." So, I don't know what my colleagues really thought, but they agreed at least to try. At this stage, of course, Chief had been involved through Stuart. Chief, I have to say, was very cautious as far as human rights were concerned, but he did something wonderful at this time. I suggested, "Why don't we bring together some of the key Commonwealth members and others in a meeting in Geneva and try to do some consensus building?" So, it happened, on 2nd March 1993. Chief told me, "Madhuri, you've written an excellent briefing paper." So, he was very pleased. He presided over the Geneva consultative meeting, and we actually started to build consensus. Finally, the Secretariat team was ready to go to the World Conference in Vienna. Chief was to address a plenary session, and it was all moving ahead. I'm simplifying the process, of course, because certain countries were pretty determined not to give in to this integrated approach to human rights and development. Now, I went ahead to Vienna, I think, a week before Chief was supposed to speak, and I got an important speaking slot for him. The day after I was there, I got a call from the SG's office and I was told that Chief had decided not to come to Vienna because countries were still arguing and what if everything fell apart in Vienna – what then?

SO: Do you think he'd been 'got at'?

MB: I guess so. So, I rang Stuart and said, "Stuart, Chief's name is on the list of key speakers, and Chuks Ihekaibeya from your office just called me to say that Chief is not coming to Vienna!" So, Stuart said, "Okay, let me see." I mean, I'm sure Stuart knew what had happened, but he didn't tell me. A few hours later I got a call from Chief himself. He said, "It seems that countries are still not agreeing about this integrated approach. So do you really think I should come when there's so much confrontation?" I said, "Chief, I think you *must* come – not should come, *must* come!" And he said, "Okay." And so he was at the World Conference on Human Rights and made his presentation.

SO: You are staring at him very firmly in that photograph. [*Laughter*]

MB: [*Laughter*] I think Chief must have been briefed about all the problems and all the probabilities, but he took a decision within minutes, and I didn't really try to persuade him. I just said, "Chief, I think you must come." And he was there. Then, following the World Conference in June, we had the Cyprus CHOGM in October. And the Commonwealth heads of government actually endorsed the integrated approach, I must say. India and Malaysia actually came together and supported it.

SO: You say India and Malaysia were key impediments at this particular point?

MB: India, for sure.

SO: You keep mentioning them. Is that because that was the prime area of your work, in South Asia, and they were obviously?

MB: Yes. I think Malaysia was not too keen to get actively involved in the Commonwealth Human Rights programme, if I may call it that. India was the principal impediment. I didn't find that opposition in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh or even in Pakistan, and in the 1990s, the Pakistan government was allegedly trying to do something about human rights. Malaysia was a bit difficult on this integration issue because the point that they were trying to make is that when Western governments talked in terms of an integrated approach to development and human rights, they actually meant conditionality and tied aid. And, of course, I see that clearly. That was Malaysia's principal argument, and they were still arguing in Cyprus. But they finally came on board.

SO: So, here we have a headline: "Commonwealth heads of government reaffirm commitment to democracy and human rights in Cyprus."

MB: Yes. It got the headlines. And I think I was telling you about that [as a] high point, at least during my tenure. That's when human rights came out of the dark and was up there as a priority. Then, of course, it was much easier for us in the Unit to talk about this integrated approach more freely and forcefully – once the heads of government had endorsed it.

SO: You've emphasised South Asian countries and I'm just wondering about the Africa dimension. It seems to me that there was a constant refrain within the Commonwealth's diplomacy that it is *African* issues which are very much to the fore, rather than necessarily Commonwealth-wide issues. I accept that the small states programme had emerged in the 1980s, and African democratisation was pushed very much under Chief's guidance and leadership once he became SG. Did South Asian issues fall in between the two?

MB: Yes, I guess. The African Commonwealth members were actually quite pro-active. They wanted us there. I have earlier mentioned about Cameroon and Mozambique, who invited us to run programmes soon after joining the Commonwealth.

SO: And, of course, the newly appointed head of the Human Rights Unit in February 1994, Christine Mulindwa-Matovu…

MB: …came from Uganda. So, the reason I haven't really brought in Africa is because they were always there, and earlier on, the Gambia was actively engaged in the Unit's programme.

SO: President Dawda Jawara had been a leading proponent of the idea of human rights.

MB: Exactly, and many workshops were held there mainly for the training of public officials. They didn't get involved in too many other things, but this is something they really wanted. But funding became more and more difficult post-1995.

SO: Why?

MB: Here's where we get into troubled waters… Because of the appointment of Mr Kris Srinivasan. Now, again, here I will speak very frankly, and I will give you my insights and talk about my own experiences. In mid-1995, I think, our new DSG-Political, Mr Srinivasan, was appointed. Sometime after that, Mr Srinivasan called me one day to his office. He asked me where I had worked before, etc., and then he put what appeared to me a very strange question: "Why did you leave the International Labour Organisation to come to work for the Commonwealth Secretariat?" I said, "Because I thought I could work in the area of human rights per se, which has always been my interest." We talked about some other things and then he said, "But you must know India's stand on human rights, as far as the role of international organisations is concerned?" I said I did, and then he said something to the effect that, if that were the case, why was I pushing the Commonwealth human rights agenda so hard? My reply was that, in my work as an international civil servant in the Human Rights Unit, I was guided by the international human rights standards and Commonwealth principles, and India, as a signatory to all the key human rights conventions, was bound by them. So, that's where I was coming from.

SO: How much was his implied attitude one of, "I'm an Indian civil servant who is now acting in an international organisation, but my prime duty and responsibility is to further the work and attitude of my government, rather than the activities and agenda of this international organisation"? Was that unusual in the Secretariat?

MB: Well, it was not so explicit with others – at least, I haven't come across anyone during my tenure who was so explicit. I stood my ground and I was left in no doubt that Mr Srinivasan strongly resented that. But then, I don't know if I can hold him entirely responsible for the funding going down and down and down, as far as the Human Rights Unit's work is concerned. It became a real struggle after that.

SO: Well, every international organisation has its internal politics, as does every office. But as you say, if you haven't got a degree of collegiality and endorsement and support from within that organisation in the range of work – if there are key areas which get people's energy and focus, and others which are really underlined in their Cinderella status – then it does make your work enormously more difficult.

MB: Yes. For me, personally, it was very disappointing, because I had already gone through five years of what seemed to me an uphill task. Now, it may not seem as difficult as it was then, with hindsight, but I think I also had luck on my side to a certain extent. But it was hard work and, I must say, I'm grateful to my colleagues across the Divisions, because, without them, I don't think we could have done the work we did. HRU simply didn't have the resources.

From 1995 onwards, we carried on with some activities, but it became more and more difficult. At the end, in fact, my position disappeared!

SO: Oh, your job was phased out?

MB: Yes.

SO: This is ironic, because from 1995, the whole push was the CMAG process coming out of Auckland, with its implied emphasis on political rights and Commonwealth pressure to correct military governments. So, at the top level, there was a degree of Commonwealth sanction with the CMAG agenda, and at the bottom level, ignoring human rights-supported work.

MB: Yes, and I used to find it very strange that CMAG remained a separate entity. We were not involved, and our expertise was not asked for.

SO: That struck you at the time?

MB: Yes.

SO: How did you account for it? Did you talk to people about it internally, saying, "We should be involved as a repository of knowledge and for our networking," suggesting that you could offer CMAG foreign ministers different sources of information? Again, was this part of national governments keeping control?

MB: Yes. I've had very frank discussions internally, but that didn't make any difference, ultimately. I don't know what the Directors felt individually. The Secretariat functioned, as I said, as a very top-down organisation.

SO: So, there was a diminution of Political Affairs supporting your work?

MB: Well, we were out of Political Affairs and into the Legal and Constitutional Affairs Division, and it was even argued that the move was to make HRU less 'political' and less 'visible'.

SO: So, Jeremy Pope and then Reg Austin were your Directors.

MB: That's right. But, you see… I don't know, it's very strange. I haven't been in touch with the Secretariat, apart from certain colleagues, so I don't know what has happened in recent years. I know that the Unit became a separate entity, which we had dreamt of for years – that it should become an independent unit on its own, working with all relevant Divisions. I know that it did happen, but I would love to know the history of the Unit as a separate entity: whether it got more resources, whether it functioned more effectively.

SO: In terms of the resources, it's not just a question of financial resources, it's also that attention and commitment invested by leaders of Divisions and the leadership within the Secretariat. How much continued emphasis did human rights have at Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings after Cyprus in 1993? You say that you felt this

was very much the high point. Was there the same commitment in Auckland in 1995?

MB: Well, I wasn't there. Cyprus was the only Heads of Government Meeting I was directly involved in and attended. Political Affairs was the lead division for CHOGMs, and if I'm not wrong, I don't think HRU was really represented in any significant manner post-93.

SO: Madhuri, looking back, how much do you think this is all bound up with a question of the Commonwealth, as an entity, going through something of a crisis of identity in the 1990s? What was the purpose of the Commonwealth in the 90s?

MB: I think [that], in the 90s, it was all about democratisation in the African member countries, and I think the Secretariat was fully engaged in that process and did quite substantial work.

SO: So, supporting racial rights in South Africa as part of democratisation?

MB: Yes, but more the setting up and strengthening of democratic institutions coming out of the Harare Declaration. And I think I mentioned, I was in Kenya as part of the Commonwealth Secretariat team for their Election Observation. But here, again, there was this separation: we were not talking human rights, we were talking about election commissions, voter lists, setting up the fundamentals of a democratic system. So, human rights were not in the forefront. But I think [that], through the 1990s, the Secretariat and the Commonwealth, as an organisation, did have a focus. But once that whole democratisation process came to a certain maturation level, questions began to be asked: what next? I know that the Secretariat is still doing election observing, but I don't know how the approach has been developed or built on. South Africa, for example, really gave a *raison-d'être* to the Commonwealth as a whole, and certainly to the Secretariat. But through the 1990s and later, there were all these reviews. That was the flavour of the day then, these reviews. I've talked to some of these 'experts' who came to review the Secretariat's structure and programmes in order to suggest a new plan and programme, but they often had no background or understanding about an entity such as the Commonwealth. This happened, of course, while I was there, and all they were talking about was how to cut down: cut resources, reduce staff numbers, etc. I understand there is still a lot of navel-gazing going on: "So, what is the role for the Commonwealth in the new millennium?" The Secretariat was doing some of its work very well, I thought: the CFTC, for example, sending out experts, and the small member countries, I think, saw the usefulness of the Commonwealth. On the political side, the Secretariat liked the idea of election monitoring and providing assistance in setting up democratic institutions. It was a high profile activity and it had a focus.

SO: It seems to me that, for the Commonwealth, it was not simply the drive for democratisation – building upon the Harare Declaration and the achievement of black majority rule in South Africa in 1994, which had been, after all, a Commonwealth grand strategy – but there was also the change in focus to development by the 1990s, which de-emphasised the role of the state. The international financial institutions and intellectual

ideas were stressing economic liberalisation, the role of market forces, and that there should be a rolling-back of the role of the state, whereas the Commonwealth had – as a key part of its identity – the inter-governmental angle.

MB: Yes, that is correct.

SO: And then suddenly the Commonwealth started to lose that emphasis.

MB: Yes. Sue, I think you've hit the nail on the head. The Secretariat perhaps didn't see a very clear path any longer, and perhaps the lessening of the role of the state, as you put it, did throw up a crisis of identity or a crisis of what role to play in the changed environment. Yes. It was sort of at the back of my mind, but after you raised it just now, I think yes, there was a major crisis.

SO: Looking, for example, at Mrs Thatcher's papers or any other international leader's papers, it is striking how much they saw the Commonwealth in the 1970s and 1980s as an entity. While it was smaller, it certainly served a political, diplomatic and power-prestige purpose. But then, by the 1990s, it seems that that purpose was becoming diluted. Now, why is that? Globalisation? Enlargement of the Commonwealth? A shifting energy and focus of individual governments? All of these factors act as a corrosive process on the Commonwealth as an international pilot fish, in so many areas. And there had been a proliferation of international organisations. Where was the Commonwealth's USP in this changing international landscape?

MB: Absolutely. As you know, the heads of government meetings have now been reduced to…how many days?

SO: Two and a half.

MB: Yes. So, I guess the governments themselves don't see much usefulness in these face-to-face, informal chats: 'fireside chats'.

SO: Yes, exactly. But there's also a sense – because of cost or the proliferation of other international summits – of sending one's foreign minister. Heads, who are busy and have only a limited amount of time, will delegate the responsibility: "You go and deal with that particular portfolio." Then there is a diminution of the value of the Commonwealth and the extraordinary intimacy and exclusivity it provides for heads. That, again, is eroded.

Please, Madhuri, may I ask you how you came to be involved in the election monitoring team in the 1992 Kenyan elections?

MB: I think it was just an accident, or maybe not. First of all, as I said, the lead Division for this was International Affairs. As far as I can recall, the HRU, the Human Rights Unit, was still part of International Affairs and so I was a staff member of that Division. The Secretariat team was recruited by rotation from relevant Divisions. I may have been selected for my human rights expertise, but that was certainly not mentioned explicitly. Again, human rights had to be

played down. I am not aware of any specific criteria that were used to select the team members.

SO: What was your personal experience of election monitoring?

MB: Amazing. Coming from India, I have always taken elections for granted, and here, in Kenya, I met with people who had never voted in their entire life. The excitement and the energy that I observed, especially among the women, [was] absolutely amazing. I think [that], for the first time, they realised, "We can actually choose our leaders who will govern us." I talked a lot to the women, and there was real excitement in the air. And many of the people I spoke to felt there would be a change. Well, of course, no change came.

SO: Do you recall a degree of realism, or was there just such hope invested in democracy achieving change? After all, democracy or a change of government doesn't necessarily deliver change as we would like.

MB: I think it was euphoria, a lot of it, because it even got me. As I said, I'd always taken it for granted. So, what is all this excitement about? And then I got carried away too! On election day, voting day, the people stood for hours, in long queues, and it was just an amazing sight. I recall that I felt terribly bad for those who had wanted a change, and it didn't happen.

SO: Well, there was a fall-out at the top, wasn't there?

MB: Yes, but we could see it coming.

SO: Chief talked about that in great length when I interviewed him.

MB: Right. We could see it coming, though – the way the other parties were falling apart. But at least for the people on the ground, there was this tremendous hope for change: something exciting, something better to come.

SO: You, of course, were required to write up your report immediately afterwards. Did you interview people privately to ask them what they felt? Had democracy failed to satisfy their expectations? Did they feel a sense of disillusion that might factor into their commitment to vote again in the future?

MB: No, unfortunately we did not get a chance. [We] were all flown out back to base.

SO: Because the practice is you write the report very quickly and then leave.

MB: Yes. So, we were just busy putting in our inputs. With the observers, we were just providing them with all the feedback and notes they needed. So, for me, personally, there was no time after the results came out to really talk to people. Which is a pity.

SO: How much collaboration had you observed between other election monitors – from the UN, from the Carter Center? Of course, these institutions have far deeper pockets than the Commonwealth…

MB: Well, now you will have a biased opinion from me… I thought our team really worked much better than the rest. It was very well organised, very tightly knit, and I thought we were very thorough in whatever we were doing. And I observed that the Carter Center people were very young. I just thought, "What do they know?" But anyway, this could be a very biased view of my experience from the perspective of the Commonwealth team. And we really worked. We worked right through the night, and I noticed there was a total involvement and seriousness about the exercise.

SO: So, a question of excellent briefing beforehand, collegiality, professionalism, and drawing upon wells of different experiences that were put to best effect?

MB: Absolutely. And the team that I went out with, at least, was very professional. We also had fun, and it was a very rewarding experience. But again, that was the only election observation I went for.

SO: Just to start to draw to a conclusion, then… You have emphasised very much the promotional role of supporting human rights, in its broadest forms, in your work in the HRU. How much importance was there in terms of its contribution to process or actual outcome?

MB: You mean in terms of the Commonwealth's work as a whole?

SO: Yes. It seems to me that very often the Commonwealth can get wrapped up in a declaratory process: that there is a satisfaction in, "We've managed to get this particular statement and consensus behind it," but there isn't necessarily any substantive work or achievement.

MB: Follow-up. That is one thing – the follow-up bit – which used to bother me, because again, coming back to the limits of our resources, we would go out and run, say, a training workshop for a week, and then we would be out of that country and it would be years before we would go back, if at all. And again, with just one or two or even three persons – at one time, we were three – it was extremely difficult to retain the contacts. Also, there was no mechanism. You see, now, with emailing, we email from our phones. But at that time, I recall [that] computers were brought in soon after I joined the Secretariat, and I recall I was given a desktop computer and asked to get on with it. I hadn't used a computer much before that, as we had secretarial assistance.

SO: So, how did you communicate? By telex, by…

MB: And faxing.

SO: And use of the telephone? Although unusually, because the cost of international telephone calls would have been phenomenal.

MB: Yes, faxing mainly. At one time, the secretaries were all transformed into admin assistants overnight, and two or three programme officers had to share one admin assistant. Night after night before a workshop, I have been in Marlborough House just faxing to the participants in Africa [or] Asia, as the

case may be. Usually we ran regional workshops, so participants came from a range of countries. We have also run workshops in one country, which was an easier process. So, you can imagine. I had to deal with travel, accommodation for the participants, etc. I did get help from the admin assistant from time to time, but basically I had to make sure that all my participants had their tickets, their hotels booked, and then once we had done that, say, in Uganda, the next month – or even two weeks later – I would have to move on to Bangladesh, so Uganda would be left on its own. So, the follow-up was not easy. Now, with hindsight, if we'd had the means, we could have had the individuals on a regular exchange, but that was simply not possible – again, coming back to the limited resources. So, that was bad, but at the end of a workshop, we had our participants fill out these feedback forms and it was always fun. Nobody ever said anything very negative. I don't think we can take that too seriously. But I would be interested to know what was the short-term, medium-term and the longer-term impact of all the training we did.

SO: You're just outlining a very different information world, where IT was at that cusp of the advent of email. And even if you had email in the Secretariat, not everybody that you wanted to contact had email access!

MB: Absolutely. I remember we had to write letters and then either fax the letters or post the letters. It was a very time consuming and not a very efficient process. And then, again, you're always limited by the funding available.

SO: So, your funding came from the central Secretariat budget?

MB: Yes.

SO: It was not associated with CFTC work?

MB: No, it was separate. We had to prepare project proposals and they had to go up through the system, through the Director concerned and then to the DSG. And very often we didn't get all our proposals approved, and that was a major constraint. I don't really know on what criteria proposals were approved or not approved.

SO: So, there was no transparency on assessment of individual projects?

MB: No, it was not transparent. Then you could think that perhaps you didn't write the proposal very well, but I suspect there were unsaid factors playing a role in the decision-making. Well, there was some kind of spatial criterion. If, for example, you had several workshops in Africa in any given time, then you would move to another region.

SO: Please, could I ask, did you in any way try to liaise with the CHRI, the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, once it had moved to Delhi in 1993, as a way to sustain interest, energy and focus on human rights?

MB: It helped, of course, that I knew Richard Bourne well, and I also knew the Director of the CHRI, Maja Daruwala, in Delhi. Whenever she came to London we met for consultations on various Commonwealth issues or

projects. One of the important initiatives I took [part in] in 1998 or 1999 was on the Right to Information. I brought together an Expert Group on the Right to Information. Now, in that context, CHRI was very helpful. If you recall, at that time, many Commonwealth member countries were bringing in legislation on the Right to Information, which, in my view, is absolutely central to any democratic process. In fact, I am just in the process of developing an RTI cell in Calcutta. We have an Information Commission, but it doesn't really work. So, unless there is civil society action, governments are not too interested in moving this one along. So, we had this Commonwealth Expert Group on the Right to Information and, at that time of course, the key person who really saved the day was Aruna Roy from India. If there is one individual who has been responsible for pushing through the Indian Right to Information legislation, it is Aruna Roy. Finally, after a lot of persuasion, she agreed to come to London.

We had the Expert Group meetings in Marlborough House. Aruna is, of course, from civil society. I brought together other experts from civil society, but also government representatives in order to have an exchange between officials, ministers and civil society activists. We put together recommendations which were then sent through the Commonwealth system, including to the Law Ministers Meeting. Actually, after 1992, after that first meeting in Dhaka, to be fair – and I'm glad you reminded me about this – I didn't face any problems in terms of inviting NGOs to our meetings and workshops: their participation became a part of the whole process. I think [that], for the Secretariat, that was a leap – a big leap – from not even talking to NGOs to involving them in human rights activities. NGOs became part of the process of consultation and other Commonwealth human rights activities.

SO: How much do you think, then, that the human rights work of the Secretariat contributed to the diplomacy of the Commonwealth?

MB: Again, I can only talk about my time. The Harare Declaration was always put in the forefront, and of course the whole spirit of the Harare Declaration is the spirit of human rights. So, from that point of view, human rights were in the forefront, but in terms of pushing any particular human rights agenda, I don't think that was anywhere up there as a top priority. The Right to Information, for example, which is so central to the functioning of a democracy, was certainly not talked about at any length or depth at the highest levels. I mean, it just didn't happen.

SO: So, can the Commonwealth in any way pride itself on this private, discreet assistance to human rights work? Was the Commonwealth a pilot fish, in any way, on human rights work, or was it in fact more reactive and responsive to other drivers in international diplomacy and international engagement?

MB: I think [that] since we packaged our work in a very non-confrontational way – our mandate was purely promotional, no pointing fingers, no investigation of human rights violations in any of our member countries – I think that was certainly an advantage, and I would like to think that we did inspire some of these promotional activities in the member countries such as training in

human rights for public officials, judges, lawyers, teachers, journalists and other professions. Even in India – I don't know to what extent civil servants are trained in human rights – we were engaged in human rights training for public officials including the police.

SO: Indeed, you provided workshops for these people in collaboration with Political Affairs.

MB: No, the Human Rights Unit ran these 'training of trainers' workshops. I'll give you an example; I think it will be clearer then. In Cameroon, as I had mentioned earlier, we were asked to hold a training workshop for their prison officers. So, I had an expert from a UK high security prison – I usually made up a team of two persons in the training of trainers workshops that I ran. So, at a workshop I would present the broader human rights framework, including the International Bill of Human Rights [and] other specific Human Rights Conventions covering rights of women and children, etc. – their implementation, etc. If the training was for prison officers, as in Cameroon, I would have an expert trainer with a prison background. We went there to Cameroon for five days and the government sent the officers they wanted to be trained, who would then have the job of conducting further training. We would also have an exchange of information and experiences between us and the trainees. I recall when the expert from here, the UK, was talking about 'open prisons', there was a big laugh around the table and they said, "Huh, if we have an open prison system here..."

SO: "… everyone would abscond!" [*Laughter*]

MB: Exactly! I wanted to go and visit a prison. I tried all my power of persuasion but I was not allowed. Then, one of the officers I got to know a bit better said, "I don't think you will be very pleased to see the conditions." So, you've got to use your judgement. I always tried to do on-site visits. If the training was for the police, I would want to see the actual conditions.

SO: Were you able to replicate that elsewhere? In Mozambique, in Zimbabwe…?

MB: In Mozambique, again, it was a training of trainers workshop for public officials, but it was a mix. We decided on the participants in consultation with the host government, and they sent a group of journalists, teachers as well as officials. So, we needed a more general training programme on human rights. I talked about the International Covenants on Human Rights and the mechanisms in place for their implementation. We had also developed some human rights training materials – I think the Secretariat still has those – which we used and then distributed for the use of the local trainers in the future. Of course, there was a language problem there: the spoken language was Portuguese. For the first time, I had to use an interpreter. We also discussed how our training manuals could be translated into Portuguese. We had to adapt our training workshops to local conditions and [the] requirements of the recipient country, so it was always a bit different.

SO: I'm just noting a comment by Datuk Farida Ariffin on her work as part of the Women In Development Division. How much did you deliberately

join forces with Eleni Stamiris in the Division to strengthen the work of the Human Rights Unit, and also her work with Women In Development? There was obviously an important cross-fertilisation in the areas of your work.

MB: Absolutely. Luckily, both Farida and Eleni did see women's rights as very much part of human rights, and so there was that natural affinity, of course. And Eleni, also, as an individual, was very keen to support me in 1993. So, that worked very well, and I think both HRU and her Division benefited as a result.

SO: Were you able to draw particularly on Canadian – CIDA – input and support? You talked very much about the limitations of funding within the Secretariat. I wondered if you had looked to raise funds externally? I am aware that takes an awful lot of energy and time.

MB: Yes, I did try for specific projects, but, I have to admit, without much success. I also think the Secretariat system didn't really either allow for it or encourage it.

SO: Well, this is very much the time when Chief Emeka was trying to bring CFTC under his own control, rather than letting it have its own autonomy and separate identity which it had developed since 1971.

MB: Yes, and maybe at that point in time the political function of the Secretariat was given more of a focus.

SO: If I could ask you, Madhuri… The drive within the Commonwealth on human rights now appears to be acquiring the agenda of trying to establish a human rights commissioner, coming out of the EPG recommendation in their report of 2010-11. There is also an apparent NGO push to support LGBT rights. Now, is that an expansion of one's understanding of human rights from the 1990s, or is it an inevitable development to a more embracing attitude?

MB: Well, within our human rights community, we have a continuing dialogue – a debate – as to whether one should include more and more rights belonging to different communities, because you might end up diluting the entire movement. I have more of a liberal stand regarding this because, you see, children, for example, were not included as a special category and subject of rights per se some decades ago. I believe the Children's Convention has made a tremendous difference and has given us a tool to not only fight for their rights, but also for their protection. But generally speaking, I am not sure whether there should be a continuous addition. One needs to draw a line somewhere.

Conceptually, you can't divide up human rights. Rights are indivisible. I find it difficult to explain that to people outside of what I call 'my community'. We can argue about which are more fundamental or 'basic rights', but in my view, the rights included under the two Covenants – the one concerning political and civil rights, and the other on economic, social and cultural rights – belong to everyone, [to] every human being, and that's a very good way of dealing with

it. No 'new' human right should be seen as falling outside of what is now known as the International Bill of Human Rights which includes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the two Covenants.

SO: Yes.

MB: But I'm going more into the realm of concepts now.

SO: I'm thinking more in the realm of politics.

MB: Yes, and do you want me to relate it to the Commonwealth?

SO: Yes, please.

MB: Unless things have really changed in the last decade or so, [during which time] I have not really been in touch with the Commonwealth's work, I think we should try to consolidate the work that has already been done. We should do this [i.e. consolidation], rather than try to expand the catalogue of rights or have other bodies or entities. I personally feel, given my experience, that we should try to stand very strongly on the International Bill of Human Rights and try to integrate those rights into all of the Commonwealth's activities, rather than to go off and introduce something new.

SO: Madhuri, from your long-standing involvement and observation of the Commonwealth, what would you say about its future, its direction and its public standing? What was it for, and what does that say about what it is, going forward?

MB: I am not sure, because I have moved from one end of the spectrum to another. At one point I thought the Commonwealth's purpose was met through the decolonisation process and then helping to consolidate democracy in Africa through the 1990s and later. And, of course, there was the anti-apartheid cause to be fought in South Africa. Perhaps that was its role, and we shouldn't keep trying to invent another purpose for it. But having said that – and of course, I have an allegiance to this organisation – if it can, it should reinforce its strengths. One of its strengths, as I saw, and as you must have heard many times, is its informal structure: the non-threatening aspects and the shared culture [and] language. I think the process of dialogue, which is still so very important, if it can remain as an informal mechanism to bring people together – government and civil society – for dialogue, it will continue to have a role. But I don't know. As we just said, even heads of government hardly make the time to meet for their fireside chats…

SO: But even if the heads don't attach importance to the Commonwealth – witness the number of absentees from the last heads of government meeting, for a variety of reasons – it seems that the civil society or NGO aspect of the Commonwealth is alive and extremely vibrant.

MB: Yes, exactly. Reality has shown us that the civil society within the Commonwealth has not only survived, but has survived well and maybe that's where the focus should be. On the Secretariat, I think there is still a need for that, but perhaps it should also pay much more attention to civil society,

[helping to] strengthen civil society and give the types of support which civil society needs desperately: in short, give it a greater place in the sun. The Directors of the Commonwealth Foundation often told me, “You know what?” – this was early on, when I had joined – “We are the second-class people here.” I didn’t know why they used to say that, but I found out later. So, the world is moving on; [it] has moved on. And, again, coming back to what you said, governments certainly have a role, but I think there is a much bigger role within the Commonwealth for its civil society and it needs a much greater place in the sun. With that, if I can also say, human rights should be right up there as a priority.

SO: That’s a great place to stop. Madhuri, thank you very much indeed.

MB: Thank you, Sue.

[END OF AUDIOFILE]