



Speech at the Launch of Lenz70 Celebrations

8 February 2025, Protea Recreation Centre, Lenasia

(Dr Ismail Vadi)

Lenasia celebrates 70 years of its existence this year. We hope to celebrate this milestone with a series of colourful sporting, religious, cultural and socio-political events, which to some extent has already begun with Lenasia Secondary School celebrating its 70th platinum anniversary on 1 February 2025.

The establishment of Lenasia Secondary School on 1 February 1955 formally marked the existence of Lenasia as township. Its first residents moved into the area during that year and were housed in 25 “huts” at the Cape Coloured Military Camp, located in what is now the Lenasia business area. These buildings are still in existence and are used for business purposes.



(All photographs courtesy of Zaakirah Vadi)

The racist National Party established Lenasia under the apartheid system in terms of the Group Areas Act (1950). It was designated as an exclusive township for “Indian” settlement and racial development. Similar townships were established for “Coloureds” in Eldorado Park and Africans in Soweto. An official proclamation issued on 3 August 1956 determined that Lenasia and Farm Rietfontein No.48 were to be reserved for “Indian occupation”, which at that stage was outside the municipal boundary of Johannesburg. About 1 600 morgens of land was set aside to accommodate 2 600 stands for “Indian housing development”.

Over the next decade several thousand families were forcibly moved from racially mixed areas such as Sophiatown, Vrededorp, Fordsburg and Kliptown to a barren piece of land named Lenasia, with virtually nothing in the way of social amenities and public infrastructure.

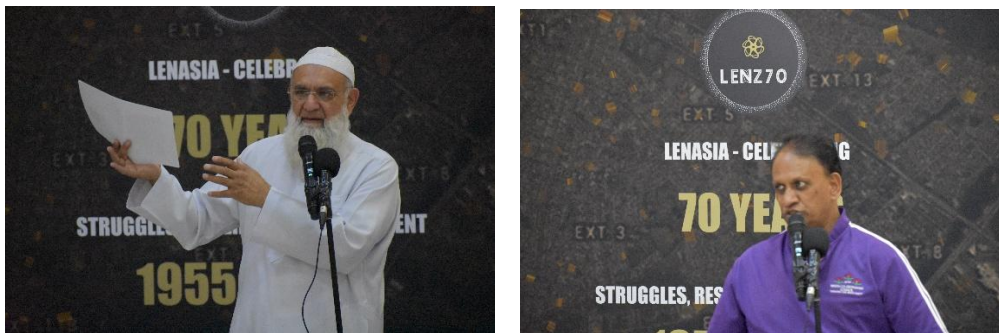
Over time, through the resilience and sacrifice of these early residents, places of worship, educational, cultural and social welfare institutions, and businesses were developed to give meaning to this newly established community. We owe an enormous depth of gratitude to these forebears for having the foresight to develop an array of civic, social welfare, cultural, sporting and educational organisations so that people could lead a more fulfilling and meaningful existence in this dormitory township, flung 30 kilometres away from Johannesburg.



Lenasia has changed since the 1980s into a non-racial community with the occupation of land by residents of the Thembelihle informal settlement. Incidentally, “thembelihle” is a Xhosa word that means “a place of hope”. Today, at least 35 000 African residents live in Thembelihle and Lenasia, among them are thousands of children who live out their hopes and dreams in this community. Our schools are desegregated and the labour force in the business and industrial zone is racially mixed. Several hundred minibus taxis transport learners from Soweto and neighbouring informal settlements to schools locally. What was meant to be an “Indian” area under apartheid has transformed into a non-racial, multi-religious and multi-ethnic community.

Lenasia has a rich social, cultural and political history. As early as May 1910, the famous Indian resistance leader, Mohandas K Gandhi, established a communal base at Tolstoy Farm - barely five kilometres from Lenasia - for his passive resistance movement against race discrimination and segregation in the country. It was here that a small community of Gandhian adherents lived and implemented aspects of the Mahatma's philosophy of self-reliance, personal discipline, manual work and humble co-existence.

Tolstoy Farm, named after the Russian novelist and philosopher, Leo Tolstoy, is located on the south-western outskirts of Lenasia. It is from here that Gandhi, together with leaders such as Thambi and Veerammal Naidoo and Ahmed Mahomed Cachalia, propagated the ideology of *satyagraha* or passive resistance in the face of British and Afrikaner racial oppression. Tolstoy Farm became the nerve centre of the passive resistance movement in the first decade of the twentieth century, which mobilised thousands of Indians in a movement of peaceful civil disobedience against discriminatory laws and practices.



In the 1970s, even as residents accepted the new housing opportunities in this “Indian ghetto” that Lenasia became, they intrinsically rejected apartheid. The mass of people opposed toothless structures such as the Lenasia Management Committee created by the apartheid system to give Indians a sham form of political representation in the Johannesburg City Council. People simply boycotted elections for this racist body thereby denying it any legitimacy.

In the early 1970s, adherents of the Black Consciousness Movement awakened the consciousness of youth locally to take up the struggle against apartheid after leaders and members of the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC) and the African National Congress (ANC) were banned, imprisoned and exiled due to intense government repression in the 1960s.

Led by an expelled teacher, Sadecque Variava, they mobilised a younger generation of activists using culture and the ideology of black consciousness to challenge apartheid. This was followed by the formation of the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) branch in Lenasia led by Variava and the slain medical doctor, Abubakr Asvat.

By the end of that decade Congress politics was revived in the area as younger activists such as Ismail Momoniat and Mohamed Valli Moosa re-established contact with TIC leaders such as Dr Essop Jassat, Dr RAM Salojee, Reggie Vandeyar, Shirish Nanabhai and Prema Naidoo, whose banning orders had either expired or who were released from prison. They played a major role in leading the community against apartheid.

The turning point in the community's political history was undoubtedly the students' boycott of classes in April 1980. Over three thousand school students walked out of classes for almost three months in solidarity with boycotting students in the Western Cape and protesting the inequalities in the apartheid education system. The result was that the elections that were held in 1981 for the racist South African Indian Council was boycotted by most voters in Lenasia.



A similar fate awaited the Tricameral parliament three years later. On the very day of the first elections for the House of Delegates on 28 August 1984, there were violent confrontations at the Lenasia Civic Centre polling station between police and students, workers and residents, who called for a boycott of the polls. This resulted in over a hundred people being injured and the discrediting of the all-Indian parliamentary chamber.

Sporting bodies across codes such as soccer, cricket, table-tennis, athletics and swimming rejected apartheid bodies and instead affiliated to the non-racial South African Council on Sport. Lenasia's two professional soccer clubs, namely, Bluebells United and Swaraj, were leading teams in the non-racial Federation Professional League.

After the first democratic elections in April 1994, seven political activists from Lenasia were sworn-in as Members of Parliament, namely, long-term Robben Island political prisoners, Ahmed Kathrada and Laloo Chiba, Dr RAM Salojee, Mohamed Valli Moosa, Mosheen Moosa, human rights lawyer, Priscilla Jana, and Ismail Vadi.

Seven decades later is a time to celebrate our people's history. It's a time for reflection of the past and chart a dynamic future for our community. There are so many community figures who should be recognised for their contributions to the

religious, educational, social, cultural, sporting, civic and business development of Lenasia. This cuts across Lenasia and Thembelihle – from mall owners to street sellers; maulanas, gurus and priests; sportsmen and sportswomen; musicians and artists; school principals and teachers; entrepreneurs and shopkeepers; journalists and photographers; civic leaders and activists; doctors and nurses; saints and sinners, and ordinary residents and sojourners.

We call on all community organisations to integrate the Lenz70 celebrations into their programmes this year. This is already taking shape. This month for example the following activities are being rolled out in partnership with community organisations:

1. Lenasia Secondary School Alumni Reunion on 1 February.
2. Lenasia Schools' Sport Association: Inter-Primary Schools Athletics Championship on 8 February at the Lenasia Stadium.
3. ISKCON Lenasia Nityananda Triyodasi Festival 7 - 10 February.
4. Lenasia Schools' Sport Association: Inter-High Schools Athletics Championship on 15 February at the Lenasia Stadium.
5. Lenasia Table Tennis Association (LTTA) Tournament every Wednesday and Thursday evenings between 7 and 10pm from 29 January to 20 February at the Gandhi Hall.
6. Mohan Hira Shotokan Karate Tournament on 15 February at 89 Hydrangea Avenue, Lenasia.
8. Hindu Co-ordinating Committee will host the Shivratri Yatra on 23 February.
9. Infinity Padel Men's Tournament will take place between 5-11pm on 22 February at 10by20 Lenasia.

Today, we are launching a new website, www.lenasialegacy.co.za, which will serve as a repository for research, interesting articles, historical photographs and profiles of leaders of Lenasia and Thembelihle.

We have commitments from all local radio stations and newspapers, the organisers of the Lenasia Fete, Diwali celebrations, Night Walk, sporting, educational, religious and cultural organisations and various businesses to participate in the celebrations. We are hoping to organise a cultural festival in September and an exciting photographic exhibition at the Trade Route Mall.

Lastly, we should discuss the future of Lenasia and Thembelihle – what is our vision and what would we like our community to look like in future. This must be a people-

driven exercise and everyone in the community is called upon to celebrate this milestone and to chart a way forward for our community.

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