



Stories from the Asiatic Bazaar

Muthal Naidoo



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FOREWORD

Memories, like dreams, having escaped from space and time, follow a chronology of significance to the heart. The remembering mind isolates events, enhances them, and removes inconsistencies that indicate a more human, less exalted existence. In these biographical stories, based largely on memories with their built-in filters, those more fascinating human elements may have been omitted.

As the act of recording requires authentication, it becomes necessary to return memories to specific historical, political, economic and social contexts in order to find congruence with actual happenings. In the process, wisps of memory, clues to forgotten events, take on substantial form when they connect with happenings described in little known written accounts. Such books and papers, no longer in circulation and gathering dust, suddenly assume new significance and personal collections become treasure troves.

I was lucky to find treasures that included the work of local Indian writers and, in particular, the work of PS Joshi. With their help and the help of other historians, I have infused symbolic truth with worldly reality in my attempts to recapture the spirit of the times.

My original intention was to write about the Cape Boys Location and Marabastad as well as the Asiatic Bazaar and to call my book “Memories of Marabastad,” but people who once lived in the Cape Location and Marabastad are writing or have written about these places and as their accounts would be more authentic, I decided, to confine myself to the Asiatic Bazaar. Once I began my research, I realised that just this one location offers a range of human experience that goes far beyond my capacity to capture it

all. This book, therefore, is only a small record of life in the Asiatic Bazaar. Many more wonderful stories are still to be told.

The women and men whose stories appear in this collection, pass through our lives for the most part unknown and seemingly ordinary but they were involved in momentous struggles for human dignity and respect and some of them walked side by side with renowned figures such as Gandhi and Mandela. My immersion in the lives of these dozen or so individuals who lived in the Asiatic Bazaar, has given me insight into the indomitable spirit of a people who held fast to their self esteem, rose above degrading circumstances and prospered. Though their lives, greatly circumscribed by regulations and environment, focused on survival, the traditions that they brought with them from the mother country sustained them and helped them develop a close-knit, vibrant community

They lived in overcrowded conditions and though the congestion was a curse, it was also a blessing as it minimized barriers of religion, ethnicity, culture, caste and race. Close proximity in the yards that enclosed them, turned neighbours into families and dependence on entertainment outside the home brought them together at the sports grounds, in the bioscopes, the streets, the cafés and dance halls.

When they moved to Laudium, they lost the intimacy that engenders a strong community spirit and, with the blessing of apartheid, split up into ethnic and religious factions.

Muthal Naidoo

January 2007



The Asiatic Bazaar

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

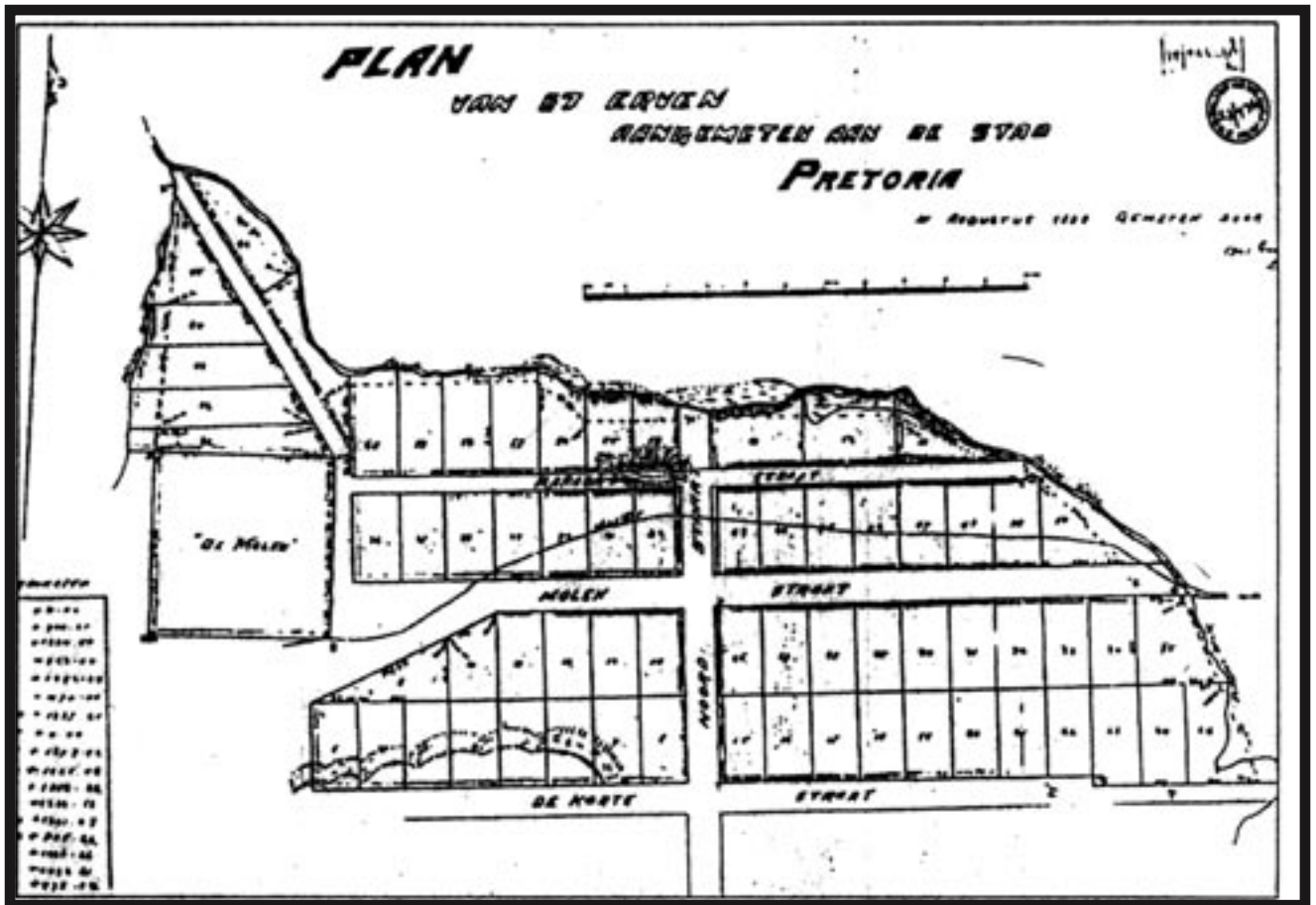
In sharing their stories and making available books, photographs, documents and newspaper articles, all the people whom I interviewed, helped me to write this book.

I am most grateful to them for their patience and hope that in these short biographies, I have done justice to their fascinating lives. I wish I could have included the stories of all the people who helped me with contributions: Bob Bhaktawar, Ray Bhaktawar, Bradman Ernest, Joan Lalla, Mohammed Keshavjee, Sabera Khan, Ronnie Naidoo, Steve Vally and members of staff of Hoxies Fish Suppliers.

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Susan who proofread the manuscript.



CHAPTER ONE

EARLY PRETORIA

In the 1830's, Voortrekkers, mainly farmers, came to settle north of the Vaal River where they laid claim to the land, set up a Boer Republic, and occupied sites that developed into towns - among them Potchefstroom, Klerksdorp, Lydenburg, Rustenburg and Pretoria. Those who settled in and around Pretoria lived in close proximity to Ndebele villages north of the Magaliesberg and to Tswana and Northern Sotho groups in the Moot and in the area that would become the city centre. The Boers took up farming along the Apies River, employed African people from the surrounding area and provided accommodation for their workers on their farms and homesteads.

As they did not want African people among them as neighbours, the Boer Republic of the Transvaal passed legislation to keep Africans out or to segregate them, and until after the Anglo-Boer War, African women were not allowed into urban areas. Such regulations contradicted the need for African labour especially after the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand and during the two world wars. Efforts to limit entry of African people to labour only, being unpractical, were undermined by the provision of temporary accommodation in compounds and hostels and the development of informal settlements. Eventually, townships such as Bantule, Skoolplaats and Marabastad were proclaimed for African people. But the need for African labour, on the one hand, and the desire for segregation, on the other, continued to create confusion and led to onerous and incongruous regulations to control and restrict the movement of the indigenous population.

When Indians and Coloureds arrived in Pretoria, they were subjected to similar controls.

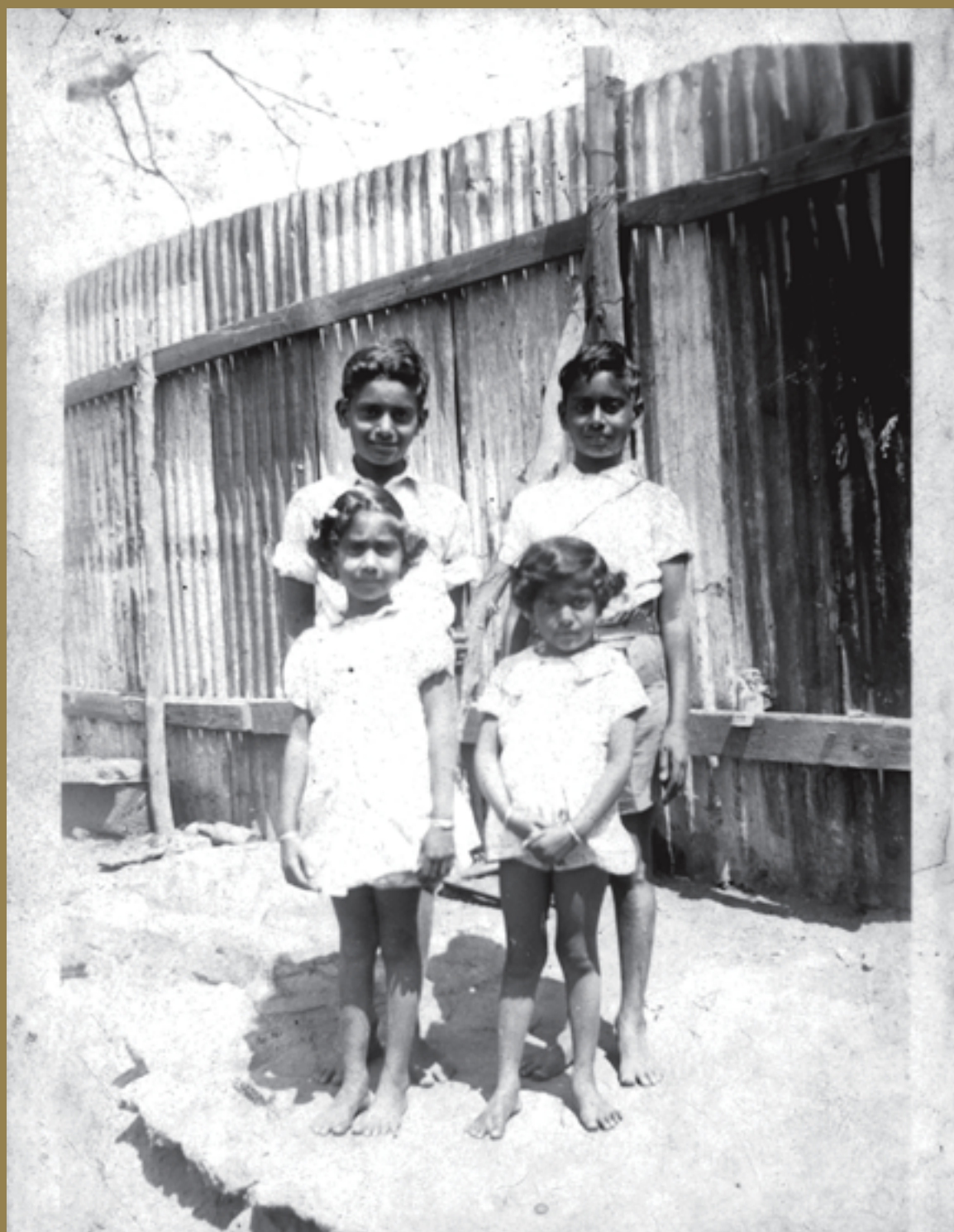
Many Indians, following developments in the mining industry, began arriving in the Pretoria area from the 1870's. Most were traders and settled in the Prinsloo Street area and in the east around what is now Esselen Street. As their numbers increased, restrictions began to be placed on their mobility, their access to trade and the acquisition of land. Then, in 1892-3, the Coolie Location, adjacent to Marabastad, was proclaimed for Indians and those living in the town were

expected to relocate. The traders in Prinsloo Street and Hercules resisted the move and remained where they were until Group Areas Amendments forced them out of their residences in the 1960's and '70's Coloureds from the Cape, who began to arrive in the Pretoria area from about 1884, owned or rented property in central Pretoria. When white residents complained, a location for Coloureds was proclaimed in 1899. The Cape Boys Location occupied three streets of the Coolie Location from Bloed to Struben Streets and Coloured people lived under similar restrictions and controls as Indian people.

In all, there were three locations in the Marabastad area: The Cape Boys Location, The Coolie Location (later the Asiatic Bazaar) and Marabastad for African people. Though they were separate, they were all part of one settlement generally known as Marabastad.

*The Cape Boys'
Location*





Back: Reggie, Seeni

Front: Boma, Baba

CHAPTER TWO

BOMA

Child of the Location

By the time she was seven, Boma was already pursuing a life of crime. Like any miscreant, she was greedy, cunning, had no respect for authority and no conscience. As long as she could get away with it, whatever it was, she was okay. Her little sister, Baba, two years younger, was a bit of a pest. She had been brainwashed by Mummy and Daddy into believing that it was wrong to steal and tell lies and as the sisters spent most of their time together, Baba's honesty really cramped Boma's style. Whenever Mummy went out, Boma climbed onto the kitchen table so that she could reach the shelves from which pickled lemons, mangoes, and carrots beckoned to her. She couldn't wait to get at them.

Skinny little Baba, standing in the middle of the little kitchen, her large eyes wide with disapproval, always yelled at her. "I'm going to tell Mummy when she comes back."

"I'm just taking a few. You want some?" Boma, on the kitchen table, holding out a soft, brown, lemon segment, grinned like a little devil.

Baba, who was never hungry, couldn't be tempted. "You know you're not supposed to touch them. The pickles aren't ready yet."

"I don't care." Her mouth crammed, Boma simply wrinkled her nose,

Her little sister couldn't understand this disregard for truth and honesty. "I'm going to tell Mummy."

"I'll kill you if you do."

"Spanky, Spanky, Spanky," Baba knew how much her sister hated to be called that as she had a secret crush on Spanky, a character in the Our Gang film shorts that they saw at the Empire Bioscope.

"Oh shut up, Dragon, Dragon, Dragon."

This was Boma's hate name for Baba, also from a film, *One Million BC*, in which dinosaurs and other monsters fought fierce and terrible fights.

Like any addict, Boma's quest in life was for money to buy junk food.

Whenever she had a penny or two, she was off to the yards where housewives running home businesses produced a variety of take away eats. All kinds of goodies were on offer – *samoosas*, *moorookoo*, fried peanuts, *koe'siesters*, *achaar* and *kerriballs*. So Boma always needed money. If Mummy left pennies or tickkeys lying around they would disappear, likewise Boma, who would be sneaking off to one of the yards, especially the one on the corner of Grand and Sixth Streets that sold sour figs and kumquat pickles. And she was always searching for dropped coins in the yard or on the streets. Once, when she found a sixpence in the yard and jubilantly showed it off, Mummy immediately claimed it as the exact amount that she had lost. After that, whenever Boma found a coin, she didn't say a word and as soon as she could, was off to buy sour figs or joysticks and cool drinks from *Makooloo Hopaan*, the Chinese general dealer on Bloed Street, or sweetmeats from Chagan's kaffee at the corner of Boom and Cowie Streets.

As Mummy didn't trust Boma, she always gave her the exact amount for whatever she needed when she sent her on shopping errands. Boma usually went to the general dealer on the corner but if she couldn't get what she needed there, she walked down Bloed Street, which had shops or *kaffees* on almost every corner. One day, Mummy gave her two-and-six and sent her off to buy a pound of butter. She went from shop to shop but there was no butter to be had and she thought she would have to go home empty handed. There was just one shop left, the *kaffee* on the corner of Bloed and Tenth Streets. When she got there, she found that it was very busy. As there was only over-the-counter service in those days, she had to wait a while before the shopkeeper turned to her. Then she gave him the half-crown only to find that this shop too was out of butter. Handing back the coin, the shopkeeper asked Boma to wait as he was expecting a delivery at any moment. After a while, he turned to serve her again. With so many customers coming and going, he had forgotten that she was waiting for the butter. She handed him the coin once more but the butter still hadn't come so he gave it back again. When the butter finally arrived, the shopkeeper, wrapping up a pound, smiled, "I know you paid me already." As she took the butter, she looked the picture of innocence. When she got home, she was very proud to have saved her mother a whole half-crown. Mummy didn't say a word. She should have sent her daughter back with the money but she was too ashamed. After all, her husband was an interpreter at the court and they were from Durban.

The Naidoo's had come to the Asiatic Bazaar in 1938. Boma's father, originally from Durban, was sent to Ladysmith when he joined the police force. After a year or two, he was promoted to Court Interpreter and transferred to Pretoria where the family took up residence in a tin shanty at 370 Cowie Street. The stand had the typical location barracks-like structure: blocks of units around a yard

with a communal ablution block comprising one toilet and one bathroom for all the families. The Naidoos occupied one of two units on the Cowie Street side of the stand; the Padayachys rented the other. An old man, Green Door *Thatha* (Grandfather) lived alone in one of the one-room units on the side.

The Naidoos' unit was a rectangle, divided into four smaller rectangles or rooms. The rooms overlooking the street were wider than the ones overlooking the yard. One of these bigger rooms was a bedroom for the parents and the two girls, with Mummy and Daddy's double bed in one corner and the girls' bed in the corner under the window. Seeni, Boma's brother, loved to stand outside, making snake shadows on the window blind to terrify his sisters. Between the beds there was just enough space for a wardrobe. Another wardrobe next to the foot of the girls' bed

permanently blocked a door that led out onto the veranda. When the girls grew bigger, Boma slept on the floor in front of this wardrobe. Since the toilet was in the yard, there was a chamber pot under the big bed for use during the night.

Adjacent to the bedroom on the street side was the living room with a sofa, chairs, a coffee table, a lamp table and a radiogram, all with vases of fresh flowers set on doilies. A connecting doorway led from the living room into the next rectangle, the dining room, and almost next to it, at right angles, another doorway into the kitchen and almost next to that, at right angles, another doorway into the yard. The dining room, which overlooked the yard, was also the boys' bedroom. They slept on *goothrees* (comforters), one on the table for one bed, another on the floor for the second bed.

The narrow kitchen adjoining the main bedroom had a chimney alcove with its own floor that was about six inches higher than the kitchen floor.

*Reggie and Seeni
on the Veranda*



The shiny black Dover coal stove stood on this platform. A small window next to the alcove looked out into the yard. The end wall, the short side of the rectangle, was lined with three shelves, neatly covered with newspaper that Mummy cut to form the patterned fringes that hung over the front of the shelves – the very shelves that Boma raided for pickles and biscuits. Adjacent to the shelves was the doorway into the bedroom. The kitchen table stood against the wall under the shelves, with Daddy's chair at the bedroom end and Mummy's chair on the side.

Most units in the location, consisting of two rooms and a kitchen, housed families much larger than the Naidoos. So the Naidoos and their next-door neighbours, the Padayachys, were quite privileged to have three rooms and a kitchen. With only these two families and an old bachelor in a room with a green door, their yard was not crowded. Other yards had four or five, sometimes up to ten families, sharing one toilet, one bathroom and a tap outside. As there was no water in the units, large zinc baths, huge enamel basins and buckets were common utensils in every home. Tin containers, in which cooking oil and paraffin were sold, were used to boil bath water, steam Christmas puddings and make ginger beer. Mummy made the best ginger beer in the world.



In the backyard at 370 Cowie Street

Back: Mummy, Parvathy, Reggie, Seeni, Velli **Front:** Baba, Boma

GP (Ganes Padayachy), who lived in the unit adjoining the Naidoo's, drove the big blue Hudson Terrapin that was parked outside on the dirt pavement. As he was one of very few people in the location who owned a car, the only one Boma knew, she always thought of GP and his Hudson as a single entity. His mother, a tiny wrinkled old lady with white hair pulled back into a bun at the back of her head, lived in the room adjoining the Naidoo's living room. In a white sari, with a pale green shawl over her shoulders, she often stood in her doorway singing Tamil songs and calling out to passers-by on the street, "*Na Morsele vanthè*" (I came from Mauritius). As she always fixed outraged eyes on children and swore loudly at them in Tamil, they found her quite scary. Although they were afraid of her, all the children in the neighbourhood loved to tease and enrage her. They would bang on her door, run off and watch from a distance as she rushed out onto the veranda, arms flailing, hurling the vilest curses. They loved it. They were thrilled at their own daring.

GP's orphaned nephew and nieces, Shunmugam (Boy) Pillay, and his sisters, Velliamma and Parvathy, also lived next door. In the evenings or over weekends, Boy, who played the saxophone, came out into the yard to practise. To Boma, his sax was as much a part of him as GP's car was a part of GP. Boy's sister, Velliamma, a very beautiful, dark skinned girl in her late teens, was like a big sister to Boma and Baba. When they played house-house together, she would build a tiny fire, put a little makeshift grate over it and boil peas and rice in tin lids. The girls loved Velliamma but she wasn't with them for long.

She died and Boma was mystified. This was her first experience of death and she had no idea how or where it had come from. Mummy never took the girls to weddings or funerals but this funeral was right in their yard. Having no understanding of death, all that the sisters saw was their friend laid out in the yard, beautifully dressed in an expensive Benares sari and gold jewellery with gold coins over her eyes to keep the lids closed. Boma, who had no idea why the coins were there, was strangely fascinated. This custom, more than anything else, gave her an eerie feeling about death. After that, whenever there was a funeral, she would ask, "Did they put coins on the dead person's eyes?"

GP's brother, Murrthee, lived just opposite, on the other side of Cowie Street, which, despite being one of the three or four tarred roads in the location, was very narrow. With a hop, skip and a jump the children were across it and in each other's homes. Uncle Murrthee, a very short, thin man and his wife, Nagoo, much taller and a big woman, were the Naidoo's best friends. They had two little boys, Visoo, the same age as Baba, and Kathi, a little younger. A third boy, who was born to them some years later, became Baba's little pet.

Like all the children in the location, the Naidoo girls and the Padayachy boys, played in the street. There was such a horde of children in the location that they turned every available space into a playground – the verandas, the yards, the pavements, the streets, the river and even the bioscopes.

The long, narrow veranda at 370 Cowie Street, which was not sectioned off, provided a playing space for less vigorous games like Baby Steps, Giant Steps and Ten Stones. On the dirt pavement below the veranda, children played borretjie, (hopscotch). In the yard, they played skipping games or ball games or house-house, for which they put up a makeshift tent with a stick and a sack. There were plenty of sacks back then, as sugar, flour, rice, and vegetables were sold in large gunnysacks. Boma, who loved sleeping in the tent, annoyed the others when she tried to get them all to sleep in it. They preferred to explore the yard, a little game park, with roofs on two sides and the syringa berry tree in the corner, just calling out to be climbed. Using the fence next to the tree, the children made their way up to the lower branches, then onto the roof over Green Door Thatha's unit.

As the climbers clattered over the flat roof of the Padayachys' and Naidoos' units, they would suddenly hear Mummy's terrified voice shouting at her daughter. "Come down at once. You'll break your neck!" But Boma, ignoring her mother, simply continued on with the rest. They were on their way down anyway. At the end of the roof, they would clamber onto the boundary wall next to the kitchen and jump to the ground. When she was naughty like this, Mummy put the poker in the fire. That sent Boma in a mad dash to the bedroom and under the double bed. Crouching in the farthest corner, she watched the red-hot poker thrashing around trying to find her. Knowing Mummy would never hurt her, Boma wasn't really scared so Mummy's attempts to discipline her didn't work and she always did whatever she wanted. But her mother's constant nagging, eventually convinced her that she would break her neck and she gave up the climbing expeditions. After that the syringa tree became just a tree. But it had other uses. It provided the leaves for treating measles. Mummy spread them with a paste of turmeric and crushed ginger and then applied them to the children's faces. Though not confined to bed, the children stayed home, wearing their leaves for the duration of the illness. And the tree also invited the peacocks from the Marieamman Temple in Sixth Street into the yard. When the birds came floating down, Baba and Boma held their breaths in delight, waiting for them to display their fantails. Sometimes they were lucky.

But yards weren't the only playing spaces. The street was a much bigger playground, with many more children and a greater variety of games – Lucky Charms, Pannetjies, Marbles, Kennetjie, Tops, Kites and Hide-and-Seek. Lucky Charms and Pannetjies required the skill of shooting charms or tin caps into a

circle drawn on the ground with a target in the middle. Whoever hit the target won and took all the charms in play. The brightly coloured charms made of clay or plaster of Paris represented all kinds of objects, animals and people; Boma's favourites were the little gnomes. One day, being on a winning streak, she decided to challenge one of the older boys. They played, and before she knew it, she had lost all her lucky charms. She felt she had somehow been diddled, but her brothers just treated her appeals with contempt. What business had she, a little pipsqueak, to challenge one of their friends?

In the evenings, just after the sun went down, the children played hide and seek in the street and the darkness came alive with little shadows flitting about looking for hiding places behind pillars, near the shop and around the Tamil School. While sounds of running, whooping, yelling, shouting, swearing and laughter filled the air, parents sat on their verandas, quietly contemplating their boisterous offspring, and enjoying the coolness of the evening.

As Cowie Street was a main thoroughfare, horse-drawn carts and motor vehicles intruded into the children's playing area during the day but the children knew how to incorporate these vehicles into their play. When they saw a horse and cart in the distance, they waited in quiet anticipation. As soon as it came by, they leapt up, grabbed the backboard and hung on by their hands and feet. Sailing his whip over them, the driver would try to jettison this unwanted cargo but the children, not at all intimidated, rode along to the end of the street before they jumped off.

They played a more dangerous game with passing motor vehicles. Cars and trucks were novelties on the street so when the children saw a motor vehicle approaching, they waited on one side. As soon as it was fairly close, someone gave a shout that sent them dashing to the other side in front of the vehicle. Drivers probably suffered near heart attacks trying to slow down in time.

One day, when Mummy was out, the children saw a truck coming down the road. As usual, they waited and then at the signal, charged. Little Baba, a skinny, sickly child, was left behind. When Boma called to her to hurry, she made a sudden dash into the middle of the road and fell down right there. Fortunately, the truck stopped in time. The driver got out, picked up the terrified little girl, set her down amongst the other children and gave them all a good scolding. That evening, Mummy, very angry with Boma, put the poker in the fire. Boma in her corner under the double bed didn't really need any punishment. She couldn't forgive herself for what had happened. After that, the sisters didn't play the game with motor vehicles anymore.

But that didn't stop their play activities from being of concern to Mummy. Every so often they escaped to the forbidden paradise of the Apies River, about five

streets away, where they joined other children whose parents were not as strict. All the children loved the river. In the section that bordered the locations, the bed and banks had been cemented over and only a trickle of water ran through. The children ran down the cement bank on their side of the river, sped across the bed and allowed the momentum to carry them up the opposite bank on to the other side where white people lived. No matter how hard she tried, Boma could never get up the opposite bank. She just wasn't very athletic and her friends always had to pull her up. Once on the other side, the children ran among the white folks' houses to steal keerè (herbs), weeds to white people. When the white children saw the little coolies outside, they swore at them, threw stones and chased after them. The children then scampered back across the river to the safety of their own side from which they returned fire and kept a barrage of stones flying through the air.

The children often went beyond the cement channel to explore the lower reaches of the river. There, hopping over rocks, they looked for frogs and swimming holes. When they reached an enticing pool, the boys jumped in and the girls, who weren't allowed to be in the water, tucked their skirts into their broekies and waded in as far as their courage would take them. Knowing that they were defying their mothers made it a great thrill.

But life wasn't all play; children also had responsibilities.

Every afternoon, after a herd of cattle had passed along Cowie Street towards Marabastad, the children collected the sarni that lay scattered across the road. Boma didn't mind doing this as she loved the feel of the fresh dung and scooped up mound after mound till she had filled her bucket. The sarni was needed to keep down the dust that blew over the verandas and into the houses. One of Boma's chores was to spray sarni over the back yard and the pavement in front. After she had swept the yard and pavement with a little grass hand broom, she broke up the manure in water and mixed the sarni to a liquid consistency. Then holding the bucket in one hand, she splashed the sarni over the ground with the other. If she found any coins during the process, it made the task really worthwhile.

Another daily chore was the cleaning of the stove. Boma and Baba had to empty and clean the ash box that lined the grate, clean the grate, put the ash box back in, fill it with a layer of paper, then wood, and lastly coal so that it was ready to be lit. Boma also chopped the wood that was delivered once or twice a week and dropped in a pile in front of the kitchen. She placed little sections of log on the chopping block, lifted the chopper and brought it down, splitting the wood in one clean stroke. As she loved the feel of that, she often chopped wood just for the fun of it. Then she and Baba carried in armfuls of chopped wood to store under the stove. The off-cuts from furniture factories that they found among the

wood made good building blocks and the girls played with them for hours on the kitchen floor.

Being a little mercenary, Boma did one unpleasant task quite eagerly, because it always produced a tip. As Green Door Thatha lived alone, Mummy cooked for him and sent over his plate of food every day. Boma always volunteered to take it. She knocked; he came to the door, took the plate and then closed the door in her face. She wasn't put off; she just parked on his doorstep to wait for the empty plate. He obviously did not appreciate being dogged like this. When he had finished his meal, he stood in the doorway to rinse his mouth, and spat out quite close to where she was sitting. Boma felt disgusted but as he always paid up, that was what really mattered.

One activity that occurred, perhaps once a year, was more of a game than a chore. When the sky inexplicably went dark, everyone ran out with utensils and sticks, anything with which they could make a noise, and stood in the street beating, yelling and shouting to keep the big black cloud from descending – locusts swarming across the sky!

The locusts were as complete a mystery to Boma as was the war that enforced total darkness upon the location at night when blinds had to be pulled down to prevent the tiniest spark of light being seen from the outside. And food was rationed; that too had something to do with the war. She and Baba had to go to Boom Street and queue with other people in front of trucks that brought supplies of groceries – rice, flour and sugar. And the war did not allow people to sift the flour, which was full of husks. As Mummy could not bake with this flour, she sifted at night when she would not be caught and co-conspirator, Boma, helped by turning the handle on the roller that pushed the flour through the fine cloth filter underneath and left the husks behind.

This war thing was a mystery.

It was only at the bioscope that the children got some understanding of it. As Daddy ran the kaffee at the Empire, and later the Royal Bioscope, they watched the newsreels that were shown before the main feature, and saw that the war was about ships and soldiers and bombs. But it was really Charlie Chaplin who put Boma in the know. From him she learned that there was this ridiculous little man called Hitler who was responsible for their nightly blackouts and the queues for rations. But he was funny and she enjoyed his antics so she couldn't really be cross with him. Daddy, who belonged to a book club, had *Mein Kampf* in the bookcase but Boma never took it out to read even though she loved Charlie Chaplin.

Sundays were special; they were family days and days for social occasions. The whole location settled into a relaxed and festive mood, with sumptuous and lavish meals, followed by outings in the location or in town. The morning began with music blaring from every radiogram in every home, playing the latest film hits featuring singers like Thiagaraj Bhagavathar, Boma's favourite singer, and Subuluxmi.

For the Naidoo family, the day began with a huge breakfast. On weekdays, they had a plate of porridge and a mug of tea. But on Sundays, Mummy served fried muttonchops with fried onions, tomato chutney and bread and butter. Mummy and Daddy sat on chairs at the kitchen table, the boys on benches and the girls on straw mats against the kitchen dresser. Boma loved her blue enamel plate with its bunch of painted flowers running from one rim down to the other. Baba's plate was green with a scattering of flowers. Boma, as always, ate with gusto, and as Baba had a poor appetite, she magnanimously cleared her plate as well. The family finished the meal with samoosas bought from vendors who always appeared at the right time. They ate so much for breakfast that they needed the long walks that they took in the afternoon.



At the Union Buildings

Back: Mummy, Daddy with Baba, Grandpa RM Naidoo and Daddy's youngest brother Jay (MJ) visiting from Durban **Front:** Boma, Seeni, Reggie

At the
Hartebeespoort
Dam

Back: Parvathy,
Mummy, Velli,
Aunty Nagoo

Front: Seeni,
Visoo, Kuthee,
Baba, Boma

Some Sundays, the whole family walked to the zoo to see the animals. Near the entrance was the snake tank and further along, the place for elephant rides. The family walked around looking at kangaroos in their fenced-off enclosure and lions and other animals in cages. In an enclosure, with a very shallow pool of water, was a large crocodile that fascinated Boma, who waited patiently just to see it open its mouth wide and show all its teeth. When it did, she ran like the devil.

Then they walked up to the monkey houses. Around the cage of a male and female orang-utan, there was the usual crowd watching their “domestic” fights.

People stood around, laughing and enjoying the spectacle but Boma didn't find it funny. It disturbed her to see the apes in their cramped cages screaming in frustration, yelling and hurting one another. Although she loved the zoo as a child, mainly because of the swings, when she grew up she saw only the captivity – animals in cages and confined spaces – and came to hate zoos and all kinds of prisons.

The Naidooos didn't go to the zoo every week. Sometimes they walked around town visiting museums, churches and occasionally the Union Buildings. At other times, they planned outings to the Hartebeespoort Dam or the Wonderboom.

Sundays spent in the location were for visiting with friends.

Daddy, who loved to play cards, often went to the Reddys' place on Tenth Street where a crowd of men sat at a long table in the shade of a vine-covered wooden canopy playing *thunny*, the lively, boisterous Indian card game. While Daddy played cards and Mummy congregated with the other mothers, the children hared off for fun and games at the river.



The family often went to Mr Post Master's house. Everyone called Mr Pillay, Post Master. There, all the men sat in the living room or on the front veranda while the women gathered in the backyard where Mrs Postmaster asked Boma to perform. Boma had a regular stand-up comedy routine that she thought was great so she didn't care whether the audience was laughing at her or with her. She had a two-joke repertoire that she performed with great dramatic flourish. One of her jokes went like this:

*One day, a man went to visit his friend who lived a long distance away.
While they were chatting, it began to rain and didn't stop. When it got
late the man, very worried, looked out of the window.
'How am I going to get home in this rain?'
His friend said, 'You can't go home in this weather. You must stay here
tonight.'
The man turned to his friend with a smile. 'Thank you, you're very
kind.'
His friend then said, 'Come, let me show you your room.'
The man answered, 'In a minute. I have to run home quickly for my pyjamas.'
And he was out the door before his friend could stop him.*

Her audience laughed heartily and Boma felt confirmed in the profession she had chosen for herself: she was going to be a clown just like Tickey or Sixpence in the circus.

Once in a while, Mummy and Daddy stayed home on a Sunday afternoon. Then the girls went out with Aunt Gladys, a Coloured woman, who lived opposite. She took them to the "Greenies," wild bush areas along the Apies River where they walked, enjoying their surroundings. When an African congregation was in the river for baptisms, Aunt Gladys and the girls sat down to watch the minister immerse heads in the water while the congregation prayed, sang and chanted. The only other awareness that the children had of Africans in the community was the parade of "Malaitas" on Sunday afternoons. Dressed in traditional warrior garb, men from Marabastad trooped down Cowie Street on their way to the fighting matches that took place in a ground somewhere in town.

Boma started school at the age of seven, the age of admission in those days. As there were no government school buildings, the Tamil School was used for "English School" in the morning with vernacular school following in the afternoon. On the first day that Mummy took her to be admitted, Boma was dressed in a bright blue dress with a big slide in her hair. More significantly, she was wearing socks and shoes. Normally, she ran about barefoot like all the other children. But on this day,

the socks and shoes indicated a new phase in her life: she was going to English School.

After all the registration formalities, a teacher, pointing to the three oak trees near the fence along Eighth Street, said in a-speaking-to-little-kids voice, “Do you see those trees, there, far away?” Glancing at the trees, Boma thought the woman an idiot – they were just there next to the fence. “Go and play there until the bell rings.”

Boma went out into the playground with lots of other new children. She was very worried about the name under which she had been registered so she asked another little girl to read her tag. She wanted to know whether the name on the tag was “Madevi.” Boma couldn’t read but it did not occur to her that the other children couldn’t read either. When the little girl assured her that the tag said Madevi, Boma felt relieved. She was happy until she got to her classroom where she had to answer to her official name. Both Boma and Madevi, being pet names, did not appear on her birth certificate. To make matters worse, there was a boy in the class with exactly the same name, first and last.

English School, so called because of the medium of instruction, began at about 7:30. But Boma was always late. She resented having to forego the game that she and Baba played on the double bed every morning. They rolled up Mummy and Daddy’s blankets and pillows to make a bank on one side of the bed. Then one of them would lie on it while the other jumped until she rolled off. Of course, Mummy had tried time and again to put an end to all this jumping on the bed with its weak springs, so she was glad that Boma was now going to school. As they lived just across the road from the school, there really was no reason for Boma to be late



*English School in
the Tamil School
Building on Cowie
Street*

every day but Mummy couldn't get her out of bed in time. A classmate, whom the teacher sent to fetch her, often found her squatting on the bathroom floor washing her face from an enamel basin.

When she got to school, she ran into the playground to find her friends. In the baby classes, the morning began with free play. Children chose whatever they wanted from all the toys and equipment set out in the middle of the ground and played until the bell rang, the signal that they had to return their toys and line up in front of the veranda for assembly, the purpose of which completely escaped Boma. When she marched off with the other children to the classrooms, she never knew whether she was in the right line or not. Dressed in a white shirt, black gym, black shoes and white socks, she stood out from the majority of barefoot children in their everyday clothes. Mummy, who had standards, knew the proper protocol and Boma was the only child in school wearing a "uniform".

At English School, they wrote on square chalkboards whereas at Tamil School that began at three in the afternoon, they wrote on slates with slate pencils. At English school, they spent a lot of time drawing; they drew the objects that they counted in arithmetic and learned about in other subjects. Boma loved drawing. Her brothers and Baba also loved drawing because Mummy and Daddy often sat drawing with them in the evenings. Those were just pencil drawings or sketches on slates. At English school, there was coloured chalk. One day, Boma mixed red with white and discovered pink. She was so excited that she went around sharing the magic with all her friends.

She quite enjoyed English school especially the lovely stories that her teacher told that they could act out. As she loved performing, she was once chosen to play Cinderella and was delighted until she had to dance with the Prince at the Ball. She was mortified to find that the boy with exactly the same name was the Prince.

After she had completed the first two grades at the Tamil School, Boma went to the newly built Big School, the Pretoria Indian Government School, on Von Wielligh Street, about six short blocks from Cowie Street. The school, a brick double-storey building, not a tiny three-roomed structure like the Tamil School, housed both the primary and secondary schools. Mummy took her to the Big School on the first day and when Boma found her way home by herself at the end of that day, Mummy was extremely proud of her.

At the Big School, the morning started with breakfast. From Monday to Thursday, the children received a glass of milk and two jam sandwiches. Fridays were special: that was the day for cheese. Later, when Boma was in Std. Four, she was one of those entrusted with preparing the bread in the morning. True to herself, she made sure she got the thickest slices with the most butter, and on

Fridays, big slices of cheese. How she always landed these jobs, she never knew. It was only much later in life when she had gone straight that she realised that crooked people, who were most ingenious, knew how to get ahead in the world. She had been on the right road to begin with but then had screwed it all up. The children also received lots and lots of fruit at school – oranges, apples, grapes, raisins and other fruit. Boma did not have to sneak any because each child got a really generous amount and she sometimes went home with six oranges.

After breakfast in the morning, they went in for lessons. Her class teacher, Mrs Dougall, a short plump very strict woman, couldn't stand the sight of the children's snotty noses so she made little nosebags that tied at the back of the head. During singing lessons, Mrs Dougall, who played the piano, taught them English songs. That was fun. But Boma's favourite lesson was reading because they always acted out the stories that they read. Even though she was a crook, she got the roles of the 'good guys.' When she played Cottontail, the rabbit, who saved himself from a lion by tricking him into going after his own reflection in a well, that was a little closer to the person she was.

In addition to Mrs Dougall, there was Mr Andrew Anthony, a tall, very dark, very handsome man, one of the first Indian teachers in the location. He taught Hygiene. One day, he asked the children how often one should have a bath. All the children's hands shot up. He asked several pupils but no one had the right answer. Pumping the air with her hand, Boma, who knew the answer, couldn't wait to be asked. When Mr Anthony finally got to her, she proudly answered, "Once a week." But instead of congratulating her, Mr Anthony went on asking different children. In the end she discovered that the right answer was every day. Boma couldn't believe her ears. Every day! Their bathroom in the yard was an empty room with a cold tap and a drain. For her bath, Mummy boiled water in a paraffin tin on the stove in the kitchen then carried it to the bathroom. When she eventually got Boma in, she had to chase her round the bathroom before she could wash her hair, scrub her down with coir and soap, rinse and vigorously dry her off. Then she combed out the myriad tangles and smeared her hair with coconut oil to keep it straight. As far as Boma was concerned, anyone who would submit to this on a daily basis had to be crazy. She began to have serious doubts about the wisdom of school.

Furthermore, she had to put up with the nonsense of being on time. Coming late to school was what she did, but she hadn't reckoned on Mr Pickles, the principal of the Big School. With his cane in his hand, he waited at the gate every morning to greet latecomers. When the children saw him brandishing his weapon, they charged helter-skelter through the gate to avoid contact. Of course, Mummy was his ally. She didn't want Boma to be late so she insisted that Reggie, the eldest, take her with him in the morning. Reggie, four years older and a fifth grader, didn't want a little sister tagging along so they walked together but on opposite sides of Grand Street.

At Big School, playtimes were very short and there was too much concentration on sport. This did not suit Boma at all. When she watched the big girls playing netball, she thought to herself, *What a barbarous game!* She vowed never to be caught doing that. Then there were sports days. For these, all the children in the school had to be tested and put into teams. One day, her Std One class was called out. They stood in a line ready to race so that the teachers could pick out the best runners. Boma took one look at the set-up, decided it was not for her and willed herself to faint. So while all the others were dashing off to the finish, she was lying inert at the starting line. Sports day itself was great because she and other recalcitrants escaped to the far end of the ground and played their own games. They rolled down slopes, chased each other, and just had fun. They had not been harnessed into races and long jumps and other such restricting and exclusive activities. Neither had they been reduced to being mere spectators.

When Boma started English School, she and Baba were also sent to Tamil School which began at three o' clock in the afternoon and finished at five. Mummy sent the girls to Tamil school in slacks or shorts and shirts. Their curly, bobbed hair was held in place at the side with big slides. The Naidoo girls' appearance irritated the teachers; girls in those days did not cut their hair or wear shorts or slacks. On one occasion, when the girls arrived late at school, they had to stand with other latecomers. There were two lines, boys on one side and girls on the other. The teacher, KP annè (big brother), a skinny man with rimless spectacles perched at the top of his thin sharp nose, was a real martinet. Taking one look at Boma and Baba through his small, narrow glasses, he sent them to stand with the boys.

"If you dress like boys, you must stand with the boys," he said. "So? You call your mother 'Mummy' and your father 'Daddy?' You think you are English people, eh?" Boma full of resentment said nothing. Her eyes were fixed on the cane in his hand. Tamil school was the place for corporal punishment. If you mispronounced Tamil words or wrote in a bad hand, your ears were twisted or you received cuts on your hands. If you were asked to stay after school, it meant a caning. And KP Annè was known for his dexterity with the cane but, on this occasion, he sent them off without punishing them.

Boma found Tamil school a great place to indulge her criminal tendencies. She loved pencils probably because she spent so much time drawing. One afternoon, she made off with every single slate pencil in her class. How she stole them even she didn't know, but when she had the lot, she disappeared from the class and made for home. Not long after, the Tamil teacher and all the children from the class were in the yard at the back door. On seeing them, Boma made her getaway out of the front door. She was running away and would never come back. She ran

all the way to Uncle Munia's house next door and hid in the little garden on the side. It was the only house in the street with a garden.

She waited there and waited. No one was looking for her. There's no point in being a fugitive if people don't come looking for you. So when it got dark, she had no choice but to give herself up. When she knocked on Uncle Munia's door, the aunty who opened wouldn't let her in. She just told her to go home. Boma crossed the little driveway, entered the yard and went in through the back door. Daddy, in his shirtsleeves, was sitting in his usual place at the end of the kitchen table, Mummy was frying fish and the others were sitting around. As soon as she set eyes on Daddy, Boma ran up to him, threw herself on her knees, and clutching his leg, began to cry. She expected to be scolded or given a hiding but all Daddy did was pat her on the head saying, "There, there." And that did it! She never stole a thing after that. Perhaps if she had been punished she would have felt that she had paid for her crime so she could go on to others. But she wasn't punished. Even at Tamil School, once the pencils had been retrieved, it was as though nothing had ever happened.

And the great pencil robbery marked the end of a promising career in crime. At least temporarily.

And Tamil School remained a bore. Because she could not speak the language, she found it difficult to learn especially as she hated chanting and having to learn things off by heart. Though she did learn to recite a few sentences in Tamil, they made no difference to her ability to communicate in the language. "*Payan koothiray mel yeri vandaan. Un-the payanuku sakthi illay.*" The boy came riding on a horse. The boy had no strength. It was part of a story but she never learned who the boy was, where he had come from or why he had no strength. As she was considered a dunce at Tamil School, she was quite surprised when Soobiah vathiar (teacher), who was handing out prizes at the end of a term, presented her with one. If it was to encourage her to learn, it had no effect whatsoever. But it was a marvellous prize, a set of wooden building blocks that gave her and Baba endless hours of pleasure on the kitchen floor.

Outside the classroom, Tamil School was great fun. Unlike English school, where playing was limited, there was the long period before class during which children played all kinds of chasing games in the schoolyard. They even ran around the three oak trees that stood in a row near the fence on Eighth Street. All the children knew that you could not go near the trees at noon because that was when the Devil and his henchmen occupied them. Any child foolish enough to wander into the shade at midday would be snatched up and unspeakable things would

occur. Boma and her friends believed fervently in the Devil; he was definitely more powerful than God. There he was every day at noon in those trees *right across* from the little Subramanian Temple, fearlessly intimidating children. They knew exactly what he looked like but had no idea of God, who was called by so many names, Subramanya, Marieamman, Muruga, Kartikeya, Ganesha, Sivan and so on, that they couldn't get a fix on him.

Boma, of course, had no such problem; the name of her god was Food and the temple provided plenty. On the five Saturdays of the month of *Purrataasi*, the whole Tamil community gathered at the temple to pray. But for Boma, *Purrataasi* had only one meaning – the brown paper bags of *kadlè* (fried chickpeas), *sacra-satham* (sweet rice) and *poolie-satham* (tamarind rice) that were distributed after prayers. People arrived hours before the service, the grown-ups to work and the children to play. The women gathered in the yard to prepare the special *prasatham* and when the cooking was done, they filled brown paper bags with two big balls of rice, one sweet, one tamarind, and a cupful of chickpeas. As soon as the prayers were over, the packets of food were handed out. Boma typically tried to get as many as she could.

During *kavadi*, people fulfilled vows that they had taken to cure illnesses by marching around the temple three times carrying on their shoulders, the wooden arches, decorated with flowers, that represented their sacrifice. The whole congregation walked with them singing *kirtans* and chanting *bhajans*. In the evening, they gathered around the *lingam* where some devotees went into trances and spoke in tongues. That terrified Boma. Glancing at the oaks where the Devil lived, she wondered whether he and his demons were still in the trees or whether they had entered the bodies of the penitents with rolling eyes and lolling tongues.

Boma didn't understand anything of these religious practices or a word of the prayers she recited in Tamil School but she had a good reason to attend the Sunday services at the Subramanian Temple, a little tin shanty at one end of the Tamil School yard with a *lingam* in the ground under a nearby tree that shaded the tall wooden housing of the temple bell. As Uncle Murrthee presided at this temple, Aunty Nagoo provided a huge dish of *kadlè* for distribution after the service on Sunday mornings. And this was the reason for Boma's sudden interest in religion. The *kadlè*. She never missed a service and was eventually rewarded for her devotion when she was allowed to serve the *kadlè*. The tiny congregation did not seem to notice that after she took over, they received smaller portions while the leftovers grew large.

The temple also offered Boma other opportunities.

As Uncle Murrthee and Aunty Nagoo didn't have daughters and cleaning the temple and all the lamps on a Friday afternoon was woman's work, this job also fell

to the devotee Boma. On Friday afternoons, she swept out the temple and covered the floor with sarni. After that, she took all the lamps to the taps at the opposite end of the playground, rubbed them with tamarind and salt, then washed, dried and decorated them with turmeric paste and kunkum. She was there every Friday afternoon without fail.

But money grubbing Boma didn't work for nothing. There was a *thaambaalim* (brass tray) filled with ashes in the little inner sanctum of the temple. The priest, Uncle Murrthee, held it out at the end of the service so people could take a little thinoor (ash) to draw a horizontal line across the forehead – the symbol of devotees of Lord Siva. Invariably, they put a coin or two in the ashes. On Fridays, after her chores were done, Boma headed straight for this brass tray. Digging around in the ashes, she looked for the more valuable coins taking just enough to satisfy herself without arousing any suspicions. Boma obviously didn't believe in a hereafter or in karma; she believed in making the best of the circumstances in which she found herself.

And she was consistent: a regular at temple and a regular truant at Tamil School. She skipped often to visit Aunty Salatchie who lived close to the river on Grand Street. There she played in the yard, climbed the fig tree, helped Aunty Salatchie with the baby or went down to the river to play in the water. It didn't matter how often she was punished, she bunked whenever she felt like it. She hated Tamil School and wished she didn't have to go. Then one day, quite miraculously, Mummy whisked her and Baba out of Tamil School and did not send them back. Boma was jubilant. She secretly congratulated herself, believing that Mummy, fed up with her truancy, had pulled them out of school. When she discovered that one of the older girls, who had often been asked to stay after school, was pregnant, she didn't make the connection. When the girl suddenly married one of the teachers, she still didn't get it. While the community was agog with the scandal, all she cared about was her reprieve.

Boma had no knowledge of sex whatsoever. When they were very little, she and Baba believed that aeroplanes brought babies – no such old-fashioned thing as a stork for Mummy. Whenever the girls heard a plane, they ran out into the yard, holding a shawl between them, chanting, "Aeroplane, aeroplane, bring us a baby." They fully expected a baby to drop out of the sky into the shawl. As Boma grew older, she and her friends became extremely interested in sexual organs. Before Tamil School, they would sit on the pavement telling tales about private parts. Boma invented a story of a disembodied penis, metres long, crawling along streets, turning corners, constantly roving. All the girls shrieked with laughter. They had no idea of the penis's quest; they were simply meditating on the lingam.

When Boma was told that the penis was in search of a vagina, she was disgusted. Visoo had come in great excitement one day to find Boma and Baba and tell them

what he had spied through a hole in the corrugated iron wall that separated the neighbours' bedroom from his living room. What he described horrified the girls who refused to believe it. People didn't do such nasty things. Boma was outraged at Visoo for making up such a revolting story.

The Naidoo's time in the location was coming to an end and Boma in Standard Four, was in her last year at a Pretoria school. In that year, 1947, the Big School was divided into a primary and high school. Prefabricated classrooms were put up in one part of the ground for a primary school that was separated from the high school by a fence. The principal of the Primary School, Miss Wolf, a tall German woman with honey brown hair drawn into a soft bun at the nape of her neck, began the day with an assembly at which all Boma ever concentrated on was Miss Wolf's fingers, knitting away at great speed. She held her needles in a different way, the German way, the other children said. Boma, who had begun knitting lessons with Mummy, and used string and two long thick nails, considered her laborious efforts clumsy compared to the smooth, fleeting grace of the Principal's hands.

Boma's new teacher was Mrs Lamprecht, a lively, blonde Afrikaner woman, whom she liked very much. Mrs Lamprecht, who knew she loved drawing, didn't mind when she pulled out her pencil to draw as soon as she had finished her sums or other work. In fact, Mrs Lamprecht often praised her drawings. And to Boma's delight, in history lessons she had them copying or drawing pictures of important events. As Mrs Lamprecht, an avid radio listener, tuned in to the same radio theatre programmes as the Naidoo's, mostly BBC radio dramas, she and Boma got into discussions of the plays. And for once, and only in her last year at this school, Boma found school stimulating and interesting.

1947.

Daddy was making arrangements for the family move back to Durban. As they had to have a permit to live in the Transvaal, Mummy and Daddy had never been able to think of Pretoria as a permanent home.

The struggle for independence in India was coming to an end, a struggle that had aroused strong anti-British feeling among some Tamilians in the Asiatic Bazaar.

The Royal Family was visiting South Africa.

When it was known that the King, Queen and Princesses were coming to the location, there was talk of a boycott but nothing came of it. The school children were given King George VI mugs, a medal and a tiny tin of boiled sweets and marched off to the sports ground to see the Royal Family. When King George, Queen Elizabeth, Princess Elizabeth and Princess Margaret Rose arrived, hundreds

of children watched them mount a dais where they stood waving to the crowd. Boma was amazed at how pink they were. If there were speeches or formalities of any kind, she missed them; she was too busy struggling to open her tin of boiled sweets.

Not all the school children had allowed themselves to be herded off to the sports ground. Boma's fourteen-year old brother, Seeni, was one of those who boycotted the occasion. In the week before the arrival of the Royal family, he had been working hard trying to make a bomb, but hadn't succeeded. Boma, aware of his efforts, had simply dismissed them as his usual pranks. He had such shining, bright eyes, round cheeks and big smile that it was difficult to take him seriously. As she knew nothing of the struggle against the British in India, she had no idea why Seeni would want to blow up the Royal Family. She understood only the concrete. Once she had opened the tin of boiled sweets, she was most disappointed. If she had to throw a bomb, it would be a demonstration against flat, uninteresting confections.

The Naidoo family
Baba, Daddy, Reggie,
Seeni, Mummy, Boma





CHAPTER THREE

SINTHUMBI AND POPPIE

Following the Heart

Sinthumbi's given name is Vartharajaloo. Clan custom requires that his first name be the same as his father's. So his full name should be Vernugopal (his father's first name) Vartharajaloo Naidoo. This is what he accepted and for most of his life was called VV Naidoo. Then when he had to reapply for his driver's licence in 1977, no record of a VV Naidoo could be found. He did not exist. When his father's file was located, he found that his name had been entered as Vartharajaloo Gopalsamy, not even Naidoo. Some careless immigration official had fused Vernugopal with Naransamy, his father's first and second names, to come up with Gopalsamy. When he discovered this, Sinthumbi changed his name from VV Naidoo to VG Naidoo; he had no intention of giving up his surname. But the law knows neither VV Naidoo nor VG Naidoo, only V Gopalsamy whom nobody knows!

Born in the Asiatic Bazaar on August 13, 1915, Vernugopal Vartharajaloo Naidoo, better known as Sinthumbi, was the youngest of six children. His father, Vernugopal Naransamy Naidoo, who had left India for Mauritius to marry Vellimay Pillay, soon afterwards set sail for South Africa, landed in Durban and journeyed to Kimberley. Like other Indian immigrants seeking their fortunes in South Africa, he followed the development of mining into the various provinces, but legal restrictions did not allow him to work at the diggings.

Then he and Vellimay left Kimberley for the Asiatic Bazaar in Pretoria where Vernugopal, like many others, turned to hawking fruit and vegetables. He drove his cart to the market every morning to stock up before setting off to sell his goods in Pretoria Town and its environs. It was on one of these rounds that he died under mysterious circumstances. He left in the morning as usual but never came back. He was found lying across the railway line in Cullinan bludgeoned almost to death

and would have disappeared without a trace, had the engineer of an approaching train not seen his body in time. Vernugopal was taken to the Pretoria General Hospital in Potgieter Street where they set about trying to identify him.

His family, unaware of these happenings, would never have found him had it not been for an unusual coincidence. His second son, suffering from appendicitis, had been admitted to the same hospital earlier in the day. The young man had no idea who had been placed in the bed that was screened off next to him until he heard hospital officials read Vernugopal's name from a card that they found in his pocket. He immediately informed them that the man was his father. That was how the family discovered that Vernugopal was in hospital. As he died without recovering consciousness, the mystery of his death was never solved. The family believed that someone envious of his success as a hawker had murdered him.

In the midst of their grief, they were dealt another blow when Appasamy Nayagar, the Tamil priest, refused to administer the last rites. He was angry with Vernugopal for having officiated at a funeral earlier in the month. "He doesn't need me. Didn't he take the funeral of that low-caste laundryman a few weeks ago?"¹ The priest, who was President of the Pretoria Tamil League, had forbidden its members from giving the laundryman a proper burial, but Vernugopal, believing that it was wrong to deny him the last rites, had officiated at his funeral. The League had fined Vernugopal two shillings and sixpence for disobeying the priest.

Vellimay angrily confronted the priest. "Are you holding a grudge against him for taking that funeral, even now when somebody has murdered him?" How could this priest be so cold? Her husband had been an executive member of the League.

"All the members of the Tamil League knew they mustn't take that man's funeral, but your husband thought he knew better."

Vellimay bristled. "What kind of priest are you? You call this doing God's work? My husband was murdered and you won't take his funeral. Is this what your religion teaches you?"

"I see. The whole family thinks it's too clever. Well, if you're so clever, why don't you take the funeral yourself?"

In that moment, Vellimay, whose pain was more than she could bear, turned her back on the priest right there and then and forever, and Vernugopal was not cremated as Hindus usually are, but was buried instead.

Vernugopal's murder, the first of three deaths that took place in quick succession, deprived the family of all its breadwinners in the short space of a few months. The two older boys died soon after their father: one as a result of a burst appendix, the other in the terrible influenza epidemic that hit the Transvaal at the end of the First World War. Vellimay with three young children, her younger daughter, Marmakka, and her two remaining sons, Perithumbi and Sinthumbi, had no means of support

¹ All quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the interview with Sinthumbi

and became dependent on her son-in-law, GS Frank, who had moved in with them when he had married her eldest daughter, Subamma.

When a Mr Padayachee, a new immigrant from India, was looking for lodgings, Vellimay saw this as an opportunity to earn a small income and offered Mr Padayachee accommodation in her house. Mr Padayachee moved in, became a hawker and helped to support the family. Though he was kind and good, a surrogate father to the two little boys, after he had been with them for a while, an irreconcilable quarrel erupted between Subamma and her mother. Vellimay, clutching Sinthumbi's little hand, walked out with a small blanket under her arm. She had asked Marmakka, Perithumbi and Sinthumbi whether they wanted to stay with their sister or go with her. Marmakka chose to stay, but Sinthumbi and Perithumbi left with their mother. Mr Padayachee, whom the boys called Aiyah, also went with them. They moved to a little room in Tenth Street on property that Vellimay's eldest son had bought for sixty pounds some years before. As the ten foot square room had no facilities whatsoever, they had to go across the road to a neighbouring yard to use the bathroom and toilet. Although Aiyah provided for the family, Vellimay, who did not want to be totally dependent on him, began hawking vegetables and fruit from a little barrow that she pushed around adjoining areas in Pretoria town.

When Perithumbi and Sinthumbi were old enough, Vellimay sent them to Miss Ferguson's Coloured School, not the English School for Indians, which used the premises of the Tamil School, the property of the Tamil League with its President, Appasamy Nayagar. Vellimay could never forgive him for refusing to officiate at her husband's funeral and would have nothing to do with anything connected to him. So Sinthumbi and Perithumbi went to the Coloured school. They weren't the only Indian children at Miss Ferguson's school; there were at least twenty others. At school, the boys developed a keen interest in sports. Miss Ferguson, who coached soccer, chose them to represent the school, and in inter-school competitions, the seed was sown for their future involvement in sport.

But Vellimay's health was failing, so it wasn't easy for the boys. By the time Sinthumbi was ten years old, he and Perithumbi were helping their mother in the afternoons after school, pushing the cart or carrying dishes of fruit and vegetables to sell in town. Vellimay, who was ailing all the time, had no idea that she was suffering from cancer and the many operations, seven over a period of two years, didn't halt her steady decline. After the last operation, she was no longer strong enough to go on working so the boys left school to manage the hawking trade. Sinthumbi was thirteen when he began pushing the vegetable barrow.

Vellimay's illness had one important salutary effect: it led to reconciliation with her daughters, Subamma and Marmakka. GS Frank then built a house on Tenth Street next door to his mother-in-law's little room. Though she now had the comfort of her daughters' care, Vellimay never improved. She became bed-ridden and died when Sinthumbi was fifteen.

After the funeral, Frank, who was the head chef at Turkstra's Koffiehuis, found Perithumbi employment as assistant-chef while Subamma approached MK Khoja who agreed to employ Sinthumbi in his grocery shop. Being on Bloed Street, the boundary between the Cape Boys' Location and the Asiatic Bazaar, the shop was well placed to serve both the Coloured and the Indian communities.

And it was in MK Khoja's general dealership, that Sinthumbi met Poppie, the girl who was to become his wife.

"My wife went to an Anglican mission school, Good Shepherd School. She was born in General Smuts' house in Irene. The late Smuts told her mother, 'I want you to baptise this child Irene,' because Smuts' house was in Irene.' Smuts also gave her the nickname Poppie (Dolly) and that was what everyone called her. "General and Mrs Smuts, and my wife's grandfather and grandmother first lived in Sunnyside. Then Smuts bought the farm in Irene and they moved there."

Poppie's grandparents, the Siegers, worked for General Smuts. Mrs Sieger, a St Helena woman, as housekeeper and Mr Sieger, a Coloured man whose father was German, as handyman. It was clear that Smuts expected their daughter, Nora, Poppie's mother, to take over as his housekeeper when her mother retired, but Nora, a feisty young woman, had other ideas. "This is not a job for me. I want an education. I will not be a slave for you. I will fight for my rights as a human being." She became a machinist in a factory in Johannesburg, held a position in the Garment Workers' Union and joined the Liberal Party. She married a German, Mr Peters, and Poppie was the first grandchild born at the farm in Irene.

As her involvement in political activities kept her on the move all over the country, Nora left her children in the care of her parents and Poppie was brought up by her grandparents. When she was ready for school, she went to live with a Mrs Fisher on Tenth Street in the Cape Location. The Good Shepherd School on Schubart Street that she was to attend, was within easy walking distance from there. After she left school, she became a machinist in a factory and continued to live with Mrs Fisher. As MK Khoja's, on the corner of Bloed and Ninth Streets, was just up the road from Mrs Fisher's house, Poppie often shopped there. Once, before she and Sinthumbi began seeing each other, Subamma caught sight of Poppie as she was on her way to work. "Oh, what a pretty girl you are," she exclaimed, "I don't know which Indian boy you're going to catch."

Petite Poppie's white skin, curly brown hair, aquiline nose and big smile excited the teenage Indian boys who hung around the shop. One day when she walked in, one of Sinthumbi's friends called out, "Hello, beautiful, where do you come from?"

"Mind your own business," was the reply.

"Hey, you don't have to be so cheeky, we only want to be friends."

"Who said I want to be friends with you?" Poppie walked off leaving the boys fuming.

"Hey, Thumbi," one called to Sinthumbi, who was behind the counter, "you know that girl, she cheeked us an' all."

"Maybe you didn't speak to her right."

"No, we were just trying to make friends. She didn't have to talk to us like that."

"So what do you expect me to do?"

"Just talk to her, man. Tell her we want to be friends."

A few days later when Poppie came into the shop, Sinthumbi charged her a little extra for her goods to punish her for being rude to his friends. Then he said, "I want to see you." They made an arrangement to meet the following day at a secluded spot close to the Apies River. After work the next day, Sinthumbi made his way to the appointed place with his two friends.

"Hello," Sinthumbi greeted Poppie when she arrived. Then he turned to his friends. "Well, here you are. You say she cheeked you." When Poppie saw the two boys who had accosted her in the shop, she gave Sinthumbi a stiff look and walked away. "Looks like she doesn't want to talk to you," Sinthumbi shouted over his shoulder as he ran after her. "Hey, Poppie, wait for me."

She didn't. When he caught up with her, he walked beside her along Bloed Street, the street that divided the Coloured Location from the Indian Location.

"Look, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have ..." he began.

"No, you shouldn't. I came here to meet *you*, not a whole gang."

"I'm sorry. They wanted to talk to you and I thought ..."

"Well, you thought wrong."

They walked on in silence for a while.

"Did you really come just to see me?" he asked.

"I don't know why," she answered.

"Well, I wasn't sure."

At the corner of Bloed and Tenth Streets, where they would go off in different directions, she to the Coloured side of Tenth, he, to the Indian side, they lingered for a while.

He asked, "Can I see you again?"

“You or the whole gang?”

“No, just me.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said as she strode off to Mrs Fisher’s house.

They began to see each other regularly after that. They were careful not to make their interest in each other obvious. In those days parents didn’t approve of boys and girls dating. And Poppie was a Coloured girl! Sinthumbi’s sisters, Subamma and Marmakka, and his brother, Perithumbi, would hit the roof if they knew.

Soon afterwards, Subamma’s husband, GS Frank, then in his tenth year at Turkstra’s Koffiehuis, brought Sinthumbi on as a second assistant chef. Perithumbi, already working in that capacity, had been there for two years when Sinthumbi joined them. In the early 1930s, Turkstra’s Koffiehuis, on St Andries Street, now just Andries Street, between Church and Pretorius, was a flourishing restaurant in the city centre, catering to an elite clientele. It was popular with professionals, especially the legal fraternity, who crowded in at about eleven every morning. Turkstra’s menu offered them a complete full-course meal consisting of hors d’oeuvres, soup, fish, entrées, the main course, dessert and coffee or tea for two shillings and sixpence. Sinthumbi felt gratified to be working at such a prestigious place.

The chefs and their assistants started preparing breakfast at six in the morning. Perithumbi organised the ingredients for the meals that the chefs cooked while Sinthumbi made sandwiches and orange juice. Mornings were the busiest times in the kitchen. After they had cooked and served breakfast, they began immediately to prepare for lunch, which they served from eleven onwards. Then twenty-two dishwashers stayed busy at the sinks while twenty-six white waiters ran back and forth between the kitchen and dining room. In the reception area, six white girls sold sweets and other over-the-counter items. At three in the afternoon, when the lunch rush was over, the chefs and their assistants took a break. They returned to work at half-past four for the last shift that ended at six-thirty. The restaurant was closed on Sundays.

On weekdays, Sinthumbi met Poppie in town after lunch, and strolled together through the city centre. Though they were very discreet, Subamma found out about their relationship and when she learnt of their meetings in town, she asked Frank to rearrange Sinthumbi’s shifts. As he could no longer meet Poppie during his break, he joined her on her Sunday visits to her grandmother. Subamma, who felt that her brother was bringing disgrace on the family, didn’t know how to get him to break it off with Poppie so she yelled at him for wasting money on these trips to Irene.

"You are spending so much money on that girl. How can you waste money like that? Do you think money grows on trees?"

"It's my money. I can do what I want with it."

"If Umma was alive, I don't know what she would say."

"You just leave Umma out of this."

"I don't know why you going around with a Bushman. You know you can't marry her. And which family will want you if you carry on like this?"

"She's not a Bushman. She's a white girl. Can't you see that?" Though they hurt him with their remarks, Sinthumbi was not going to be put off by his sisters and brother. He loved Poppie and that was that.

Then things changed at Turkstra's. Old Mr Turkstra died leaving the business to his sons, Bernard and Rintz, ambitious young men who wanted to turn Turkstra's into an even more exclusive restaurant. Rintz went on a tour of restaurants overseas, came back with new ideas and began to introduce changes. The first thing he did was to set out the menus in French. Frank pointed out that this would create problems but the young Turkstra ignored the chef. When the new menus were introduced, the waiters were constantly on the run to the kitchen to ask what the items on the menu were. Soon afterwards, the owners, who were planning to hire a German chef, gave Frank notice.

Frank explained to his brothers-in-law: "Listen boys, Mr Turkstra has hired a new chef. He doesn't need me anymore. So I will not be working here any longer. This does not affect you. You still have your jobs here."

"But how can they do this? After fourteen years of service! You built up this restaurant. People come here because of you." Sinthumbi was indignant.

"They are the owners. They can do what they like."

"Well, I don't think it's right. How can we stay on now? You were the one got us the jobs. I won't feel right to go on working here."

"We can't just give up our jobs, man." Perithumbi was nervous.

"We must. They can't treat Frank-Marmè (brother-in-law Frank) like this. When you leaving, Marmè?"

"End of the week."

"Then so are we," Sinthumbi spoke for himself and Perithumbi. "Look, we'll give them notice Friday. Then we finish Saturday. That's twenty-four hours."

"I don't know." Perithumbi wasn't happy to give up his job.

"You stay if you want but I won't. They replaced Frank-Marmè. Who says they won't replace us soon as we train two whites to take our place? I'm not staying."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Frank asked.

"Quite sure. Listen, we won't do the usual preparation for Monday. If we finish Saturday, then we finish. Monday is not our worry."

And they left. Sinthumbi didn't see why they should put themselves out for people who didn't appreciate their contribution to the business. In the years that followed, when Sinthumbi saw the restaurant going under, he felt convinced that when they fired his brother-in-law, the Turkstras brought bad fortune on themselves. He believed that their new staff was not able to cope with the volume of work required in that kitchen. The Turkstras struggled for a while; then sold the restaurant, which changed hands a few more times before it finally closed.

After he left Turkstra's, Sinthumbi bought the hawking business of one of the Chetty Brothers (owners of the Orient Property), who sold him a lorry and a list of customers for a hundred pounds. He became a hawker and remained one for the rest of his life. The business was, however, just a means to a living. His real interests lay elsewhere – in sport.

While he and his brother were still at Turkstra's, someone at the restaurant had offered to sell them Charles Atlas's book on bodybuilding. They were very interested but couldn't afford it. The seller, seeing their enthusiasm, left the book with them in the hope that once they had studied it, they would buy it. They, however, had a different plan: they took the manual, copied the whole of it by hand and returned it to the owner. Then they began training. They had no idea that brother-in-law Frank, a tall well-built man, was a trained bodybuilder. When he saw the brothers exercising in the mornings and evenings, he took them in hand and turned these good-looking young Tamil boys into strong men with firm, muscular bodies. Once they were proficient, they, in turn, helped him train a number of young boys.

Then Frank began arranging physical culture exhibitions for his troupe of thirty-two youngsters at the Empire and Royal Bioscopes with Sinthumbi and Perithumbi, the star performers, whose



Sinthumbi, Poppie, Bobai at Hartebeespoort Dam

prowess earned them renown as 'The Thumbi Brothers.'

All of Sinthumbi's feats demonstrated his phenomenal strength. In one, he picked up a ten-pound bag of sugar with his teeth. In another, he stood at one end of the stage opposite a line of boys, each one of whom took a running leap at him and kicked him in the stomach. In the next, the boys jumped onto his stomach from a chair mounted on a table. Finally, he lay on his back, raised his body on his arms and legs and a wooden board was placed over his chest and abdomen. Perithumbi then put three bags of sand on this human platform and eight boys climbed up next to them. In this position, Sinthumbi supported a weight of over nine hundred pounds.

Seeing the tremendous potential in these two young men, Frank offered to train them in boxing. He worked out a schedule that included exercising, running and chopping wood and, in the boxing ring that he put up in his back yard, took them through their paces. Sinthumbi was a natural; speed was his main asset and he always got the better of his brother. As Frank wanted to find out just how good Sinthumbi was, he invited a professional boxer to a contest in the homemade boxing ring. Frank told Sinthumbi, "If you want to box, you have to learn to take a hiding."

When the fight began, Sinthumbi held back, didn't throw any punches just blocked the professional's jabs. But when he received a hard blow to his solar plexus and felt sharp pains, he became enraged, threw himself into the bout with the ferocity of a tiger and began hammering the pro unmercifully. Frank was forced to stop the fight. Though Sinthumbi's performance had exceeded his expectations, Frank felt that he still hadn't discovered the full extent of his brother-in-law's talent and arranged another match with a tougher opponent, an African boxer, at whose hands a challenger had died. When Sinthumbi heard who his opponent was, he appealed to his sister.

Subamma, who was lying ill in bed, sent for her husband. "Are you trying to kill my brother? Stop all this nonsense at once."

Frank dismissed her concern with a muttered, "You don't understand sport," and went on with his plan. He made several arrangements for the fight but Sinthumbi was always missing when the black boxer was due. One day, however, when he returned home from a soccer match, he found Frank and the boxer waiting for him. He was trapped. He put on his boxing gear, got into the ring with his opponent and began the bout defensively. As before, when he received a blow that incensed him, his instincts took over and he laid into the boxer with such ferocity that the man called off the fight. He too was impressed by Sinthumbi's remarkable speed. Despite his obvious talent and Frank's urging, Sinthumbi never took up boxing professionally. He was interested in it only for self-defence.

Sinthumbi preferred field sports: soccer, cricket, tennis and rugby. By far the most popular sport in the Asiatic Bazaar was soccer; people were fanatical about the game and the teams. In the twenties and thirties, there were four main teams, Pretorians, Cambridge, Swaraj and Pirates, competing at the Razor's Edge, the sports field on Boom Street. The Thumbi Brothers were valued players of the Pretorians Football Club with Perithumbi at centre-half and Sinthumbi, centre forward and later defence. As there were no coaches, all the teams trained themselves and, to improve their tactics on the field, went often to watch white soccer matches at the Caledonian ground where they picked up pointers by focusing on players who played in the same positions as themselves.

Competition amongst the four teams was fierce. Teams that couldn't take a beating became violent and often attacked the referee when they were losing. Whenever Cambridge, the most aggressive team, lost, there was a bloody battle after the game. Fighting would begin in the grounds, continue outside and all the way to players' homes where there were knockdown drag-out fights in the street. Bobai, Sinthumbi's second son, recalls one incident when he was still a little boy. "The match finished at five. Around six o'clock, the taxi drivers came." The Mooloos, sponsors of Cambridge FC, were bus and taxi owners. Their drivers and conductors, known as the Mooloo Gang, were always sent to deal with enemies, in this case, the Pretorians. "The taxi drivers got hold of my father, held him down on the street and kicked him. I just saw blood and I screamed." There was nothing much the little boy or his father could do against this mob. Despite such incidents, the Thumbi Brothers continued to stand up to the gangs and earn the respect of the community. Because of the violence, Sinthumbi did not allow Poppie to come to the soccer matches in the location. So she never saw him play.

Sinthumbi had married Poppie in 1936, after the death of his sister, Subamma. Though he was a man who adhered strictly to Tamil customs and traditions, nothing about his marriage to Poppie was conventional. One day, he simply said to her, "Let's get married. We can go to court and have a civil ceremony."

"But what about your sister and brother?"

He knew that Marmakka and Perithumbi would never approve. "This is my life. I know what I want. If they don't like it, that's too bad."

Soon afterwards, they presented themselves before a magistrate who took one look at Sinthumbi and shook his head. "You can't marry this woman. You won't get permission from me for this."

Sinthumbi was stunned. He hadn't expected any problems at court. From remarks being made around them in Afrikaans, he and Poppie realised that the magistrate was not prepared to marry a white woman to an Indian man. When they went back a second time, after a lengthy debate, they persuaded the magistrate that Poppie,

registered white, was actually Coloured. Nevertheless, he insisted that they put up the banns at court and wait three weeks. Sinthumbi's family had no idea of what was happening and as banns were not a part of their culture, there were no objections. On the day of the wedding, Sinthumbi brought his friend Ambalavanan to witness the marriage. Everything went smoothly until the magistrate asked for the ring. Sinthumbi looked around in embarrassment. In his eagerness to be married, he had not thought about the requirements of the ceremony. Poppie gave him the ring she was wearing and after they had been pronounced man and wife, the magistrate asked for two witnesses. As Sinthumbi could produce only one, the clerk of the court signed as the second witness.

Now they were married but had nowhere to stay.

Traditionally, a son brought his wife to stay in his parents' home. Sinthumbi, who was still with Marmakka and Perithumbi, was hoping to persuade them to open their home to Poppie. In the meantime, he settled her in a room and kitchen on the corner of Bloed and Cowie Streets. When Marmakka and Perithumbi discovered that he was married, there was a huge fight and he walked out. The

unit on Bloed and Cowie became home and their boys, Raymond and Bobai, were born there. When Raymond was a toddler, their landlady, who didn't want children in her yard, gave them notice. Nagoo Padayachy, who lived further down Cowie street on the stand next to the Tamil School, told Poppie about a vacant unit in her yard and they moved in there. That was in 1941. They had moved into premises that would be their home for the next thirty-eight years.

Despite his unorthodox marriage, Sinthumbi was a staunch traditionalist who believed that, as the man of the house, it was his responsibility to provide for the family and a wife's place was in the home taking care of the children. He didn't ever want to see Poppie suffer as his mother had suffered. On the other hand, Poppie, an excellent machinist, who had been working in a factory until her marriage, took for granted her right to work. A few years into their marriage, when her

*The home in
Cowie Street
(standing) Poppie,
Raymond, (seated)
Ronnie, Dhano,
Naran, Bobai*



mother, Nora, found a job for her in a Johannesburg factory, Poppie was delighted, Sinthumbi flabbergasted.

"I am going to work in Johannesburg," Poppie announced to her husband.

"Oh, very good," he replied.

"Yes, now I can help with household expenses."

"Make sure you pack all your best things and put on your best for work.

Once you leave here, don't come back."

Poppie stared at him in astonishment. "What are you saying?"

"I don't want you to work. I'm the man; I must work. I want you here at home looking after the children. I don't want you coming home tired and frying an egg or some other thing for them."

Poppie gave up the idea of going to work and resigned herself to becoming an Indian wife. In the first instance, that meant learning to cook the Tamil way. Dedicating herself to this task, she mastered all the intricacies of South Indian cuisine, became an expert in no time and gained such a favourable reputation in the community that she was able to set up a catering business from home. So despite Sinthumbi's attitude to working women, Poppie, like so many Indian wives in the location, found a way to work without leaving the house.

Sinthumbi, who came from a background of Tamil scholarship, was inordinately proud of his heritage. His father Vernugopal, a respected Tamil scholar, had drawn up the original constitution of the Pretoria Tamil League in the vernacular and had officiated at ritual ceremonies. Though Sinthumbi never went to Tamil school, the hostility between his mother and Appasamy Nayagar had prevented that, he loved his language and religion and imposed them strictly on his children.

"You will speak to your mother in Tamil."

"But she can't speak Tamil," they protested.

"That doesn't matter. You speak to her in Tamil. She will answer in English."

Sinthumbi was very pleased that his children had as their teacher the outstanding Tamil scholar and priest Krishnannè (G. Krishnan Pillay), who took a personal interest in these bright, conscientious, well-mannered children. When Raymond was absent from school one day, he came in person to inquire from Poppie.

She heard his deep voice booming from the door, "Poppie."

"Annè, (Big Brother)" she answered respectfully.

"Why didn't Raymond come to school today?"

"Annè, I look after my children in the house. If they misbehave outside, you can do what you like with them, even kill them, I will not complain."

When she recounted the incident to Sinthumbi, he was really proud of her. She was not like other women who would have questioned the teacher's right to come into their home to discipline their children. Poppie who obeyed the requirements

of the culture into which she had married, did not take liberties like people born into it.

Though she never spoke it, Poppie learned to understand Tamil. Living next door to the Tamil School helped. Her kitchen window, which looked out onto the school, allowed her to listen in to the Tamil lessons in the afternoons. But she learned far more from her husband. When Sinthumbi prepared the children for eisteddfods held to promote the Tamil language and culture, he often discussed matters of pronunciation and meaning with her. Eventually, she became so attuned to the language that she could identify errors in the speech and singing of performers. As her children – there were five of them, three boys and two girls – always performed exceptionally well, she was very proud of them. The top prizes that they won in these singing and recitation competitions, were an acknowledgment that they were the best Tamil scholars in the community. They could speak, read and write in Tamil, sing the holy songs and recite the prayers. With the standard of Tamil in Pretoria recognised as the highest in the whole of South Africa, this was no mean achievement. The children's successes filled both parents' hearts with secret feelings of triumph. Their children had excelled in the culture of a community that didn't fully accept them because their mother was Coloured.

But Poppie was slowly being drawn into the activities at the temple through her husband, children and Krishnannè. At first she came to watch. Then Krishnannè began to involve her in the work. When he included her in the corps of women who prepared food for all the ceremonies, she slowly gained acceptance among them. After a while, her presence was taken for granted. As she became familiar

with the religious practices, she learned to differentiate between the ceremonies and when she found that they had to be performed at specific times, she began a study of the Tamil calendar and almanac. The knowledge that she gained put her in a position to advise others and before long, she was being consulted widely for her ability to recognise auspicious and inauspicious days and times for important events.

*The home in
Cowie Street*

Left: Sinthumbi,
Poppie and Pet

Right: (standing)
Poppie, Raymond,
(seated) Ronnie,
Dhano, Naran,
Bobai



Though Poppie was settling very comfortably into the Tamil community, she had not forgotten her roots. Brought up Anglican, with no thought of relinquishing the Christian faith, she remained in the congregation of the Good Shepherd Church. Being asthmatic, however, she found it difficult to walk all the way to Struben Street. As she could not attend regularly, she confined herself to the most significant church events. Sinthumbi did not interfere with Poppie's religious convictions and they never debated the merits of each other's faiths. Only once, in a discussion about last rites, did it become apparent that there were strong differences.

Poppie said, "When I die, I want to be buried, not cremated."

Sinthumbi tried to convince her otherwise. "Why do you want to be buried? Don't you see that when someone is buried, people visit the grave once or twice, and after that all is forgotten?"

"But I want to be buried."

"Why? Cremation is much more hygienic. You will see, one day it will be law that everyone must be cremated."

She was not convinced but didn't pursue the subject. Whenever they disagreed, they both walked away from the argument, especially if they knew it was going nowhere.

After years of living in the Asiatic Bazaar, prejudice against Poppie evaporated. In 1953, even Sinthumbi's brother and sister came to accept her. It happened quite unexpectedly. Marmakka, Sinthumbi's sister, a tall, good-looking woman, who had never married and had taken up informal business and social work instead, obtained living quarters for a family in the old Tamil School building that had been converted into housing units after government schools were built on Von Wielligh Street. As the family had to wait for an auspicious time to move in, Marmakka paid the rent, locked up and put a padlock on the door. But there was such a shortage of housing in the location, that another family broke the lock and moved in.

When Marmakka decided to take legal action and needed a witness, she approached Poppie who had observed the break-in from her kitchen window. When tall, thin Marmakka and short, plump Poppie walked down the street on their way to the Magistrate's Court, people were surprised to see them together. After Marmakka won the case against the intruders, she became Poppie's friend and that led to reconciliation between Sinthumbi and Perithumbi as well.

Poppie's children and their foster-grandfather, Aiyah, who still lived with Marmakka and Perithumbi, had unconsciously facilitated the reconciliation. Though estranged from his brother and sister, Sinthumbi had kept in touch with Aiyah and had visited the old man regularly with the children. Their constant presence in that home had broken down their aunt's prejudices and she had opened up to them completely. It took their uncle longer but constant exposure to

his nephews' and nieces' refined Tamil ways and their competence in the language eventually won Perithumbi over. Poppie's father's death in the house on Cowie Street brought them all together and healed the breach between the brothers.

In 1956, when the priest at the Good Shepherd Church retired, his replacement, Father Nye, who was making the acquaintance of his parishioners, came to visit Poppie. When he expressed concern about her irregular attendance at church, she explained that she had difficulty walking because of the asthma. What was really troubling him, however, was the fact that she was living with Hindus. But his disquiet turned to shock when he learned that she often went to the Marieamman Temple. It seemed to him that she was falling into a pagan way of life: "Unless you give up these practices, you cannot have a church funeral when you die."

This stern pronouncement numbed Poppie into momentary silence. Then she pointed to the gopuram (entrance tower) of the Marieamman Temple that was clearly visible from her living room. "When I die, my funeral will go from there." It was an impulsive reaction, spoken in resentment, but she never attended church again and became more involved in her husband's religious activities. She couldn't avoid it: Sinthumbi was more than a devotee; he was a religious leader, a secondary priest, with many responsibilities. Since he shared everything with her, his interests became her interests.



Poppie's Family
Back left:
Sinthumbi and
Poppie

In 1958, the gopuram of the Marieamman Temple was renovated and new murthis (statues of deities) were installed in the shrine. The event was celebrated with a forty-eight day kumba abishegam (major consecration ceremony) for which Sinthumbi trained a choir of youngsters. He was a strict taskmaster and as he wanted pure sounds and perfect pronunciation, he insisted that all the members of the choir scrape their tongues clean before practice. Though Poppie laughed to see her children scraping their tongues, she was proud that with their solo parts, they were prominent in the choir.

In 1961, when lamps and other holy vessels quietly began to disappear from the temple, the whole community was perturbed. Poppie, who shared her husband's indignation, watched him go with Krishnannè, and A. Nadasen, an official of the Tamil League, to stake out the holy shrine in which murthis and holy vessels were housed. They sat in the darkness of the gopuram, taking turns to sleep and to keep watch. They had rigged up a light that could be switched on the moment they spotted anything suspicious. For three weeks they sacrificed their sleep to watch and wait. As nothing happened, they decided that the thief was not coming back and gave up the vigil. The very next day, the three most important murthis, Muruga and his consorts, Velli and Devayanai, disappeared.

*Gopuram of the
Marieamman
Temple in Sixth
Street*

Sinthumbi couldn't believe it. How could this happen just after they had given up the watch? Outraged, he couldn't put it out of his mind. From his living room in Cowie Street, he looked up at the gopuram towering over the tin roofs and called out in exasperation to the Mother Goddess, "Sakthi woolla Umma (Mother Goddess, you are strength), If you have faith in us, help us to catch the thief."

Believing that he had been heard, he rushed off to the temple with his son, Bobai. When they found the gate unlocked, they entered cautiously, peered about in the darkness and then split up to circle the shrine. When Sinthumbi caught a shadowy movement near the back of the temple, he made a dash for it, caught the intruder and beat him mercilessly. When he let him go, he discovered that the thief was a former cleaner who had been fired for incompetence. After he lost his job, he



began stealing from the shrine. He knew the temple well and in the three weeks that Krishnannè, Sinthumbi and Nadasen had kept watch at the bottom of the gopuram, he had been at the top watching them

Though Sinthumbi was a staunch Hindu, he had done nothing about having his marriage consecrated at the temple because his wife was Christian. By the time Poppie became a Hindu, their children were grown up, three of them married with children, and it no longer seemed necessary. Sinthumbi, who was quite content, forgot all about it. But it was important to his son, Ronnie, who was apprenticed to Krishnannè and studying to become a priest. Because his marriage had not been consecrated at the temple, Sinthumbi was not permitted to perform his fatherly duties at any of his children's weddings. When Bobai was to marry, an overt expression of prejudice against him, as the son of a Coloured mother, had distracted them all. His prospective mother-in-law had refused to attend the wedding. It was a real paradox; she was an activist and progressive thinker but she was the only one to object. No one else, not even the members of her family, had had any reservations. At the time, everyone was too preoccupied with her to worry about Sinthumbi's inability to take part in the wedding ceremony. When Sinthumbi was still unable to participate in the ceremony at Ronnie's wedding and after that his youngest son Naran's wedding, Ronnie became firm with his parents. He insisted that they consecrate their marriage so that Sinthumbi could fulfil his duties in at least one wedding, that of his youngest child. To please Ronnie, his parents arranged a small private ceremony at the temple. With Krishnannè officiating, Sinthumbi tied the thali around Poppie's neck and they exchanged garlands.

When Poppie became a Hindu, she set up a little shrine in her home with the three murthis of Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and their female counterparts, Sarasvathi and Lakshmi and the sacred cow, Nandi. She lit her lamp and prayed every morning without fail and fasted, that is refrained from meat and meat products, on four days of the week – Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays. When she adopted the teachings of Sai Baba, she went beyond the sphere of her husband's religious beliefs. Bobai, her second son, maintained, "She became more Indian than Indians; more Tamil than Tamilians."

Sinthumbi attributes his wife's transformation to dharma. "I think she was a Tamilian in her former life and didn't complete her work. Even though she was born again as a white, it was her destiny to complete what she began in her previous life."

In the early 1960s, the Group Areas Board gave notice to Indians living in the location to move to Laudium, the newly created township for Indians to the West

of Pretoria. But Sinthumbi did not move because the Transvaal Indian Congress had called on Indians in the location to resist the forced relocation to Laudium. In 1979, almost two decades later, Sinthumbi, Poppie and all their children were still living in the Asiatic Bazaar. Marmakka, Sinthumbi's sister, kept insisting that her brother buy property in Laudium. "Don't be a fool," she told him, "you will be sorry if you don't. The Council houses are cheap." But Sinthumbi was quite comfortable where he was. He had taken over the rooms of people who had relocated and had gained possession of all the units on the stand. So he had an eight-bedroom complex that housed himself, Poppie, their children with their spouses, the grandchildren, and Poppie's mother and her children. Sinthumbi paid a rental of about R39 a month for this accommodation. He was quite content

*Nora and Poppie at
a Tamil function*



and didn't move. But when the threat of bulldozers became imminent, he was forced to give in. His family, probably the last to leave, had held out against the Group Areas Board for almost twenty years.

The day after they moved out, their home was knocked flat.

In Laudium, though Sinthumbi and Poppie's extended family separated out into nuclear family units, each with its own house in a different part of Laudium, the closeness that had been nurtured in the location was not lost. The family, with its many grandchildren and great-grandchildren, continued to revolve around Sinthumbi and Poppie. In the late nineties, Poppie became seriously ill. She had been asthmatic from birth but now her heart was failing and she had been hospitalised several times. When she was admitted to the hospital for the last time, Sinthumbi became very ill. This was most unusual. He was still very fit and took pride in his good health. When he collapsed, the children were afraid that the shock of his wife's illness and impending death was more than he could bear. His grandson, a doctor, believed that he was on the verge of a stroke. But Sinthumbi knew that his sudden indisposition was a sympathetic illness, a sign to him that his wife would not recover. On the Sunday after she was hospitalised, she went into a coma and died two days later. Her funeral, in accordance with her wishes, was conducted according to Tamil Hindu rites and she was cremated.

Now Sinthumbi lives alone and his home is a shrine of memories to a dearly beloved wife.

At eighty-six, Sinthumbi still plies his hawker's trade. With the lorry and list of standing customers, bought when he was twenty-three, he had developed a trade that is now in its sixty-third year. Today, he drives his truck to the market at about four in the morning, stocks up with the vegetables and fruits that he knows his customers need and goes out to make deliveries in Sunnyside, Arcadia, Brooklyn, Capital Park and Gezina. He is the last of about three hundred hawkers who plied their trade in the Asiatic Bazaar.

After sixty-three years, with customers who go back many, many years, some as many as fifty, he knows exactly what they need, in some cases, even better than they do themselves. Many treat him as a member of the family, allowing him to walk into the kitchen, inspect the pantry and refrigerator and then of his own accord supply the vegetables and fruit that they need. He is so used to his job that he no longer uses scales and weighs vegetables accurately in his hands. Sinthumbi, who enjoys going on his rounds, conducts business for pleasure – not profit. At eighty-six, hawking has become a socially satisfying hobby.

His customers still expect him at precisely the same time every day. If he is late, they telephone his home. “Where is Mr Naidoo?”

When Poppie was still there, she would answer, “He’s on his rounds.”

“But he hasn’t come by yet and he’s always punctual.”

“Don’t worry, he’ll be there.”

“It’s not the vegetables, I just worry about him. He’s like family. He’s been bringing my fruit and vegetables for fifty years now. My daughter’s and granddaughter’s too.”

At about ten in the morning, his rounds done, he returns home to Laudium to relax. Despite his competence in running his business, his family is very concerned about him. Now that he is eighty-six², they think that he should retire.

But as he cheerfully says, “I haven’t had the call.”



² In 2001

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[Handwritten signatures and names:]

M. L. ...
M. L. ...
E. ...
F. Adams ...
J. ...
P. ...
W. J. ...
A. Kachadze
P. Nene.
M. L. ...
A. Kachadze
P. Nene.

CHAPTER FOUR

THAYANAYAGIE PILLAY

Satyaraghi : Thailema

This letter, signed by thirty treason trialists, is addressed to Thayanayagie Pillay, better known as Thailema, who lived right next door to the Marieamman Temple on the corner of Grand and Sixth Streets in the Asiatic Bazaar. The Treason Trial, which had begun in the Drill Hall in Johannesburg in December 1956 with 156 accused, most of whom had been acquitted by 1959, was in its last phase with the trial in Pretoria of the most prominent anti-apartheid leaders in the country. Their hearing, which began in August 1959, would end in March 1961, when they too would be acquitted.

During this period, Thailema's home was a hive of activity. By seven every morning, Mrs Moodley, her friend and neighbour, and one or two other women, appeared at her door to prepare breakfast for the thirty accused. They cut up the bread that came in every day from voluntary donations, made sandwiches and filled one of those old-fashioned metal milk cans with coffee. Then Thailema's brother-in-law, Sooboo, and her son, Visoo, after packing the breakfast into the green-and-cream station wagon, headed for town. As the trial was being held at the old synagogue on Paul Kruger Street just around the corner from the Good Shepherd Church, Father Nye had made the churchyard available for serving the meals. Sooboo drove into the churchyard where he and Visoo served the breakfast. The coffee and sandwiches were always there in time to refresh the accused before the day's session began.

Meanwhile back at the house, the women, cutting up vegetables and meat, were preparing lunch. When this was ready, the green-and-cream station wagon carried the women with their pots to the Good Shepherd Church. In the half-hour for lunch, Thailema and her helpers made sure that everyone was served. They had no time for anything else. When they returned home, they washed all the dishes and set them up for the next day. The green-and-cream station wagon became something of an icon of the Treason Trial. Years later, an attempt to hijack it was aborted when the hijackers recognised it as the vehicle used to support their comrade leaders.



*Thayanayagie
Pillay (Thailema)*
Passive Resister

In order to provide her meals-on-wheels service, Thailema had organised a supply of vegetables and groceries from the people in the Asiatic Bazaar, who very willingly dropped off contributions at her house. There was even a Mr Cohen from the city who sent in bulk amounts of oil and other groceries that lasted for several weeks at a time. When they ran short, Thailema went to the traders and shopkeepers in the location, appealing for donations or for goods at reduced prices. Generally, the shopkeepers were very obliging; only a few, afraid of showing open support for the treason trialists, turned her away.

After about a year, during which the team at Thailema's house had worked with unflagging enthusiasm and energy, two other women's groups offered to share the responsibility for the lunches. Then Thailema's team rotated with them, each group taking on the task for a week at a time with Thailema's group still providing breakfast every day. Periods of respite occurred when the trial was in one of its many adjournments.

On three or four occasions during these years, a harsh knocking on the door in the early hours of the morning woke the family. When the door was opened, two or three security policemen barged in to confront Thailema, demanding information about her suppliers and funders. Thailema, a tall, plump woman in her fifties, with black hair pulled back into a bun, always stayed calm. She gave vague answers: the money came from overseas; she didn't know the people who sent supplies. Once or twice, they took her off to the police station, but Thailema remained unruffled. When she returned home, she brushed it all off, "They just asked me some questions."³

Thailema came from a family of political activists. Her father, CK Thambi Naidoo of Johannesburg, had worked closely with MK Gandhi from 1906 – 1914, the time of the first Satyagraha campaigns. A principled, disciplined and brave fighter, Thambi Naidoo, according to Thailema, "thought only of his duty and not of his personal affairs". Once when a group of protesters under his charge was picketing against the TARC (Transvaal Asian Registration Certificate), Gandhi came to tell him that his wife had given birth to a stillborn child. Apparently Thambi retorted very sternly, "Do you not see that I am on duty? Go and bury the child yourself." Some believed that his unwavering commitment set an example even for Gandhi, whose secretary is credited with saying, "No Thambi Naidoo, no Mahatma Gandhi." Thambi's grandson claims, "Mahatma Gandhi came here a lawyer and we made him a politician."

Life for the families of those early *satyagrahis* was very uncertain.

³All quotations, unless otherwise indicated are from interviews with Visoo Pillay, Thailema's son

Though Veerammal, Thambi's wife, and the children understood the importance of his involvement in political activities, they found it hard to survive without him. When he was imprisoned, Veerammal had to take on his role as provider. As a mother, she understood the needs of her seven children, but the requirements of her husband's substantial business were beyond her and the responsibility terrified her. Instead of running the business, she began to dismantle it, selling off horses and carts one by one until there was nothing left to sell, no money to pay the rent and, when she and her children were put out on the street, no home. They were rescued by her brother who took them all into his home on President Street. When he too was arrested, they were destitute again.

This was how it was for many activists' families.

Gandhi became very concerned about this situation. When his friend and follower, Hermann Kallenbach, an architect, offered him a farm of 11 000 acres at Lawley, twenty-one miles south west of Johannesburg, as a refuge for the *satyagrahis* and their families, Gandhi gratefully accepted. That was how Tolstoy Farm, named in honour of the Russian author whom he greatly admired, came into being in 1910. For Gandhi, the farm was much more than a refuge. It was a training camp, a place where *satyagrahis* could arm themselves for the struggle through the practice of self-discipline and self-sacrifice. After his release from prison, Thambi took his family to live at Tolstoy Farm. In this peaceful, beautiful place, Veeramma recovered her equilibrium and built up the strength and courage through the practice of *satyagraha* to become a role model for her daughter.

Thailema was about four years old when she went to live at the farm. Her first memories were of the simple life they led there.

At the beginning, there was nothing on the farm so they lived in tents until they had built their houses. Because they had to keep costs down, they became vegetarians and cultivated a large vegetable garden. Orange, apricot and plum trees were abundant on the farm so the settlers had plenty of fruit. In this little kibbutz, every individual, including older children, had tasks. Thambi, who did the marketing, was also in charge of sanitation. Veerammal was a cook. Others, under the guidance of Hermann Kallenbach, made sandals and clothes. Thayanayagie's four brothers, with other boys, had to fetch water from the springs about three quarters of a mile away. They carried the water in buckets hanging from poles slung over their shoulders. Thayanayagie, who sometimes went with them, sat on the rocks minding their clothes while they went swimming in the river.

Gandhi, using home remedies, took on the duties of ministering to the sick. When Thayanayagie got the measles, Gandhi wrapped her in a wet sheet covered with Condy's Crystals. Feeling miserable, cold and clammy, she clung to her mother sobbing loudly, but Gandhi would not be denied. Carrying her outdoors in

the cold sheet, he put her down on a bench in the sunshine. Lying there swaddled in the sheet absorbing the warmth of the sun, she was cured of the rash. Inspired by his example, she too, much later in her life, would use similar methods to cure sick people.

In 1912, at Gandhi's invitation, Professor Gopal Krishna Gokhale, a highly influential leader in the National Congress of India, came to South Africa to study the conditions under which Indian immigrants lived. As he was the first prominent Indian to visit the country, the Indian community turned his tour of South Africa into a celebratory event. A group of Gandhi's protégés, which included Thayanayagie's brothers, went to welcome Gokhale at Klerksdorp Railway Station, his first stop in the Transvaal. Gandhi and Kallenbach, who had gone to Cape Town to receive him on his arrival, were on the train with him. They were taken in a procession to a reception in the town. They made similar stops at Potchefstroom and Krugersdorp before the train finally steamed into a grand reception at Johannesburg station where a dais had been erected and the Mayor was waiting to welcome Gokhale. Thayanayagie, who was there with her mother and sister and the *satyagrahis* from Tolstoy Farm, couldn't keep her eyes off the floral arches that decorated Park Station or the landau drawn by four white horses in which Gokhale rode. At the huge banquet held in his honour, it was her brother Naransamy's great feat that took pride of place in little Thayanayagie's heart. All the youngsters at the farm, at the time of Gokhale's tour, had agreed to give up sugar and salt for a month as a test of strength of will. Only two of the boys, one of them Naransamy, later known as Roy Naidoo, remained steadfast at the great banquet. Thayanayagie was very proud of him.

In 1913, two statutory events that outraged the community set off new *satyagraha* demonstrations: the *Immigrants Regulation Act* passed to stop Indian immigration into the country and a judgment handed down in the Cape Supreme Court that invalidated all Hindu and Muslim marriages. *Satyagrahis* went into action. Since the Act and the ruling closely affected women, Gandhi for the first time allowed women to take part in non-violent resistance. Not only were women to participate, they were to take the lead. Twelve women were chosen from Tolstoy farm: Mrs. Veerammal Naidoo, (Thailema's mother), Mrs N Pillay, Mrs K Murugasa, Mrs A. Perumal Naidoo, Mrs PK Naidoo, Mrs K Chinnaswami Pillay, Mrs NS Pillay, Mrs RA Mudalingum, Mrs Bhavani Dayal, Miss Minachi Pillay, Miss Baikum Murugasa Pillay and sixteen-year old Valliamma R. Munuswami Mudaliar.

Veerammal, who was pregnant at the time, took her tiny toddler, Seshammal, Thailema's younger sister, with her. The women, some with babies and young children, went to Vereeniging where they hawked without licences in order to

⁴ MK Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, p.259

court arrest but nothing happened. Meanwhile at the Phoenix Settlement in Natal, Gandhi had organised a group, including four women, to march across the Natal border without permits. This group led by Gandhi's wife, Kasturbha, was detained on 23 September 1913 and sentenced to three months imprisonment with hard labour.

Following their example, the women from Tolstoy Farm also crossed the border, but again nothing happened. Since they had geared themselves for this expedition, it was most frustrating not to have their brave defiance acknowledged. Clearly, more drastic action was needed. Thambi Naidoo took them to the coalmines in Newcastle where they moved among Indian coalminers urging them to protest against the crippling £3 poll tax. When the miners came out on strike shortly afterwards, the women were at last arrested. On 21 October, 1913, having been sentenced to three months with hard labour, they joined their comrades from Phoenix in the Pietermaritzburg Prison. Thailema's mother and her baby sister, Seshammal, were both in jail.

They were still in prison during the great march of *satyagrahis* from Natal across the Transvaal border that began in November 1913 and ended in December with the arrest of Gandhi and hundreds of others. When Veerammal and the other women were eventually released in February 1914, they were weak and ailing. Harsh prison conditions had seriously undermined their health. Veerammal, however, despite being pregnant, had withstood the ordeal better than most and twelve hours after her release, gave birth to a son. The sixteen-year old *satyagrahi*, Valliamma, who had been reduced to little more than a skeleton, was immediately confined to bed on her release. Gandhi, greatly moved by this young girl's dedication, went to her bedside to speak to her.

"Valliamma, you do not repent of your having gone to jail?"....

"Repent? I am even now ready to go to jail again if I am arrested,"
said Valliamma.

"But what if it results in your death?" ...

"I do not mind it. Who would not love to die for one's motherland?"
was the reply.⁴

Valliamma died on 22 February 1914, a week after her release.

In the same year, Gandhi's negotiations with Smuts, which led to the *Indian Relief Act* that gave no relief regarding the major restrictions stifling economic growth and development, brought his work in South Africa to an end. After twenty-one years in the country, Gandhi returned to India taking Thayanayagie's four brothers with him to continue their education under his tutelage. Thambi, with the rest of his family, came back to Johannesburg where they all resumed

their normal routines. Thambi took up his business as a produce merchant once again, Veeramal resumed her roles as housewife and mother and the children went back to school. Thayanayagie and Seshammal, who attended the school for Coloured and Indian children in Market Street, found that as a result of moving about so much, they were the oldest children in their classes. Thayanayagie, who turned fourteen at the end of Std 3 (Grade 5), was considered too old to stay in school and did not continue. Seshammal stayed on until Std 7 (Grade 9).

When the struggle against unjust laws that had been interrupted by WWI, was taken up again in 1919, Thambi became one of its leaders. Renewed resistance aimed at old laws as well as new more stringent proposals to restrict the development of Indian business enterprises, led to the formation of the South African Indian Congress which united activists from the Transvaal, Natal and the Cape. Thambi Naidoo, in Johannesburg, organised meetings, addressed gatherings and took part in protest activities with his teenage daughters by his side. He encouraged them to speak out against oppression. Thayanayagie, who was a rather shy young girl, needed his help with her speeches but Seshammal, a fiery young idealist who composed her own orations, declaimed her ideas in the same vociferous style as her father.

When prominent leaders from India, following in Gopal Krishna Gokhale footsteps, began visiting South Africa to assess the plight of Indians in the country, Thayanayagie and Seshammal had the opportunity to meet them. In 1924, when Mrs Sarojini Naidu, the renowned poetess, who became president of the National Congress of India as well as president of the South African Indian Congress, addressed a gathering, Thailema and Seshammal, in white saris with red rosettes, acted as hostesses. Mrs Naidu's powerful oratory along with her insightful assessment of conditions in South Africa made a tremendous impression on Thayanayagie. This encounter with a formidable woman leader inspired her and she would assert her power as a woman when she went to live in the location. She would become a leader in her community despite attempts to confine her to the role of traditional wife.

In 1930, Thayanayagie Naidoo married Perumal Pillay. Their families, friends for many years, had emigrated from Mauritius together, made their way to Kimberley and from there to the Reef, the gold-mining area of the Transvaal, before they went their separate ways, the Pillays to Pretoria, the Naidoo's to Johannesburg. Though they settled in different cities, ties of marriage kept them close. Veeramal, Thayanayagie's mother, was from the Pillay family, so when Thayanayagie married Perumal, she was in a sense returning home.

The Pillays, though not as driven as Thambi Naidoo, were activists in their own right. Thayanayagie's husband, Perumal, Fisher to his friends, was a member of the Transvaal Indian Congress, and had taken part in the discussions that led to the Cape Town agreement of 1927, which advocated the repatriation of Indians. Believing it to be a democratic option for those who wanted it, Fisher had involved himself in the scheme. When he realised that he was assisting the PACT Government of JBM Hertzog to reduce the local Indian population and abandon returnees to an uncertain fate in the mother country, he actively opposed the scheme.

Fisher, a thin, dark man brought his bride, Thayanayagie, to the family home on the corner of Grand and Sixth streets in the Asiatic Bazaar. Thayanayagie, a tall, slender woman of the same height as her new husband, was in her early twenties when she came to live in the four-bedroom wood and iron structure that accommodated her mother-in-law, six brothers-in-law and one sister-in-law. Her father-in-law, had left his wife, Achieammal, and seven children, and returned to Mauritius. At first Achieammal had struggled to maintain the produce trade started by her husband but, with the help of friends, she survived. As her sons grew older, took over the business and developed it, her life became easier. Fisher's marriage was also a boon as there was now another woman in the house to help her care for the family. As other sons married, bringing home their spouses, her burdens became lighter.

Fisher's eldest brother, Krishnan, also known as G.S. Krishnan and Krishnannè, became the headmaster of the Tamil School on Cowie Street. As the cultural and religious leader of the Tamil community in the location, he initiated the construction of the Marieamman temple on Sixth Street, designed the gopuram and supervised its construction. Perumal's sister, Ama, who married Thayanayagie's brother, Naransamy (Roy) Naidoo, Gandhi's protégé, went to live in Johannesburg. Alongside her husband, she too became actively involved in the struggle for human rights in South Africa. When her daughter, Shanti, was born, Achiammal brought her granddaughter to live with them in the Asiatic Bazaar. So the house accommodated several branches of this extended family. Thailema's daughter, Sintha, shared a bedroom with four others: her grandmother and her sister, Daya, in one bed, Shanti and another of her sisters in a second bed while she slept on a stretcher between the two. Though the Pillays made additions to the wood and iron home each time a new bride entered the house, these were never sufficient for their needs and as long as they lived in the location, they had to put up with congested conditions.

After she married, Thailema discovered that Perumal had a drinking problem and became abusive when he was high. Once when her brother Roy was visiting from

Johannesburg, Perumal began shouting at her. Having read the signs of abuse, Roy, who wanted Thailema out of that situation, offered to take her and the children back to Johannesburg. But Thailema would not go; *satyagrahis* are trained to endure suffering, not run away from it. Besides, her family had arranged her marriage and she could not dishonour them. So she put up with Perumal's rages. Once when he locked her out of the bedroom, their youngest daughter, Vasugie, who shared the same bedroom, cried herself to sleep because her mother wasn't there. In the morning, surprised to find her mother in the room, she asked her how she had got in. When Thailema answered, "You let me in,"⁵ Vasugie was surprised; she couldn't remember any such thing.

Perumal constantly threatened the most dreadful violence against his wife. "You just come and sleep on this bed and I'll set it alight." He actually carried out this threat a couple of times. After Perumal's brothers, Krishnannè and Nadasen moved into their own homes on the opposite side of Sixth Street, Thayanayagie with all the children would spend nights with them whenever Perumal was in one of his rages. But by five o' clock the next morning, Thailema was back seeing to things in her own house.

After he was involved in a car crash, Perumal lost the use of his right arm and that affected his ability to earn a living. His brother, Sooboo, whose café on Boom Street was doing very well, extended his support to Thailema and her children. As she did not want to be totally dependent on Sooboo, she began her own home catering business. At first she made and sold spices, then expanded her trade to include the sale of meat, fish and vegetables.

Perumal also became involved in her trading activities, bringing home vegetables, dried snoek and sometimes a springbok, which he hung from a hook on a rail in the yard so that Willie, their Khoi-San helper, could skin it. Thailema then cut it up into portions for her children to hawk in all the locations. In the two hours between the end of English School at one o' clock and the beginning of Tamil School at three in the afternoon, the children were going from door to door selling meat, fish, and vegetables. Being unwilling conscripts in the catering business, the children sometimes rebelled and sneaked off to the "Greenies," vacant land on the banks of the Apies River, where they picked mulberries and stuffed themselves. When they returned home, they insisted that they had been unable to sell their wares.

Like it or not, they were their mother's distribution department. And she experimented with all kinds of goods, constantly diversifying her trade in an attempt to capture new niche markets. When she began selling eggs, her daughter, Sintha, and her son, Murthi, found that they had a market in the Boer Kamp where poor whites lived. One day, as they were trudging along with their baskets, three Boer children accosted them. "Hey, koelie, shee eiers." As Sintha and Murthi

⁵ Interview Vasugie Moodley

stood dumbfounded, paralysed with fear, the Boer children advanced on them, “gave Murthi two shots, took three or four eggs and ran home.”⁶ Sintha burst out laughing – as much from relief as amusement.

When Thailema began to make snack foods to sell at the market on Saturday mornings, twelve-year old Sintha, her brother, Visoo, and her father, had to catch the six o’ clock bus to Church Street where they spent the day selling samoosas and moorookoo.

Thailema’s difficult life was made more difficult by her teenage son, fourteen-year-old Visoo, whose hot-temper got him into trouble all the time, especially at school. On one occasion, his teacher, Mr. Andrew Anthony, sent him with a friend to collect soapstone for carving ashtrays etc. in class. When they came back, a boy in the class kicked over their potato sack full of stones and some of them broke. Grabbing the boy by the collar, Visoo hit out, and the boy’s blazer tore as he tried to pull away. That afternoon, the boy’s mother came to have it out with Thailema. She threw the jacket at her in indignation demanding that she replace it. Visoo’s granny, Atchiammal, who had a soft spot for her grandson, paid for a new jacket and saved the day.

Whenever Visoo played games, he would get into fights. Then his *kennetjie* stick became a weapon. Once, a boy that he beat up, sent a whole gang of Coloured youngsters after him. When they arrived at his house, Visoo hid under his grandmother’s bed; he couldn’t take on five or six at one go.

But it was at Tamil School, which he hated with a passion, that Visoo got into the most trouble. He often jammed the lock on the gate with matchsticks and other objects so that the teacher couldn’t open up. Thailema was mortified that her son, Krishnannè’s nephew, would try to sabotage Tamil classes. Her brother-in-law, Krishnannè, teacher and Principal at the Tamil School, was revered by adults but feared by children who knew him as a strict disciplinarian who believed in corporal punishment. He twisted his nephew’s ears so often that the boy was convinced that his uncle had elongated them. What was worse, when his uncle beat him in school, Visoo got another hiding from his mother at home. How dare he defy Krishnannè? But Visoo felt that Krishnannè wasn’t fair. He had favourites among the children – those who were proficient in Tamil, like Ronnie Pillay and Sunnyboy. Visoo, who was not a diligent pupil, despised them because they were. As far as he was concerned they were just currying favour with Krishnannè. One day, when Visoo had neglected his homework as usual, Krishnannè punched him hard on the side of his head. Visoo, jumped up in pain, ran out, and racing along the veranda, broke every window with his *kennetjie* stick.

⁶ Sintha Naidoo, daughter of Thailema

Thailema, at the end of her tether, with this very unruly, headstrong teenager, agreed when Krishnannè suggested sending him to India. In those days, it was the practice to send difficult teenage boys to the old country for a dollop of culture and good manners. But Visoo believed, “It was go to India or be sent to the reformatory.” Of course, there was no real intention of sending him to a reformatory but he didn’t know that. He left for India in 1945 and for the next three years, lived with his grandfather in a village in Mathur, near Mayavarum in the South.

In the years that he was away, the community in South Africa undertook a passive resistance campaign to protest against the *Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act* (the Ghetto Act). In India, they were fully aware of the

implications of the Ghetto Act as well as the part being played by Smuts to throttle Indian enterprise. Visoo, who knew that his mother would be involved in the demonstrations, was disturbed by news reports that described passive resisters being detained and strip-searched. He was horrified to think of his mother being humiliated like that.

Though Thailema was involved in the Passive Resistance Campaign, as Visoo knew she would be, the reports that he received in India were greatly exaggerated. All kinds of rumours afloat around him kept him in a constant state of anxiety about various family members. When he heard that Indians in Pretoria were boycotting the British Royal visit in 1947, he became anxious about his Uncle Krishnannè, who, as a young man, had spent fourteen years in India fighting against the British. Then he heard that the Ossewa Brandwag, in collaboration with the Germans operating from South West Africa, was blowing up petrol stations to eliminate all Coloureds, Indians and Africans.



Thanga Kollapen and Sintha Naidoo (Thailema's daughter)

But Visoo's agitation about happenings in South Africa soon gave way to real horror at the atrocities being perpetrated in the north of India at that time. 1947, the year of India's Independence, which should have been a time of joyous celebration, was instead a period of brutal carnage. With independence came partition, the separation of Pakistan from India, and bloody conflict between Hindus and Muslims. It was at this unfortunate time that Visoo's grandfather took him on a tour of Northern India where he witnessed horrific violence. In places like Poona and Bombay, they were afraid to go out. Shooting was random and people were dying on the streets. "They didn't know who was a Hindu or who was a Muslim, they were just killing people." Visoo and his grandfather cut their trip short and made a beeline for home and safety. Meanwhile in South Africa, people like his Uncle Krishnanné were celebrating India's independence with patriotic fervour completely unaware that the new nation was being baptised in blood.

In 1948, Visoo returned to South Africa a changed young man. His experiences in India had made him value what he had in Pretoria. "You were coming from the best. No matter how we lived, with the apartheid laws and all, you were coming from the best. Even though there was only one toilet and one bathroom outside for five families staying on a fifty by fifty plot, you were coming from the best."⁷ After his return from India, Visoo, about seventeen, and more responsible, began to help out in his Uncle Sooboo's café.

Uncle Sooboo and his mother had both gone to jail in 1946 during the Passive Resistance Campaign. After Thailema's month in the Pietermaritzburg Prison, she had returned to an ailing mother-in-law, to her trade and the care of her family. Her mother-in-law's illness, which she diagnosed as diabetes, was an ailment that she knew how to treat. Her father had been a diabetic so she had learned how to test urine for sugar and to give injections. As she liked helping sick people, she was very good with her mother-in-law and the many neighbours whom she helped with the kind of home remedies that had been used at Tolstoy Farm. In ministering to the sick, she discovered that burdensome laws had deleterious effects on people's health.

When the Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign (the Defiance Campaign) was launched in 1952, Thailema not only felt it was her duty to volunteer, she was anxious to serve; as a *satyagrahi* she was always ready to make her contribution and she submitted her name to the Congress. After having made arrangements for the care of her children, she waited in readiness for the call. When it came on 8th December 1952, she found that she had been assigned to Patrick Duncan's batch. She was glad to be part of a non-racial group – the Passive Resistance campaign in 1946 had been an exclusively Indian protest. In defiance of Group

⁷ Interview: Visoo Pillay, 2002

Areas regulations, Duncan's group marched without permits into the Germiston location. They were arrested and sent to jail. But imprisonment was not a new experience for Thailema. "Jail was almost a family shelter and at times our home address forty years ago when I was a little thing." She wished she could sacrifice her whole life, spend it all in the struggle, for she believed in Gandhi's maxim: "the good of the individual is contained in the good of all people." But she had little children and had to think of them.

After the defiance campaign and the 1956 women's march against passes,

Thailema reached the pinnacle of her achievements when, in 1959, she provided her meals-on-wheels service for thirty *satyagrahis* on trial for treason, one of whom would become the first President of a democratic South Africa in 1994. She didn't live to see that day but she did live to celebrate Mandela's release after twenty-seven years in prison. Now her grandchildren, who serve in various structures of the new democratic government, reap the rewards of sacrifice and dedication that go back at least three generations to her father, Thambi Naidoo.

Satyagraha, to which Thambi's descendants dedicated their lives, did prevail in the end. Its emphasis on non-violence, which had rooted itself in the national psyche, had led to a democracy in which tremendous personal sacrifice rather than violence eventually overcame injustice. There's no denying that there was violence and bloodshed, but far more compelling was the suffering of the millions of ordinary people who endured under cruel, demeaning conditions. Millions of ordinary men, women and children – unknown, unsung *satyagrahis*.



MANIBEN SITA

Passive Resister

The 4th June, 1939, will ever be remembered as a black day in the history of Indians in South Africa. This was the day when the Transvaal Indians were to decide, at a mass meeting at Osrin's Bioscope Hall, Johannesburg, either for or against Satyagraha. The rumour was afloat that there would be bloodshed at the meeting, which was advertised to start at two p.m. The hall was full a couple of hours earlier. Some volunteers of the Nationalist group, who were affixing banners to the hall, were suddenly attacked. Bottles, heavy clubs, bicycle chains, knuckle-dusters and knives were freely used. One Indian was disembowelled by a knife thrust, four others were seriously injured; and five were treated for minor wounds. All the injured were of the Nationalist group.⁸

It was right after this dreadful event that it all began for Maniben. She was busy with chores in the kitchen of their home in Hercules, when her father, Nana Sita, who had just returned from the meeting at Osrin's Bioscope, dropped into a chair next to her mother, Pemiben. Being extremely agitated, he wasn't even aware that Maniben, quietly going about her tasks, was listening as he recounted the events of the afternoon to her mother. As Chairman of the Pretoria Branch of the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC), he was fully aware of the division in the organisation. Older members led by SM Nana were in favour of negotiating with the government to bring about change, but the young radicals, led by Dr Yusuf Dadoo, had no faith in the Smuts and Hertzog governments that had brought in law after law to strangle Indian enterprise. Dr Dadoo's group, known as the nationalists, was calling for satyagraha, non-violent resistance, such as Gandhi had initiated in 1906. But Nana Sita, a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, had learned from his mentor the importance of keeping communications open, and he chose to support SM Nana.

⁸ PS Joshi, *Tyranny of Colour*, p.255-6

When Nana Sita was a young boy living with the Vyas family, Gandhi, who had come to Pretoria to deal with a legal matter, had stayed with them. His influence on Sita in that short time had been profound. The fifteen-year old had immediately become a vegetarian and made non-violence the principle by which he would live his life. The violence at Osrin's Bioscope, therefore, had shocked him to the core. He had not taken seriously the rumours that there would be bloodshed as that was not the way Indians behaved. But he had been proven wrong. He had seen for himself the attempt on Dadoo's life. Someone behind the young doctor had suddenly raised a knife and would have plunged it into his back, had not a woman nearby pushed aside the assassin's arm and deflected the blow, which struck Dayabhai Govindjee, the man next to Dadoo, who was fatally wounded. When Nana Sita realised that all the violence against the young Nationalist Group had been instigated by SM Nana's group, the group to which he belonged, he withdrew his support of SM Nana and joined the young radicals. The attack on Dr Dadoo's Nationalist Group, at Osrin's bioscope, had appalled many others besides Nana Sita and had swung their allegiance to the Nationalists, who were elected to the leadership of the TIC at the next AGM.

Maniben, a tiny girl, not quite thirteen years old, was greatly moved by her father's distress. In the kitchen, on that day, awakened to the plight of the Indian community, she came to a crucial understanding of the purpose of her life. From that moment, she put away childish things and embarked on a course of education that would equip her for the fight against injustice. She read everything she could find in newspapers, magazines and pamphlets. She attended meetings at which her father and his TIC colleagues, Mr GS Krishnan, Mr BR Mooloo, Mr Mohamed Jeeva and others explained how the proliferation of land and trading acts was stifling the progress of the Indian community. Being so young – she still wore her black hair in a long plait at the back – she would have had great difficulty in understanding it all but she came from a family that was politically alive. With her father, the chairman of the Pretoria TIC, and her activist brothers, the eldest, Ramlall, a law student, the discussions in the Sita family home were lively and vigorous, providing Maniben with the perfect training ground for the course she had chosen for herself.

In 1943, the promulgation of the *Trading and Occupation Land Bill* (The Pegging Act), which threatened to reverse the economic advances that Indians had made, added to the momentum that was building up for passive resistance. But it was Smuts' *Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Bill* (The Ghetto Act), which became law in 1946 that finally pushed the South African Indian Congress into action. A passive resistance campaign, organised to demonstrate the community's rejection of the Act, brought thousands of resisters to Durban from all over the country from the middle of 1946 to the end of 1947. Their protest took the form

of a symbolic repudiation of discrimination: the occupation of a vacant plot of land at the corner of Umbilo and Gale Streets in a proclaimed white area. The protesters were to camp on the site until arrested and not retaliate when confronted with violence. On standby in batches and ready to move in immediately after the arrest of the preceding batch, the activists were to maintain a constant stream of resistance until the “Ghetto Act” was repealed.

The campaign began in June 1946.

Three Pretoria men, Ramlal, Maniben’s eldest brother, Sooboo Pillay, and BR Mooloo were in the first batch of resisters led by GM Naicker and MD Naidoo. As they had no idea how long it would be before they were arrested, they set up camp with tents, chairs and other equipment. They were prepared to stay as long as it took but waiting in the midst of a hostile crowd was not easy. Eggs, tomatoes and other missiles came flying at them throughout the day. It would have been a relief to be arrested but they were still there after sunset. Things quietened down after it became dark and they thought they were safe for the night but when they were least expecting it, a bunch of hooligans suddenly ran in among them, pulled down tents, smashed equipment and threatened them with violence. The passive resisters did not fight back but they did not leave either. Constant harassment over the next few days did not dislodge the passive resisters and eventually the group’s objective was met – they were arrested. At the arraignment the next morning, they pleaded guilty, were sentenced to a month in jail and taken off to prison. This was the awaited signal for volunteers in other parts of the country to get ready to come to Durban.

Maniben immediately began to mobilise women in the Asiatic Bazaar. Inspired by what she had read about women’s achievements in the political struggles of India and South Africa, she wanted to organise an all women’s batch to demonstrate the strength and dedication of women. Her father, who was closely associated with the Pillay family through Mr G Krishnan, secretary of the Pretoria TIC and his brother, Sooboo Pillay, who had been detained along with his son, Ramlal, advised Maniben to speak with Thayanayagie (Thailema) Pillay, Mr Krishnan’s sister-in-law and daughter of Thambi Naidoo who had walked side by side with Gandhi in political struggles from 1906 -1914. Thailema, who was filled with the same courageous, unwavering desire for justice as her late father, was glad to join forces with Maniben. They were in sharp contrast: Thailema, tall and stately, her quiet dignity belying the fervour with which she undertook political activities and Maniben, scarcely nineteen years old, tiny, very articulate, forthright and outspoken. But they shared a passion and willingness to sacrifice that made them a perfect match.

Maniben, the daughter of the President of the TIC, and Thayanayagie, the sister-in-law of both Krishnannè, the Secretary, and Sooboo Pillay, a member of the

Executive Committee, found the TIC Executive excited and eager to help them. When they began to recruit women for the campaign, Mr BR Mooloo and Mr Mohamed Jeeva, also executive members, encouraged their daughters to join in. With Thanga Dharmalingam, Maniben's school friend and Thailema's goddaughter, two of Thailema's relatives, Muniamma Pillay and Shunmugam Pillay, and Mrs Jassoo Gandhi and her sister, Gowrie Bharoochi, there were ten of them altogether. All readily agreed to take part in the campaign.

It was a group of mostly very young women: Thailema, the oldest, was in her thirties, Amina Jeeva and Jassobhen in their early twenties and all the rest under nineteen. Though Thailema and Maniben were the acknowledged leaders, Thailema was content to remain in the background, giving advice and organising. She made arrangements for the use of a room behind Sooboo's Café on Boom Street where they held information and planning sessions to prepare them for their undertaking. They formed themselves into an organisation known as the Indian Women's Service League and collected funds for the campaign on behalf of the TIC.

Their upcoming participation in the Passive Resistance Campaign excited a great deal of interest in the location. Krishnannè designed a special uniform for them that aligned the struggle in South Africa with the struggle for Independence in India. It consisted of a white sari printed with the map of India as motifs, a border in the colours of the Indian flag, and white Nehru caps. These very young impressionable girls were exhilarated at the prospect of this daring adventure. They would be players in a situation that was dangerous and exciting; an event of greater significance than anything they had ever been involved in.

Then the great moment arrived! In September 1946, The Indian Women's Service League was called to serve. After medical fitness checks at Dr Dadoo's surgery in Johannesburg, they were driven down to Durban. Bubbling over with nervous energy, the girls, especially Thanga and Amina, were in a mischievous mood. Thailema, acknowledged mother of the group, tried to keep them calm, but these high-spirited young women on their first risky adventure, could not be subdued. They arrived in Durban just as Thailema's brother, Roy and the others of his batch, were released from prison. There was a party to celebrate the release of Roy's group and cheer on the women from Pretoria, who would be on site that evening.

At dusk, they took their places on the vacant plot in Gale Street. There were no tents or chairs; these had long been removed. At any rate, they were no longer necessary. The authorities had been prodded into reacting exactly as the resisters had hoped they would. They had, involuntarily, developed a routine that allowed the Congresses to bring on batch after batch of resisters in quick succession to crowd the prisons and give the demonstration the significance that it sought.

Immediately resisters arrived at the appointed spot, a police vehicle dispatched to arrest them, gave them twenty minutes for their demonstration before carrying them off. “The police came and picked us up in their vans. Somebody told us before we left for Natal we must speak in Afrikaans to the police because most police are Afrikaner and their attitude changes immediately you speak Afrikaans. So when we were in the police van, Amina Jeeva and others started conversing with them in Afrikaans and they became friendly.”⁹

At the police station, where the women were giving their details and having their fingerprints taken, Gowrie Bharoochie, who was under sixteen, became flustered. It had been drummed into her that she had to say she was over sixteen or she would be sent away. But finding herself in such extraordinary circumstances, Gowrie stumbled over her details. Her predicament sent Thanga and Amina into a fit of giggles.



Women Passive Resisters from the Asiatic Bazaar, 1946

Back: Thanga Dharmalingam, Beeta Mooloo, Raji Mooloo, Shumugam Pillay, Gowrie Bharoochi
Front: Maniben Sita, Amina Jeeva, Thayanyagie Pillay (in uniform), Muniamma Pillay, Jasoo-behn Desai

⁹ All quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from interviews with Maniben Sita

After spending the night in a holding cell, the women were taken to court the next morning. At their arraignment, all the women stood in a row as Maniben, the leader of the group, read out a statement: "We come from the capital city of South Africa where these laws are administered. They are unjust, therefore we are opposing them." Having pleaded guilty to the charge of trespassing, they received the now standard sentence of thirty days in prison. Though she was expecting it, Maniben was still appalled at being sent to jail for a paltry offence.

The women were taken to the Pietermaritzburg Prison, the very prison in which Thailema's mother, Veerammal, and her tiny sister, Seshammal, had been imprisoned in 1913. Thailema felt very proud to be following in her mother's footsteps. The women were divided into three groups and locked up. Maniben shared a cell with Thanga Dharmalingam and Amina Jeeva. Their beds were coir mattresses on *the floor*. They had two blankets each: one to cover the mattress, the other to cover themselves. As there were no pillows, they rolled up some of their clothes to make bolsters. They had to be up by seven in the morning, line up for inspection, and then go out to exercise. Twice a week, they bathed from washbasins in the yard. "The thing that surprised us most," Maniben recalls, "is that we all had to stand *naked* in front of each other. That was a bit embarrassing at the beginning, but afterwards, you *get used to it and it becomes just ordinary*." *At about four in the afternoon, they were locked up for the night.*

Maniben didn't find the conditions unpleasant. "It wasn't a tense atmosphere, it was very harmonious. The wardresses used to joke with the prisoners. I know that Amina and Thanga used to stare at the wardresses when they ate a sandwich with jam or butter in it because we had dry bread. They used to ask, 'Now when will the day come when we can have sandwiches like that?' The food, never enough for them, was too much for me. Amina would say, 'Maniben, if you don't need that, please give it to me,' and she used to share my food. Thanga used to share my food too. But it was all fun."

Time hung heavily over them. "We just sat there all day long. Sometimes they gave us socks to repair or a little bit of sewing. I wished we had our knitting there. How much we could get done. I wished they would give us books to read. How many books we could read because we've got no other work, no cooking to do, no dishes to wash and all that we have to do at home. But we just had to dream to while away the hours. Or Amina used to sing and we used to talk about our life experiences."

They felt lucky to have Amina Jeeva among them. Her pranks, jokes, her outrageous flirting with the wardresses, kept them amused. What they loved most of all was to listen to her beautiful singing. Still, it was difficult to fill up the time. Being in prison was dreary; they were in a kind of limbo that made existence meaningless. When their sentence was reduced to twenty-one days for good behaviour, they were immensely relieved.

When they returned to Pretoria, they were the heroines of the moment. “The spirit was high. There was a meeting to welcome us back and the Sooboo family prepared a special lunch for us. People were very happy to see us; they greeted us everywhere we went.”

But the Passive Resistance Campaign was not over. Although it continued well into the next year, the number of new volunteers began to dwindle. To infuse new energy into the campaign, the Congresses called for people to volunteer a second time. Maniben's father, Nana Sita, and her brothers volunteered again. Of the women, only Maniben, Amina and Thanga went a second time. Though over 2000 people went to jail during the period of resistance, the campaign did not achieve its goals. After it ended, the Pretoria Indian Women's Service League died a quiet death. “We didn't meet or do anything after that.”

An important consequence of the Passive Resistance Campaign, however, was the formation of an inter-racial alliance of political organisations. When the Nationalist Party, the new government after the 1948 elections, began introducing discriminatory legislation, the new alliance embarked on a Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign (the Defiance Campaign). Nana Sita, President of the TIC, working at the core of the Congress Alliance, spent more time away from home than in it. His responsibilities in the shop and house fell to the rest of the family. In addition to her usual chores of cooking and sewing for the family, Maniben, who ironed her father's clothes and packed his suitcase for his bi-monthly meetings in Natal, also had to help out in the shop. But with her determination to make a contribution to the new campaign, she still kept abreast of all happenings, accompanied Nana Sita to many meetings in Lady Selborne and spoke on the same platform as her father and Dr AB Nkomo. Her job was to recruit women. In a white sari, her large dark eyes flashing from a face fringed by long black hair, this tiny young woman, exhorted women to join the campaign.

In terms of strategy, the Defiance Campaign, which began in 1952, was an extension of the earlier Passive Resistance Campaign. Where the earlier campaign had used the plot in Gale Street as a symbol of discrimination, in 1952, the protest was nationwide, challenging the reality of discrimination. Activists broke curfew restrictions, ignored permit requirements for townships and entered or occupied public facilities designated “Europeans Only.”

In Boksburg, resisters led by Walter Sisulu and Nana Sita marched into the African township without permits. In central Johannesburg, while hundreds of supporters sang and danced in solidarity, Nelson Mandela and Yusuf Cachalia with fifty African resisters, waited for the clock to strike 11 pm the curfew deadline, before issuing onto the street. Maniben and two African comrades from Lady Selborne, who sat on a bench marked “Europeans Only” at the Pretoria Railway Station, were detained and spent a month in Pretoria Prison.

After the Defiance Campaign, Maniben, who didn't want to be dependent on her family for the rest of her life, turned her attention to her education while her father and brothers continued to work in the resistance movement. Nana Sita was involved at the highest levels in the Congress Alliance, which drew up the Freedom Charter, planned the Congress of the People and organised or supported strikes, boycotts and marches. Caught in the cycle of defiance and detention, the authorities were exposed as intolerant and repressive. Resentment at being sucked into demonstrating their lack of humanity turned them towards violence. Though Maniben was aware that the situation was becoming dire, she kept her head in her books, acquired a teachers' certificate and enrolled for the bachelors' degree with UNISA.

The decade of the fifties, a decade of runaway mass action, closed with the Sharpeville massacre in 1960. In the new decade, States of Emergency along with the growing menace of the Security Police, handicapped public protest. Nana Sita, among those detained under the state of emergency that followed Sharpeville, was incarcerated for four months. He was released after a 'flu epidemic had taken the lives of eighteen comrades imprisoned with him. When he returned home, the family shocked at his condition – mere skin and bone – felt certain that had he remained in prison a day or two longer, he too would have died there.

After the open defiance of the fifties that had hardened rather than humanised the enemy, belief in non-violent resistance was shaken. While many renounced Satyagraha, the Sitas held steadfastly to it as the only humane way to bring about change.

In the early sixties, at the time that Maniben was teaching at the primary school in the Asiatic Bazaar, the government began implementing the final phase of the Group Areas Act. Indians in Pretoria were given notice to move to Claudius, (formerly Mooiplaats, and soon after, Laudium). The Sitas, with other Indians, who lived and conducted their trade in town, were among the first to be targeted by the Group Areas Board. Nana Sita who had moved to Hercules in 1923, had purchased his home in 1931, and had lived in the area for almost forty years, had no

Nana and Pemiben Sita outside their home in Hercules, Pretoria



intention of moving. His whole family was fully behind him. In December 1962, he appeared in court with other Indians living in “white” areas. They all pleaded guilty under the Group Areas Act but refused to move to the Council houses that had been allocated to them in Laudium. Nana Sita’s co-accused were fined and released, but Nana Sita, who refused to pay a fine, was sentenced to three months in prison.

During the court proceedings, the Council house set aside for the Sitas in Laudium was vandalised. The act, a show of support for Nana Sita, was a symbolic gesture as the exodus to Laudium had already begun. When schools were established in the new Indian township, location schools were closed down forcing parents to relocate. Teachers too were being transferred to the new Andrew Anthony Primary School and the Laudium High School. When Maniben and her sister, also a teacher, were told to report to the schools in Laudium, Maniben, who had a sympathetic principal, refused. Her sister had no choice.

In April 1963, Nana Sita was charged again and imprisoned under the *Group Areas Act*. This second time, the Group Areas Board also charged his wife, Pemiben, and all those living in the family home. Pemiben and her son paid fines. Maniben did not, as she was quite prepared to go to prison like her father, but the case against her and the others never came before the court. Between 1963 and 1967, inspectors from the Group Areas Board hounded the family incessantly. They always arrived unexpectedly to inspect the premises or make note of who was living there. During this time, Nana Sita was served with a third notice to vacate his property but, as the courts were jammed with trials, the case was withdrawn. It was also the time of the Rivonia Trial and when Nana Sita was not serving time, he and Maniben were at the Palace of Justice demonstrating their solidarity with

the accused. Ahmed Kathrada and one or two others always made a point of turning to the visitor’s gallery to acknowledge friends and supporters.

Despite indications that resistance was evolving into revolution, the government was steadfastly unrolling its plan of separate, unequal development. In the early 1960s, it began to set up homelands, self-governing states and town councils

*The vandalised
house in Laudium*



– new structures to co-opt African communities. For Coloureds and Indians, it appointed ‘Representative’ Councils that would have responsibility for certain aspects of education, welfare, agriculture, rural areas and local government. There were strong protests against the appointment of these dummy Councils but the Government committed to its programme of social engineering was no longer in the mood to humour protesters as it had done in earlier decades.

Maniben experienced this at first hand when she joined a women’s march led by Zainab Asvat in December 1963. In the tradition of the 1956 women’s march, the women took petitions to the Union Buildings to protest the establishment of the Indian Council. Maniben was fully aware that as they were marching up the hill to the Ministers’ offices, collaborators, sitting in the Laudium Civic Centre, were nominating candidates to the National Indian Council. But her attention was forcibly directed back to the march when the police suddenly let loose their dogs. Women scattered in all directions to avoid being bitten but a number were savaged, one very seriously. Nevertheless, the women persevered and delivered their petitions but their protest was ignored. The National Indian Council was established in 1964. When it took control of Indian Education, Maniben resigned from teaching.

In 1967, the Group Areas Board, now under the Indian Council, served Nana Sita with a fourth notice to vacate his premises. This time he changed his strategy; he pleaded not guilty. Satyagrahis always pleaded guilty; it was their way of saying we are guilty of not accepting injustice. But Sita pleaded not guilty this time so that he could request a preparatory hearing at which



Maniben and Nana Sita outside the courthouse

all the circumstances pertinent to the matter would have to be considered. When his request was refused, he presented a fourteen-page statement to the court that outlined the history of economic and political obstruction of Indian immigrants including attempts to enforce repatriation. He roundly condemned the *Group Areas Act*:

*Shorn of verbiage the Apartheid policy as enforced through the Group Areas Act is nothing but a barefaced expression of a desire to dominate, oppress and exploit the non-Europeans and to subject them to perpetual servitude of the White Man who claim to be God's chosen people, the Master Race, the Herrenvolk, a concept which plunged the world into a holocaust which was defeated at the cost of millions of lives. Is the world going to be made to witness the same holocaust by perpetuating the concept of the Master Race theory?*¹⁰

His statement, however, made no impression on the court. Though he was sixty-nine years old and suffering with chronic arthritis, he was sentenced once more to a term of six months with compulsory hard labour.

Each time that Nana Sita went to prison, his wife, Pemiben, who suffered from hypertension, had to take to her bed for three or more weeks to stanch the heavy, prolonged nosebleeds. The responsibility of nursing her, running the shop and managing the house, fell on Maniben's shoulders. But Maniben was proud to be able to help her mother. In her eyes, her mother was the real hero of the family. It was she who had always made it possible for her husband and children to follow their convictions. In keeping the house and business going, she had given them the freedom to engage in the fight for human dignity.

When Nana Sita came out of prison for the last time he went straight back to his home in Hercules. When he became seriously ill in 1969, his son, Ramlall, took him to his home in Lenasia where he would be within easy reach of the Coronation Hospital. They all knew that the end was near. Nana Sita died in December 1969. As he had never vacated his home, in death he remained the victor over the Group Areas Board. Maniben took his ashes to India and scattered them at the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati Rivers.

Maniben and her mother stayed on in the house in Hercules until 1976 when the threat of expropriation forced them to move.

Indian political organisations, which had been dormant during the sixties and seventies, began to revive after the Soweto Uprising in 1976, and came alive in 1981 when the government announced elections for the Indian Council (now the South African Indian Council – SAIC) hitherto a government-appointed body.

¹⁰ Nana Sita, *Statement by Nana Sita at his Trial under the Group Areas Act*, p. 13

Anti-SAIC Committees, established in opposition, called on the Indian community to repudiate the SAIC by boycotting the elections. Though the campaign was very successful – the turnout at the polls in 1982 was negligible – the fact that elections had been held was all the proof of democracy that the Government needed. The SAIC elections had been a trial run for elections to the new Tri-Cameral System of Government that were to be held in 1984. Opposition to the Tri-Cameral Parliament brought African, Indian and Coloured anti-apartheid organisations together to form the United Democratic Front (UDF) that was launched in August 1983. Under the charismatic leadership of Dr Alan Boesak, the UDF called on the whole of society to reject the Tri-Cameral System and on Indians and Coloureds to boycott racial elections.

This was a busy time for Maniben, who was now an executive member of the TIC, which had been resuscitated after the SAIC elections and had become a key organisation in the UDF. Travelling to Indian communities in the Transvaal and Natal, she was a featured speaker on many UDF platforms. Despite savagely repressive conditions, Maniben, now a tiny grey-haired woman, in a white sari and glasses, spoke out boldly and scathingly against the new proposals and, unequivocally, called on people to stay away from the polls.

*The government has the nerve to proclaim that they are trying to bring about reform, and want us to collaborate and be a party to the oppression meted out to our own people and also to our African and Coloured countrymen. Does the government think that we are mad? Only ignorant people, that are also insane will stoop to the level of collaboration. If such there be, (and I think there are); I pity them from the bottom of my heart for they are being used as tools in their own destruction.*¹¹

On voting day, August 1984, despite a strong police presence, she stood outside the polling station at the Laudium Civic Centre dressed in a black sari to register her silent protest. In the evening, young activists, who were not allowed near the station, joined her in a demonstration from across the street. When more voters, hoping not to be recognised in the dark, appeared at the polls, the demonstrators grew more vociferous. Police loosed their dogs to chase them off and ensure that the electoral process was “free and fair”. After the elections, the new Indian and Coloured “leaders” in ethnic Houses of Parliament, who were given greater power to enforce apartheid policy on their respective communities, took up their seats in separate parliaments thus demonstrating their allegiance to oppression in the name of democracy.

¹¹ Maniben Sita, *Women Power: The Role Indian Women Play*, The Mirror, 1984

But there was a new spirit among the people. As their opposition grew more vociferous, more determined, more resourceful and less tolerant, severe repression followed. All forms of protest were brutally suppressed, all associations fell under suspicion, jails were filling up and activists were being murdered. The many funerals, which gave opportunity for mass protests, brought the police into the townships with teargas and dogs to disperse mourners.

In 1985, after the mutilated bodies of Matthew Goniwe and three other comrades from the Eastern Cape, were found, the UDF organised a massive funeral to restore to these men, who had been brutally tortured and murdered, their dignity as human beings and their honour as heroes. Each organisation under the umbrella of the UDF was allowed a specified number of representatives to attend the funeral of the Cradock Four.

Maniben was one of those chosen to represent the TIC.

Having packed clothes and food, she set off to board one of two buses leaving from Lenasia. All those embarking on the trip were fully aware that they could be harassed, stopped, even arrested by the police but it was still a shock when police vehicles suddenly appeared on either side of the buses just outside the Lenasia border and travelled along with them as they made their way south. Maniben and the others sat watching, waiting, expecting the worst from this unwelcome escort. But the police just stayed with them, stopping when they stopped, moving when they moved. They accompanied them all the way to Colesberg where the bus stopped to refuel while the travellers got out to refresh themselves. When they resumed their journey, they were relieved to find the police gone. They hoped they would be allowed to proceed without further harassment.

When they arrived in Cradock at ten the next morning, they drove straight to the football stadium where the service was being held. Buses from all over the country were arriving by the minute and the stadium was packed to overflowing. Banners of the various organisations were on proud display, even those of the banned ANC and Communist Party. Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Dr Alan Boesak were the main speakers. In his address, Dr Boesak boldly declared, "We know who killed these men."

When the ceremony was over, the buses from Johannesburg set off on the return journey and travelled without incident until they reached Colesberg where they found the police waiting to escort them back. When they arrived at the Lenasia border, police from Protea Police Station in Soweto stopped the buses. Someone in Maniben's bus shouted, "Hey, the police, the police!" Maniben stood up to look out as a couple of policemen carrying rifles boarded the bus. One of them shouted at her, "*Haai, wat kyk jy daar? Sit.*" (Hey, what are you looking at? Sit.)

"Don't talk to me like that," she replied but she sat down.

The policeman, menacing others with his gun, growled, "*Bly stil.*" (Keep quiet.)

The buses were driven to Protea Police Station where all the passengers were arrested. While they were waiting in a narrow passage, Maniben thought she saw one of the policemen in the office beckoning to her. When she approached him, he shouted at her, “*Loop, man. Wie het jou geroep?*” (Get out. Who called you?) After the usual procedures of fingerprinting and giving the police their personal particulars, they were taken to Diepkloof Prison where they were locked up twenty to a cell and given blankets, coffee and bread. The next day, they were put into single cells. This was detention without trial. They had no idea how long they would be there.

Maniben is a vegan. In those first few days, she became quite weak because she couldn't eat the food provided. When the security police tried to interrogate her, she was unable to focus. She couldn't remember the simplest things, such as the registration number of her bakkie. Not knowing what to make of her, they asked, “Do you take drugs?” “Do you drink?” Then they ordered the Matron to search her for drugs every night. For three days, she suffered the indignity of being strip-searched. On the fourth day, she told the wardresses, “I won't strip and I won't be searched. If you knew what sort of family I come from you would be ashamed to treat me like this.” They stopped the searches.

When they eventually realised that Maniben's confusion was due to a lack of nourishment, they at last acceded to her request for vegetarian meals and provided her with grated cabbage on one day, followed by grated carrots on the next. She was not allowed food from home or visitors. And the only reading material provided was the Bible. After constant requests for Hindu scriptures, she received the writings of Swami Vivekananda, which she read over and over and over.

After many weeks of solitary confinement, she became aware of sinister and threatening happenings around her – strange vibrations above her cell and gas drifting in under the door. When she saw a workman replacing a nozzle on a pipe, she became convinced that it was for the gas. So she took action. During exercise time, she spoke to other detainees, urging them to stand up against any kind of mistreatment in prison. Then she asked for pen and paper to write to the Minister of Justice to complain about the injustice of her detention. Two weeks later, when she was given writing materials she wrote out a statement that she handed to the matron.

Then one day, out of the blue, she was told that she had visitors. She couldn't believe it. Apparently, her sister and sister-in-law were waiting for her at the Protea Police Station. Maniben, who was taken there to see them, was very happy to have contact with members of her family at last. She had been in prison for more than two and a half months and had not been allowed a single visit during that time. Two days after this unexpected visit, the Matron informed her that she was being



Maniben with the Prime Minister of India

released. She was astonished. In all the time of her detention, eighty-one days, she had been allowed only one visit and that just two days before her release. This was very unfair. But she recorded no complaints in the questionnaire that she had to fill out before she left because the wardresses had been kind to her. She also believed that a good report would benefit future detainees. On her release, she spent two weeks with her family in Lenasia before she returned to Laudium. She continued her work with the TIC until the end of 1989 and in 1995, in the first democratic local government elections, Maniben, a little white-haired woman in her late sixties, the ANC representative for Ward 11 in Laudium, won a seat on the Centurion Town Council. She was one of very few ANC Councillors on a mainly National Party Council and served for one term only, until December 2000.

Now, at age seventy-four¹², she is busy with other projects. Having published a vegetarian cookbook, *Give Me Vegetables*, she is dedicating herself to yoga studies. Being most concerned about the high levels of crime in the country, she believes that the introduction of Gandhian studies in schools would help to build a nation of moral strength and integrity.

She is still plagued by the vibrations that she first experienced in Diepkloof Prison. They are somehow connected with the cars that she hears stopping and moving off just before they begin. Maniben can do nothing about the terrible shuddering that overtakes her in her bed or wherever she hides to escape them. It is most unnerving but she has given up complaining. She will not allow such happenings to deflect her from her life's purpose which is to continue to be of service in the struggle for human rights and human dignity.

¹² In 2001



Previous page: *Amina Jeeva, Passive Resister*¹³

¹³ See Chapter 5

CHAPTER SIX

AMINA JEEVA

Singer of the Majalis

*T*error, pain, despair and reckless abandon fill every heart as the voice rises and falls, hurtling them in amongst clashing swords at Karbala, where Hussain, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, stands firm with his tiny band against an army of thousands. Fusing them all into one, the voice has transformed them into Zainab, sister of Hussain, who sees, rising up before her, the apparition of Ali, their father – mutilated and bloody – murdered by those who had turned against him, against the son-in-law of the Prophet as they now turn against, Ali's son, trapped here at Karbala.

In that moment, on the tenth day of Muharrum, they look out of Zainab's eyes, and watch helplessly from their tent as their dear brother marches resolutely into battle with seventy-two men to oppose an army of four thousand. They listen as he challenges the enemy to end his life, the life of the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. Hope fills their hearts for a moment when they see Hur, Ibn Ziad's army commander, come to beg forgiveness and swear to fight by Hussain's side. But he comes alone. There can be no reprieve.

As they will their strength into the hearts and minds of the seventy-two, they feel their men brace themselves into a fearless and resolute force. Pride striving with fear in their breasts, they watch as their warriors win all the single combat fights that traditionally open battles. Then when the legions charge, hope rises again as their men fiercely drive back their opponents. But they are too few; the enemy surges over them like a tidal wave.

And the voice fills the air with their grief as they witness the slaughter of nephews, brothers and uncles, all of the Prophet's line.

After all Hussain's men have been slain, the voice compels them into the midst of enemy soldiers, to watch their grievously wounded brother, standing his ground alone as he is hacked to death. After they slash off his head, Ibn Ziad's men tear off the remnants of his clothes and ten horsemen ride over his dismembered limbs, crushing them to a bloody pulp.

Then begins a diabolical triumphal march in which Hussain's head and the heads of many others, impaled on spears, are paraded all the way to Kufah. Left behind, the women and children sit, silent and empty, in their tents on the battlefield of Karbala. They are not present when their brother's head is flung down at the feet of Governor Ibn Ziad but the relentless voice carries them to the scene and forces them to experience unspeakable desecration as the governor mockingly beats the lips of the rolling head with his stick.

Two days later, dishevelled and in rags, the women and children are marched to Kufah and ushered into the presence of Ibn Ziad. As the Governor jeers at their brother Hussain, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, the voice bursts from them, giving them Zainab's words with which to confront Ibn Ziad and throw his blasphemies in his face. Infuriated, Ibn Ziad threatens to execute Zainul-Abedin, Hussain's only surviving son but they challenge him to put them both to death and force him to back down.

With this strong motif of Zainab's courage and compassion, the voice restores to them the lives that they forfeited as Hussain in the recital of this harrowing tale, and found again in Zainab's love and courage.

The narrative ended, the room in which the listening women were seated swam back into view. Looking around into one another's drained, exhausted faces, they recognised each other for who they were. Throughout the recital, the singer, calm and controlled, had passed out glasses of water to comfort those in extreme distress. No one had spoken. None could. The only life, they had had, was the life given to them by the voice. They had not even been aware when their screaming infants and crying babies had been removed from the assembly. Nothing had been allowed to vitiate the impact of the tale of martyrdom and tragedy. Even though they heard it every year, in the month of Muharrum, it never failed to lift them out of themselves to experience, as Hussain and then Zainab, the events at Karbala. And it was Amina Jeeva's voice, dark eyes and expressive features that transported them to that battlefield to relive the first ten days of Muharrum, 61 AH (680 AD). Her melodious voice, conveying every nuance of a minor scale, united all the women in the room with the pain and suffering of Zainab and the women at

¹⁴ Interview: Jainab Dawood, 2002

Karbala. The *Majalis* ceremony, a recital performed by women for women, brought home their vulnerability in the macho world of power, politics and warmongering. Amina Jeeva's dramatic rendering gave the tale such life that even the children, among them Amina's nieces, who came each night mainly for the goodies that were served after the ceremony, involuntarily fell under her spell. Though they may not have understood fully the story told in Urdu, the narration, nevertheless, filled them with awe and reverence. At the end, they all drank the spicy milk, specially prepared for the occasion, as solemnly as Christians at communion.

The *Majalis* was a twelve-day ceremony to commemorate the martyrdom of Hussain. With the death of Hussain on the tenth day, the tale reached its climax; the eleventh and twelfth days were for healing. On these days, the sick lay on the floor wrapped in sheets while Amina prayed for them as she rolled them from side to side. Finally on the twelfth day of Muharrum, the day of burial, they ate apples for their healing power and threw the cores on the roof.

Amina Jeeva's mother, a scholarly woman, who lived a quiet, devout life, had initiated the *Majalis* service in the Asiatic Bazaar to keep alive a tradition with which she had grown up in India. At the ceremony, Amina sang, her mother explained the story with Amina's nieces, Jainab and Shahida, joining her in reading the prayers. For these occasions, Amina put on her long flowing dress, *ijar*, and a *dupatta* to cover her shining, black hair. Sitting on the floor, she conducted the service from behind the coffee table decorated like an altar with flowers, incense and holy vessels. As the women, who attended the *Majalis*, fervently believed that the water, in the little bottles they had set on the coffee table, was transformed into an elixir during the recital, they distributed their bottles to the sick and ailing afterwards.

And so the ghosts of Karbala were laid to rest until the following year.

Now Amina Jeeva's powerful voice has also been stilled. She died on 1 April, 2001, the ninth day of the month of Muharrum, before Ashurah, the anniversary of the terrible battle on the tenth. Perhaps she went to join the women of Karbala whose suffering she had brought to life every year without fail for more than three decades. Did her constant evocation of the events leading to the slaughter at Karbala influence her personal destiny? Did she bring the same kind of doom upon herself so that she too would end her days wandering in the wilderness, crying for succour?

People do not remember her like that. They knew her as a strong, independent woman with the ability and will to achieve anything to which she set her mind. Her helplessness at the end was a complete contradiction.

How does one account for Amina, a woman so completely her own person? She lived the life of a woman of the twenty-first century in a time and place dominated by the ethos of the nineteenth century. Born on 9 December 1924, in the Asiatic Bazaar, Amina was the daughter of Mahomed Jeeva, who owned properties on Eleventh Street, which overlooked the Apies River. On one stand was the large family house of brick while on the stand next to it was the typical location barracks-type arrangement of units with kitchens enclosing a yard. Next to this stand, were shops, with Mr Jeeva's barbershop occupying the corner of Grand and Eleventh Streets. Even though he was a businessman, landlord and traditional healer, it was this barbershop by which the local people characterised him and he was known as Jeeva Barber.

His only son, Omar, managed the barbershop. Amina's brother, a gentle soul, ten years older than his sister, demonstrated none of the assertiveness and authority that characterised Amina. She was a tomboy, who wore trousers and shirts, rode a bicycle, then a motorcycle, was the first Indian woman in Pretoria to drive a car, a taxi sometimes, and the only one ever to fly a plane. Her mother and her niece, Jainab, once went with her to Wonderboom Airfield for one of her training flights. As she rose into the air, her mother exclaimed, "Allah, she is flying into the clouds." She was terrified she would never see her daughter again.

Amina was quite different from other Muslim girls. Instead of learning to cook and clean, she followed her father around his vulcanising business, learning how to change tyres and batteries, fix punctures and diagnose engine problems. As a result, she developed a keen interest in cars. It wasn't surprising, therefore, that she became the first Indian woman in the Asiatic Bazaar to drive a car or that she helped out with the taxi business that Omar had established or that she became a



driving instructress and taught many women to drive, including her nieces when they were old enough. She even set up her own used car dealership in the cul de sac at Eleventh Street with cars that she picked up at auctions. In 1956, her father, knowing how much she loved cars, made her a very special gift of a Chrysler convertible with an alarm system and all the modern conveniences of the time, including a little refrigerator.

Amina was such a good driver that she was once awarded a medal by the Traffic Department. The people in the location, however, did not concur. Whenever they saw her big blue Chrysler coming, they hastily got out of her way because, more often than not, she took corners on two wheels. She loved speed and set a family record for the trip from Lourenço Marques (LM, now Maputo) to Pretoria! It was when her mother fell seriously ill while she was visiting her sister, Rabia, in LM. On receiving the news, Amina, driving alone along narrow roads, raced back to Pretoria and made it home in the amazing time of four hours.

Her car wasn't used only for business; it provided a good deal of pleasure as well. Amina loved taking her nieces and their friends on outings, sometimes to Weskoppies Hospital to bring little gifts to the mentally challenged patients there or to the Rebecca Street Cemetery to clean graves and put fresh flowers on them. People remember Amina's visits to the cemetery, not out of gratitude, but for her presumption. She was a Muslim woman. How dare she enter a graveyard! But Amina who lived by her own rules, did not trouble herself with conventions of any kind.

She was a girl, following in her father's footsteps, not only in the vulcanising business, but also in the dispensary that he had established on the stand next to their home. Though people called him Jeeva Barber, her father saw himself as a spiritualist and healer and from him, she learned about the treatment of illnesses, herbal cures and the preparation of medicines. Mr Jeeva was especially known for his ability to cure yellow jaundice. He imported ingredients for his remedies from India, boiled them together in the water tank in the yard and sold his medications at two shillings and sixpence a bottle, a very steep price for those days. Indian and African patients from the locations, who came to consult him, sat in the yard on benches placed against the walls of the dispensary.

Mr Jeeva, whose powers as a spiritualist were widely recognised, also read people's horoscopes or made *taweez* (amulets) to protect them from evil. In 1952, in an article describing how he had exorcised a ghost that had haunted a woman for fifteen years, a news reporter condescendingly described him as "a Pretoria fakir who dabbles in mysticism and who has routed many poltergeists all over the Union".

Haunted Pretoria Housewife For 15 Years

VIOLENT CITY GHOST IS DRIVEN 'UNDERGROUND' BY FAKIR

A PERSISTENT "ghost" which haunted Mrs. A. S. van Jaarsveld, of Pretoria, for 15 years was driven "underground" this week and buried in the backyard of her home in Morgan Avenue, Parktown, by Mr. Jeeva Mahomed, a Pretoria fakir who dabbles in mysticism and who has routed many poltergeists all over the Union.

The "ghost," Mrs. van Jaarsveld told a "News" reporter who accompanied Mr. Mahomed to the "haunted" house, had played on her nerves ever since she was married in 1937. In all the eight houses she had moved to, the "spirit" had followed her to make her life a misery. It scraped chairs across the floor, dragged chains, played marbles, switched on lights and blew out candles. It had even resorted to violence by pulling her hair, slapping her and throwing her off her feet.

"I have sometimes seen the 'thing.' It is a vapour-like shadow with a human form, but without a head," she said.

Mr. F. P. Vokes, her brother, said that he, like most other people, had regarded the matter as a joke until he stayed with

his sister and saw and heard the "ghost" at work.

"It was frightening, and if the 'monkey business' had continued much longer our nerves would have gone to pieces," he said.

Mr. Mahomed was called in to put the flitting shadow to flight after all else had failed.

The reporter watched Jeeva go into action.

He asked for glowing coals from the fire and water in a bottle and, throwing incense over the coals, he walked through the house. With eyes uplifted and muttering prayers, he slowly wafted the fumes into the corners of each room with a bunch of peacock feathers bound together to form a long wand.

A hole was dug in the garden

and the coals, incense and water were buried. Stamping the soil firmly into place, Mr. Mahomed said that with the forces of water, fire and wind (represented by the feathery wand) he had driven the "evil spirit" into the water and buried it.

He then "sealed" the nine doors of the house by nailing small silver discs above each door. Wrapped in the discs were holy signs from the Koran which prevent the "ghost" from re-entering the house. A disc was given to each member of the family, including the children, "to prevent the 'spirit' from pestering them while they were not sealed off in the house."

"The" ghost has not visited us since," Mrs. van Jaarsveld told the "News" today.



Though she emulated her father in everything, Amina did not become a spiritualist. She was more interested in business ventures and her father, a highly successful businessman with a variety of enterprises, owned in addition to the garage and barbershop, a double-storey structure on Boom Street with shops downstairs and a hall upstairs for live entertainment, weddings, dances and even film shows. This property, the Nav Jivan, later became known as the *Orient*. Mr Jeeva's grandchildren firmly believe that he personally mixed and poured the concrete for the foundations of the building. But the Nav Jivan did not stay in his possession long. Mr Jeeva, apparently too trusting, lost the building when he offered it as collateral to help out a friend. So Amina did not have

Article from the Pretoria News

a chance to become involved in developing it. But as Mr Jeeva was a substantial landlord, with additional stands scattered over the location, Amina became his rent collector and collected rents from residents in units and from shopowners. The big enterprise, Kit Kat Cash and Carry, today located on Church Street in central Pretoria, had its beginnings in one of Mr Jeeva's little shops.

Amina was an uncompromising rent collector. She brooked no challenge to her authority and her stern business manner made her seem quite unapproachable. Tenants, who found the rents exorbitant, dreaded her appearance at their door. Others, like Gafoorkala (Gafoor Aunty), a hawker who sold *dhunya* (bunches of coriander), discovered a kinder, more charitable side to her nature. When Gafoorkala's son abandoned her, Amina provided her with a rent-free room. She did the same for another woman and her children whom she rescued from a drunken, abusive husband and father.

Because Amina was tough-minded and independent, Mr Jeeva came to rely on her more than on Omar. His quiet, unassuming son, who ran the barbershop for his father, had established a very reliable taxi service but he did not have a passion for business and was not ambitious like his sister. As he loved dancing, he spent much of his spare time at the dance hall of the Nav Jivan, where his participation in competitions earned him many trophies. But Amina, always with her father, learned about business and how to make money.

Unlike fathers who think of their daughters only in terms of their suitability for marriage, Mr Jeeva, recognising his daughter's talents, made opportunities for her to develop them. When he set her up in the shop next to the barbershop, he gave her the opportunity to become an entrepreneur in her own right. To run the business, a clothing and shoe store, Amina had to learn about wholesaling, retailing, how to choose stock and how to market it. She was an astute, innovative woman who learned very quickly and as her business burgeoned, she began to look far afield for suppliers. Soon she was driving to Johannesburg and Durban to purchase stocks. When she put a record bar in one corner, the shop became a flourishing enterprise. Amina also became the buyer for the boutique that her sister, Rabia, who had married in LM, opened there and she kept her sister's shop well stocked with quality products. As Mr Jeeva, originally from LM, owned a number of properties there, the family enterprises were on the Pretoria-LM nexus and Amina found herself ferrying the family back and forth for business and pleasure.

Though she had no interest in housekeeping, Amina had strong maternal instincts and that was apparent in the way she related to her nieces. She behaved more as a parent than an aunt. According to her youngest niece, Shahida, "My aunt

wasn't married at all. So we were her children. We grew up more with her than my father." Amina wanted them to develop into strong, independent women who could fend for themselves. They were to be doctors or lawyers. As a good education was key to achieving such goals, she made it her business to supervise her nieces' schoolwork and did not tolerate any backsliding or infringement of school rules. Though they loved her, her nieces were afraid of her. If they missed a day at school, they knew they would have to pay. When they saw her coming to look for them, they disappeared behind the kitchen cupboards.

Jainab, the eldest of her nieces, was her personal little housekeeper. "Actually, she used to say I'm like a little wife for her. 'Wifey' she used to call me. From small, I never knew what's playing in the street. I was only with her, you know, doing her work."¹⁴ Jainab cleaned Amina's room, washed her clothes and polished her shoes. Amina, who prepared her for her tests at school, was very proud of her achievements and showed her excellent school reports to all and sundry. Though Amina had not chosen a career for Jainab, she knew she wanted Shahida to study law. Shahida believed that Amina, who could hold her own with the attorneys she encountered, would have made an excellent lawyer herself.

*Amina and
tennis partner,
Norooben Ismail*

In Shereen, her second niece, Amina saw a reflection of herself, a little tomboy in pants and shirts, playing cricket, kennehtjie and other games with the boys in the street. When Shereen was sixteen, Amina taught her to drive, to diagnose car problems and to change tyres and batteries. When Shereen got her licence, she became Amina's driver taking her on all her business trips. Twice a week, she drove her to auctions in Pretoria where she watched in awe as her aunt bid for and obtained all kinds of bargains. Though Amina bought a variety of goods – cameras, kitchen units, beds – anything that people asked her to pick up, her personal interest was in the cars that she purchased for her little lot on Eleventh Street.

Amina was a surrogate parent to her nieces but she longed to have a child of her own. In 1950, when her sister-in-law, Mariam, gave birth to her fourth daughter, Amina decided to adopt the child and raise her as her own. She would not be depriving Mariam of her child altogether because they were an extended family living in



¹⁴ Interview: Jainab Dawood, 2002

the same house; Omar, Mariam and their children in one wing with Amina and her parents in another. Sadly, however, little Hanifah died of meningitis when she was just a toddler and Amina having lost her child, felt she had lost her chance at motherhood and was distraught.

Fortunately, she was not allowed to dwell on her grief. She was called upon, just about then, to take a young relative under her wing – Koolsoom Hassim, an attractive eighteen-year old orphan, who had recently lost her father; her mother had died some years before. Koolsoom and her five siblings lived in Jerusalem Street with grandparents who couldn't control them and thought they were running wild. Koolsoom's grandmother begged Amina, her first cousin, to take charge of the girl. Amina immediately decided that Koolsoom should come to live with her. As her mother did not agree, Amina put Koolsoom to work in her shop instead. Having inducted her in all aspects of the business, Amina also taught her to drive. Koolsoom, a very capable young woman and a quick study, was soon running the shop, leaving Amina free to go on business trips

*Koolsoom, Amina,
Janey, Shireen*



At first Amina was just an aunt taking care of yet another niece but Amina

and Koolsoom became more than just relatives or employer and employee. Their relationship grew into an intimate partnership that lasted until Amina's death. But no one speaks of it. Everyone relegates it to the back of consciousness even though it flickers from behind blank eyes, squeaks between flat tones and hides in nonchalant gestures. No one acknowledges the relationship. It can only be inferred from acrimonious references or homophobic gibes. Amina had long been the object of gossip; there had been whispers of a 'scandalous' liaison with Frances, a white woman in Pretoria town. Amina had had the habit of bringing her home for a meal, then spending hours afterwards chatting with her. For a long time after Frances stopped coming to the house, she remained in touch with Amina.

When Koolsoom came into her life, Amina was happy. "Amina was ten years older than Koolsoom. She eventually did bring Koolsoom into our family and she used to spend most of her time with her." Their involvement led

to close ties between the Hassims and Jeevas. As Amina had several nieces and Koolsoom several brothers, marriages between the cousins merged them into one big extended family. According to Shahida, "They (the Hassims) were in Jerusalem Street and when my eldest sister (Janey) got married in the family that house was like our house. We were in and out of the two houses."

But the circumstances of her marriage embittered Janey. "They (Amina and Koolsoom) were so close. She wanted all the girls to get married to her brothers." Janey, an exceptional student, was looking forward to finishing school so she could take up a career. But when Amina discovered that Jainab had a boyfriend at school, she was outraged and took drastic measures. The aunt who had always insisted that education came first, arranged a marriage and Jainab, who had been Amina's 'little wife' was married off to Koolsoom's brother, Dawood, when she was only fifteen. This excessive punishment for her little transgression devastated her but intimidated by feelings of guilt and shame, she said nothing. Her grandparents, Mr and Mrs Jeeva, also aghast, did not intervene; they just watched while Amina, riding roughshod over all their feelings, organised an elaborate wedding. In 1960, Jainab left the house to live with the Hassims in Jerusalem Street. Unlike her aunt who had had complete freedom to determine her own destiny, Jainab found herself relegated to anonymity as a conventional housewife. Unlike poor Jainab, however, her tomboy sister, Shereen, who fell in love with Koolsoom's eldest brother, Osman, married to live happily ever after.

For Amina, it was a time of contentment. Two years before, in 1958, when her sister-in-law, Mariam, had given birth to yet another girl, her seventh daughter, Rehana, Amina, still hankering after a child of her own, had adopted the baby. Her nieces, the baby's sisters, with their friends helped Amina take care of Rehana. Amina, who doted on the child, bought her the best of everything. When Rehana won a baby competition at the Pretoria Primary School, Amina's heart overflowed with maternal pride. She was a mother again; she had Rehana. In 1965, after Amina's mother died, Amina brought Koolsoom to live with her and became the head of a happy little family of her own.

In the very next year, however, Rehana died of chicken pox. This unexpected blow shattered Amina. She fell into a deep decline, lost all touch with reality and spent hours at the Rebecca Street cemetery everyday reading prayers and grieving. On Sundays, she took loads of flowers to make a floral blanket to cover Rehana's grave. It was difficult to get her away from there. On many occasions her nieces, Shereen and Shahida, had to bring Masi, an elderly neighbour, to the cemetery to persuade her to come home. She was inconsolable. Her father, having watched her agony for several months and realising that it would not abate, decided to send her and Koolsoom on hajj.

In 1966, Amina and Koolsoom travelling to Arabia, to Mecca and Medina, eventually arrived at Karbala, where the martyr Hussain had died. At Karbala, they attended the *Majalis* service with which they were so familiar. But Koolsoom was shocked at the literal enactment at the end. On Ashura, the tenth of Muharrum, in remembrance of Hussain's decapitation, the freshly severed head of a handsome young boy was displayed to the gathering. Apparently, young men willingly sacrificed themselves in that way as they believed it was an act for which they would be rewarded in the hereafter. Though Koolsoom was distressed, Amina accepted it all; the death of a strange boy, willing to embrace eternity, was meaningless compared to the loss of a little daughter who was just beginning life. After Arabia, they left for Pakistan, the final leg of their journey, where Amina, finding a little girl who resembled Rehana, clung to her as if she were her own. It was clear to Koolsoom that the visit to Mecca and Karbala had not assuaged Amina's grief.

On her return to Pretoria, Amina went back to haunting Rehana's grave. She continued to mourn for three long years. Then suddenly, inexplicably, she returned to a semblance of normality which she retained even after her father's death shortly afterwards. Within six years, Amina had lost three of the people who had been closest to her. Mr Jeeva was buried next to Rehana in one of the plots that Amina had bought for herself and her father.

After her father's death, things began to change in the household at Eleventh Street. Mr Jeeva, who had bequeathed all his worldly goods to Amina with nothing for his son, had left Omar's family feeling cheated and unhappy. Although he had always played second fiddle to Amina, Omar was, nevertheless, the son and ten years older than his sister; he had not expected his father to flout tradition so totally as to deny him any share of the inheritance. He had counted on something. The inequitable settlement led to festering resentment and anger that transformed the Jeeva home into enemy camps. Amina's lifestyle, tacitly accepted before, suddenly offered the pretext for war. As Amina, the beloved aunt, was beyond reach, Koolsoom became the scapegoat, being seen as an ambitious, conniving woman intent on robbing the legal heirs of their birthright. The relationship between cousins that had seemed strong and abiding, crumbled under the onslaught of acrimony and suspicion. The desire to gain control over the Jeeva estate pitched Amina in the middle of a tug-o-war between Hassims and Jeevas.

And the war makes it difficult to trace the rest of Amina's life. There is no clear voice to tell the story, which dissipates into a maze of accusation and counteraccusation. Sifting through resentments and antagonisms, the Amina who rode the wall of death, who flew her plane into the clouds, who took corners on two wheels, who sang the *Majalis*, disappears, leaving in her place a derelict of her former self.

There is no way to know exactly what caused her drastic deterioration or how to reconcile the different versions of her story. Since the details of the end of her life are recounted as indictments of one side or the other, they are less about Amina and more about the people who were closest to her. What really happened to Amina is reflected in a shattered mirror. The pictures that can be pieced together, therefore, may have no resemblance to any kind of truth.

Here follow two possible scenarios.

In the first, after Mr Jeeva's death, Amina's nieces, who watched Koolsoom assume more and more control over their aunt and her possessions, began to perceive the Hassims as predators. They owned property and businesses, had received their inheritance from their own parents years before and were independently wealthy. They had no moral right, therefore, to the Jeeva legacy. Mr Jeeva's will had denied his son, Omar, his rightful inheritance and Omar's daughters had expected the Hassims to make honourable reparation as the Jeevas were the rightful heirs.

Amina, caught between the factions – she loved Koolsoom and she loved her nieces – was having difficulty negotiating the strong currents pulling her from one side to the other. So she went about business as usual trying to ignore the strife around her. She continued to conduct the Majalis service with her nieces, Jainab and Shahida reciting the prayers, and their mother, Mariam, preparing the special milk with Koolsoom. Though the service was meant to heal the sick and suffering, it was conducted without reference to the cancer that was eating away at the family.

The skirmishes continued until the *Group Areas Act* put the finishing touch to a household that had been emotionally and psychologically divided for many years. In 1976, when they quit the Asiatic Bazaar to take up residence in Laudium, Amina and Omar went their separate ways. They bought properties in Himalaya Street not far from each other in terms of distance but very far in terms of trust. In Laudium, Amina began construction of a house for herself and Koolsoom. After she had designed a double-storey structure, she went about looking for materials, bought a door here, a window there until, piece-by-piece, she had put a home together. Amina and Koolsoom ran the businesses that she had inherited in the Asiatic Bazaar but the barbershop remained under Omar's management, an unsatisfactory arrangement, as underlying resentment made co-operation difficult and little problems led to perceptions of malicious intent. When Omar was ill or his car out of order, his family believed that Amina would not help him because Koolsoom objected. Nevertheless, Amina remained on good terms with her nieces who visited her often with trays of home-cooked meals. Amina, who had never learned to cook, loved her sister-in-law Mariam's cooking.

After some time, the hostilities between the Jeevas and Hassims abated. They declared a truce. They were, after all, connected by two marriages. Besides, living in separate households had taken the strain off their relationship. But when another of the Jeeva girls became involved with one of Koolsoom's brothers, Koolsoom was blamed for having instigated the affair. This became the pretext to resume hostilities against her and Amina's nieces armed themselves with new accusations, suspicions and recriminations. When Amina and Koolsoom were going through a bad patch, Koolsoom, who had left Amina and gone to stay with her sister, was suspected of an affair with a married man and was blamed for Amina's state of severe depression.

Koolsoom returned after about a year. Her cousins believed that she went back only after Amina had promised to sign everything over to her. Once she was back, she ruled the roost. She stopped the *Majalis* service, took in one of her brothers who was in some kind of trouble with nowhere to go and converted the prayer room, where the *Majalis* had been held, into a barbershop for him. Amina became the victim of abuse; her car was sold and she was locked up in the house. As she was not allowed to have visitors, she was sent upstairs when the Hassims were entertaining friends. It was obvious that she was being neglected as she had telephoned her nieces and sister on several occasions, begging them to bring food.

They would rush over, meet Amina who was waiting behind the security gate at the front door, hand over the food and watch her wolf it down. She gave them the impression that she had to eat it all up right there at the gate before anyone returned. Amina, who had always been fastidious about her appearance, looked haggard and unkempt. Apparently, all her teeth had been extracted because of the gold fillings that were of great value. In this account, Amina was kept drugged and docile. Koolsoom, who managed all her properties and businesses, kept the telephone locked. Then she attempted to have Amina committed to Weskoppies Hospital. Sometime before she died, Amina managed somehow to get in touch with her sister, Rabia, who was now living in Laudium. When she begged her to rescue her from her prison, Rabia went with the police to fetch her. Amina had asked Rabia to meet her at the garage. Despite her weakened condition, she had somehow managed to remove the heavy bars that held the door down and had escaped with her sister.

Five weeks later, she died.

Rabia, unable to obtain Amina's personal documents from Koolsoom, could not fulfil Amina's wish to be buried in the plot next to Rehana and her father at the Rebecca Street cemetery. Amina was buried in the Laudium cemetery. Koolsoom made no enquiries after Amina nor did she attend the funeral. After Amina's death,

Koolsoom, who had acquired her entire estate, continues to run the businesses that were established in the Asiatic Bazaar. She is described as a woman who is making lots of money only to lose it all just as swiftly. An inveterate gambler, she is dissipating all her inherited wealth in the casinos in the area.

But the memories can be put together to form a different picture.

In the second scenario, Koolsoom had the care of a woman, suffering from some form of dementia, who required constant attention. As Amina was always in a state of anxiety, she ground her teeth so fiercely that they had to be extracted to prevent damage to herself. For her own safety, she had to be locked in when Koolsoom went to work or she would wander off alone and when they searched for her, would find her on the streets far from home. Koolsoom, who had to keep all the businesses running and look after Amina, couldn't manage alone so members of her family came to stay with her to help her out.

Before her illness, Amina had made a huge investment in jewellery. This was their security if things did not work out for them under the new government in South Africa. The jewellery, worth a fortune, would sustain them in a new life elsewhere. When the jewellery mysteriously disappeared, Amina, greatly agitated by the loss, was constantly trying to find out who had taken it. Though Koolsoom had her suspicions, she kept them to herself.

Without her jewellery, Amina, who no longer had a buffer against an uncertain future, became extremely insecure, quite irrational and easy to manipulate. One day, in a delusional state, she was taken away while Koolsoom was at work. Koolsoom never saw her again. She died in her sister Rabia's house. Because of their inimical relationship, Koolsoom did not make contact with Amina's family nor did she attend the funeral. She misses her partner very much and remembers sadly the quiet evenings that she, Amina and her brother spent together watching television. Koolsoom's brother died a few months after Amina and Koolsoom now lives alone in the big double-storey house.

The singer of the *Majalis* is no more, and like the martyr she sang of, spent her last days in a war. Though she was not physically hacked to pieces like Hussain, her life at the end held little coherence. It is better to remember Amina as she was in the Asiatic Bazaar – a remarkable woman exploring all aspects of her potential, not allowing herself to be confined by limiting social customs or cross-eyed visions of life's grand offerings.





THANGA KOLLAPEN

The Spirit of Independence

Thanga was born to Valliamma and Rathnasamy Dharmalingam of the Asiatic Bazaar on 25 November 1927. Fourteen days later, she lost her father. When Rathnasamy, chef at the Victoria Hotel in town, came home from work on 9 December, he complained of a severe pain in his chest. Being an impatient man, he easily made enemies and when he collapsed at home, neighbours and family put it down to witchcraft and revenge. They believed that some person had tricked (bewitched) him. They didn't realise he was having a heart attack. Valliamma put him to bed and went into the kitchen to fetch medicine. When she came back, she found her husband dead on the floor.

He was of the Padayachy clan and one of many who had left India to seek their fortunes in South Africa. He married Valliamma Chetty from Port Elizabeth and they came to live in the location around the turn of the twentieth century. They had thirteen children, six of whom did not survive childhood ailments, such as measles and whooping cough, and the flu epidemic after the First World War. When Rathnasamy died, Valliamma, with seven children to support, took up hawking. She acquired a horse and cart and drove all over town collecting and selling bottles. At the end of her rounds, she stopped at the market where Strydom Square is today, to buy fish and vegetables. Back in the location, she packaged these items, loaded them in a barrow and went around the location selling her goods. For some reason – it may have been that she was the only one to sell fish – Valliamma came to be known as Fish Mary. No one in the location called her Fish Mary to her face; Mary, a corruption of Marie, was a derogatory term for an Indian woman. When Thanga was still a young girl, she was called Fish Thanga. As she admired her mother, her role model, for her enterprising spirit, she was proud of the name.

Before Rathnasamy died, he had bought a house for his family in Jerusalem Street so Valliamma didn't have to worry about accommodation. She and her children had a home with a yard that they didn't have to share with other families. Valliamma could also rely on her brothers in the location, who knew that she

didn't earn enough for the needs of her family and made sure that she was never in want. Her neighbours also helped out by baby-sitting her daughter while she was at work and little Thanga spent her days in many different homes. When Auntie Thailema, Mrs Thayanayagie Pillay, offered to look after the little girl, Thanga was glad because she liked Mrs Pillay best of all. Thailema,¹⁵ who lived next door to the Marieamman Temple where her brother-in-law, Krishnannè, was the priest, often took Thanga to help her with her duties at the temple and taught the little girl about Tamil customs and religious practices. From helping and observing, Thanga eventually memorised every step of the marriage ceremony and became very knowledgeable about Tamil rituals.

Thanga owed her religious education entirely to Thailema as her mother, Valliamma, had no time for prayers, rituals and politics. All her efforts went into making sure her children had enough to eat, and that meant constant attention to her various trades and household chores. Like most women in the Asiatic Bazaar, she prepared her own spices: cleaned and washed seeds – cumin, coriander, fennel – and set them on the flat roof to dry. Then she roasted, ground, mixed and stored them away. As she was also a very good cook, she was invited to cook at many weddings in the location. When Thanga grew up, she too made her own spices and cooked at weddings and other ceremonial occasions.

As Valliamma could only afford what the family needed for the moment, she never bought groceries in bulk, and sent the children to the shops on Bloed Street for her little purchases. "We used to buy a cup of oil at a time from the oil factory. Meat was eight cents; bread five cents. You could feed a whole family for a few shillings. We used to go to K.K. Khoja's shop to buy rice. There we used to get bunsella. We'd eat the bunsella and come home. Then my mother would say, 'This is not the right rice. Take it back.' But we couldn't; we ate the bunsella. So we just sat outside on the pavement trying to think of how to tell her."¹⁶

Like most children in those days, Thanga began school at the age of seven.

She was very bright and enjoyed school. She loved dramatic activities and when she was in one of the higher primary grades, her Afrikaans teacher, Mr Van Heerden, chose her for the leading role of "Wawonka." She enjoyed it so much and was so good in it that some of her classmates nicknamed her "Wawonka" and still call her that to this day. Thanga had many friends at school, among them Maniben Sita and Amina Jeeva, with whom she would engage in political activities later in life. At school, they played three tins, *kennetjie* and *pelangoli*. For *pelangoli*, they made holes in the ground into which they put stones and then played a form of draughts or chess.

In those days there were no uniforms. She and her brothers went to school barefoot, like most children in the location. She had three dresses. When she came

¹⁵ Chapter 4

¹⁶ Interview Thanga Kollapen, 2001

home in the afternoon, she had to wash and iron her clothes for the next day. Thanga also went to Tamil School where her teacher was Thailema's brother-in-law, Krishnannè, a dedicated teacher and religious leader. At school, he taught Tamil and at the temple, he conducted religious ceremonies. Thanga and her friends, who had great respect for their teacher, went to the Marieamman temple on Sixth Street every Friday to clean it and wash the clothing of all the murthis (statues). Though she was a keen and enthusiastic student, Thanga's school career was brought to an abrupt end when her mother arranged a marriage for her eldest son, Sababathy. After his bride, Mangalum, a young woman from a farm in Seekoei Water (Witbank) came to live with them in Jerusalem Street, Valliamma realised that her daughter-in-law knew nothing about housework or living in a location. On the farm, her only chores had been washing and ironing. So Valliamma made Thanga leave school to teach her sister-in-law to cook and to help with the catering business. Thanga, very upset, protested loudly but her mother was adamant. So at age thirteen, Thanga gave up school to help her very beautiful, pleasant sister-in-law run the home and the catering business. Together, they made a great success of it, expanding it to provide snack foods – samoosas, kerriballs and vadè.

They also looked after Mangalum's children, who had made their appearances on a regular basis until there were six little ones running about and crowding the house. When Thanga's brothers married, they each brought their spouses to live in the house and soon the home had to accommodate three sisters-in-law and many more children. Thanga's brothers built on additional rooms, each room to accommodate a whole family. Only one of Thanga's brothers, Govindasamy, popularly known as Vasanda, left the house when he married. He went to live in Claremont where his wife, Mariam Layloo, being Malay, could own property. So they built a home there.

The routine in the household changed when Mangalum's husband, Sababathy, developed Addison's disease. This debilitating condition put a tremendous strain on the family. Mangalum had to look after a sick husband and six small children so the weight of the catering business fell on Thanga. When Sababathy died, Mangalum, who could no longer cope, went back to her parents, leaving her six children with Valliamma.

Soon after, when Thanga was about seventeen, Valliamma, busy setting trays of spices on the roof, fell with the ladder as she was descending and broke her leg; her shinbone was severed in two. As she never completely recovered and walked with great difficulty ever afterwards, she was forced to give up her business. That meant Thanga had to go to work. She found a job in a Johannesburg clothing factory, Pearl Modes, on Pritchard Street in Doornfontein where Mr Shaw and his brother-in-law, Mr Segal, Jewish owners, employed hundreds of people in a well-equipped factory that complied with the *Industrial Standards Act*.

On her first day at work, Thanga, who had no knowledge of sewing, was asked to set a pocket into a skirt. After she had completed the task, she was asked to put her hand into the pocket. When the pocket went out instead of in, she was so embarrassed that she burst into tears, declaring she was no good at this kind of work. She wanted to go home but Shaw insisted that she try again. Referring to the garment, he said, “No, that is a dead thing. You are alive so you make mistakes but you can learn. You don’t have to go.” One of the Coloured instructresses took her in hand; she learned and within three months became a proficient machinist.

Travelling to work from the Asiatic Bazaar to Johannesburg everyday was onerous. Thanga had to take the bus to the Pretoria station and then the train to Doornfontein. Exhausted when she came home in the evening, she would “go straight to the pots”. Her mother, who cooked the family meals from a chair, prepared the ingredients, after which Cigarette, their African helper, assisted her with the cooking. Cigarette, who had run away from his home on a farm when he was a young boy, lived in the yard and did odd jobs around the house: chopping wood, cleaning the stove and making the fire. Valliamma’s home, like the majority of homes in the location, did not have a geyser so Cigarette also prepared the family’s bathwater. He built a fire in the yard between bricks that supported two iron bars and put on two large tins to boil. In those days, empty twenty-gallon paraffin tins were very useful especially for boiling water.

In 1946,¹⁷ when the Ghetto Act was passed, the discontent that had festered in the Indian community for decades erupted in the Passive Resistance Campaign and broke the routine of Thanga’s life. Maniben Sita and Thailema, who were recruiting women to take part in the campaign, invited Thanga to volunteer. She joined the small band of women resisters from the Asiatic Bazaar, went to Durban and spent the month of September in jail. As a result she lost her job at *Pearl Modes*. But it didn’t take her long to find new employment. *French Model*, another factory in Johannesburg that also produced exclusive ranges, offered her a better position as a sample hand. Then in 1947, Congress leaders called on people to volunteer a second time to boost the flagging campaign. After another month in jail, Thanga lost her job at *French Model*.



Thanga Darmalingam, Passive Resister

¹⁷ Passive Resistance, Chapter 5

When she found work again, it was at a garment factory where the work was very different. She was no longer creating fashions for boutiques but was working at a conveyer belt in a mass production line. Garments came down the belt in thirty sections, one for each of the machinists seated on either side. Each machinist inserted her section of the garment and sent the work on. By the time the garment arrived at the end of the belt, it was complete. The constant flow down the line put the machinists under great pressure. The thirty machinists, fifteen on either side of the belt, had to complete thirty garments at a stint. Though the work was demanding, once she got used to it, Thanga settled into a safe, boring routine.

She travelled to work with Ainamma Kollapen who became her good friend. In 1953, when her sister-in-law died, Ainamma asked Thanga to help her cook for the funeral. While she was busy, Thanga became very aware of Ainamma's brother, Billy Kollapen, a dapper, good-looking young man, who had created something of a stir when he married Minnie Fisher, a Coloured woman, and went to live in the Cape Location. "He had just lost his wife. We were doing all the cooking but this man is standing in the doorway, only watching me."¹⁸ She became quite self-conscious, "Why is he looking at me like that all the time?" She did not wait around to find out. When she had completed her tasks, she went home.

Thanga wasn't a complete stranger to Billy. He had seen her a few times at his mother's place when she had come to visit Ainamma. Always elegantly dressed and very smart, this very pretty woman, with bright eyes and curly black hair, struck him as arrogant, "She thinks she's really it." She presented a challenge that excited him. When all the formalities of the funeral were over, even though he didn't think he stood a chance, he began to court her. He was delighted to find her responding to him and it wasn't long before they were meeting and taking little strolls together. But her family was incensed and Billy was not allowed into the Dharmalingam home. Each time he came to the door, Thanga's mother would chase him off, "Bhai go. Thanga not here."

Billy could see that her mother and her brothers did not like him. They looked down on him for two reasons; he was 'low caste' and he was a waiter. Everyone knew waiters were heavy drinkers! And even worse, he had married a Coloured woman, was living in the Cape Location and had taken up 'their' ways! They did not believe he would make a good husband and father and tried to get Thanga to break it off with him. But their opposition spurred Thanga on. She would slip out of the house to meet Billy round the corner where he was waiting for her under the lamplight. Handsome, flamboyant Billy, given his circumstances, cut a very romantic figure.

¹⁸ Interview Thanga Kollapen, 2001

He, however, was very conscious of the fact that the Tamil community regarded him as a pariah. During his schooldays, for instance, when he went to his friends' homes, he was never invited to share a meal with them. He had to leave before they sat down to eat. At Tamil School, even though he was an exceptional student, Krishnannè overlooked him for parts in the dramas that he produced. Constantly having to endure snubs in a community in which caste prejudice was strong, Billy became disenchanted and began to question many things including the Hindu religion, from which the caste system stemmed. Adopting an outsiders' view of the many deities that bewildered him, he decried the fact that there was no common holy text, like the Bible or Koran, to help him overcome his confusion. So he learned to reject where he felt rejected and privately repudiated the Tamil community. He was more at home with his Coloured friends.

But here he was, courting a girl from a staunch Tamil background.

Opposition to their relationship forced the pace of events. Things came to a head when Billy's family decided to take matters into their hands and arrange a marriage for him with a cousin from Johannesburg. On the day he was to meet his family in Johannesburg where he and his cousin would become officially engaged in the presence of the two families, he never showed up. Mortified, his parents returned to the location to discover that while they were waiting for him in Johannesburg, he was having tea with Thanga at Auntie Thakri's house. So that evening there was trouble.

Billy's family went to Jerusalem Street to confront Thanga's family. They got into a loud argument, accusing Thanga of interfering with their arrangements and humiliating them. The whole neighbourhood listening in to the quarrel was agog. When Thanga's brother began shouting at her, and she picked up her bag and ran out with Billy, the whole street rippled with excitement.

Thanga and Billy went off to Johannesburg, to Billy's Auntie Baba Pillay. At his aunt's house, the family began to congratulate him on his engagement. They hadn't heard that Billy had thwarted that scheme. His aunt apologised for not having attended. As she had developed a problem with her legs, she couldn't walk properly. Thanga, who had already been humiliated at her own home, now felt worse. His relatives were congratulating Billy on his engagement to some one else and didn't seem to be aware of her presence. She couldn't stay there.

Billy took Thanga to her sister's house and he stayed with Auntie Baba. When he went back to Pretoria the next day, he found the Asiatic Bazaar buzzing with the news that he and Thanga had eloped. Billy's colourful history, combined with Thanga's reputation as a fastidious and uppity woman, made it a very juicy tale. Thanga was mortified and upset. Her impulsive action had cut her off from the family and left her with no choice. There was no turning back. She had to get married.

That April in 1954, Aunt Baba arranged their wedding. It was not the typical, colourful Indian ceremony, every step of which Thanga had memorised when she had been with Thailema. She would have to forego all the rituals that bind two people and two families together: the exchange of garlands, tying the thali, planting a tree and the bridal procession to her new home in the bosom of her husband's family. For Billy and Thanga, the legal registration of the marriage would be the entire wedding. Nevertheless, Thanga tried to make it special. She bought herself a wedding outfit consisting of a blue shantung two-piece suit and a pair of black shoes. But Aunt Baba shook her head at the black shoes – bad luck! Though Thanga exchanged them, the fact that no one from her family would be present, was the worst luck and black shoes didn't compare. A friend from the factory, who helped with her make-up, was the only one there for her on her wedding day. When they arrived at the magistrate's court, Thanga found that Billy had not brought a ring. She took it as another bad omen. Aunt Baba, who was witness to the marriage, quickly lent him the ring that declared Billy and Thanga a union.

After the wedding, they had to confront the consequences of their rash actions. They had no home. Where were they to live? When Billy's uncle in Barberton offered to take them in and find a job for Billy, they went to stay with him. This uncle and his family received them with such great excitement and joy that Thanga's misgivings were allayed to some extent. Here in this house, she and Billy would share a bed for the first time; she was afraid but excited. "I was so upset about the whole thing. This was for the first time. And this was a stranger's home." But Thanga's run of bad luck was not over. Billy went out for a drink with a teacher who was boarding at the house, got drunk, came back, collapsed on the bed and was soon sound asleep. The wedding was not consummated and Thanga spent the whole night crying.

The next morning, they began fighting. Thanga wanted to go back home and Billy was angry. "If you want to go back to your family, you can go."

Thanga was shocked, *Everybody will say, I ran off with him, had a good time and now I'm back home.* So she remained in Barberton but after a week went back to her job in Johannesburg and stayed with Aunt Baba. Billy didn't stay on in Barberton either; he went back to Pretoria to a job at Janina's Restaurant.

It seemed that the newly-weds were going separate ways.

Then one day, after Thanga had just bought a cup of coffee from the tearoom near the factory and was going back to work, she suddenly found herself face-to-face with Billy. He didn't want to be apart from her and had come to make up. Before he left, he promised he would come to fetch her when he had found a place for them

in Pretoria. But it was difficult to find accommodation in the location and Billy had to settle for a garage in Claremont. Thanga wasn't happy but she had no choice. To make things worse, she and Billy were just up the road from her brother, Vasanda, who would have nothing to do with them because his sister had brought disgrace on the family. His wife, Mariam, however, was very sympathetic and entertained Thanga at the back of her house, out of sight of her husband.

Three months after she moved to Claremont, Thanga fell pregnant but she wasn't pleased. How could she raise a baby in a garage? She took her troubles to Mariam who did her best to comfort her, made her maternity dresses and visited her during her confinement in the Claremont nursing home. Though Thanga hated bringing her baby back to the garage, she had to stay put until they could find a place in the Asiatic Bazaar. That happened a year later.

When Thanga and Billy moved into rooms in Jeeva Barber's yard on Eleventh Street, Thanga had the chance to renew her friendship with Amina Jeeva.¹⁹ They were old school friends, had played tennis together, were in the passive resistance together and had shared the same cell. When Maniben and Thailema were organising meetings at that time, Amina, the only driver among them, would give some of the girls a lift to the venue. Thanga's family had always expressed their disapproval of Amina. "When she used to come and hoot, my brothers would get mad. 'Why doesn't she come in? Why is she hooting outside?'" But Thanga ignored other people's opinions: she had a great deal in common with Amina and liked her very much.

And Amina popped in all the time. She came into the kitchen, sat talking to Thanga and often stayed for a meal. Billy was resentful. He didn't like this woman, who always wore trousers, hanging around his wife. One day when he came home and found her at the table enjoying a meal of cabbage and meat, he lost his temper. He picked up the plate that Thanga had set out for him and flung it against the wall. After that, they had to find another place to live. They moved to Cowie Street, opposite Sinthumbi and Poppie,²⁰ and into the heart of the Tamil community.

Thailema then insisted that their marriage be consecrated at the temple. She asked Krishnannè to perform the rites. Thanga in a new sari, carrying a tray of fruit, and Billy, in his best suit, set off for the Marieamman Temple where Krishnannè blessed the thali that Billy tied around Thanga's neck. Billy and Thanga exchanged garlands and the nuptials were over. Thailema then insisted that Thanga go to Jerusalem Street, prostrate herself before her mother, Valliamma, and ask for her forgiveness. When Thanga went to see her mother, she took baby Nimmi with her. It was the baby that won Valliamma over. She forgave her daughter but still wouldn't have anything to do with Billy.

¹⁹ Chapter 6

²⁰ Chapter 3

Living across the road from Sinthumbi and Poppie, made Thanga very happy because they provided the loving support that she missed from her family. Aunty Poppie with her home remedies helped Thanga through many a little crisis and some big ones. When Thanga, who was expecting her second baby, came home after helping at a funeral where she had carried heavy pots, she began to bleed during the night and realised that she was having a miscarriage. Billy went across to Aunty Poppie, who rushed over to help Thanga. When she found that there was nothing she could do, she took Thanga to the hospital. But they were too late; Thanga lost the baby.

Even though people snubbed her because of her marriage to Billy, when Thanga moved back into the location, she moved back into the Tamil community, into her family and had come home. But it wasn't the same for Billy. He was uncomfortable in a caste conscious community. He longed for the good times he had had with his friends in the Cape Location. He had been different then – young, unmarried, carefree and much happier. He'd come home from work after nine o' clock at night, don his best and cruise the locations. In those days, very few people had cars, so young men strutted around on the streets. This is how he had made friends with young Coloured men, had gone with them to the dances at the Orient Hall and learned to dance by watching them. In those days, people danced *lang-arm*, which he quickly mastered. He loved it so much that he became very accomplished, could be very selective and chose to dance only with women who had "educated feet."

As they couldn't dance past midnight on Saturday – it was against the law because of the Christian Sabbath – Friday nights became the main dance nights. They danced at the hall till two or three in the morning, then with the band, flitted off to a picnic spot in Faerie Glen where they danced on the grass till dawn. Billy, debonair and rakish, sweeping women off their feet both literally and figuratively, never missed a Friday night at the Orient Hall. He had the talent to go professional but the location provided no opportunities beyond recreation.

It was at the Orient, that he met Minnie Fisher. With all the confidence of an aroused nineteen year old, he set off in lusty pursuit of her and they became an item. Although Minnie's widowed mother accepted Billy, other members of the community were suspicious of him. Indian men didn't always do right by Coloured women. They treated them as mistresses and set up "legitimate" families with Indian women in the Asiatic Bazaar. Here was young Billy, someone they knew well, someone they knew to be carefree, in love with life but with no thought of marriage. He was not to be trusted. When Minnie fell pregnant, they anticipated the worst. But Billy surprised them; he proposed.

To avoid trouble with his family, Billy decided on a civil marriage but found that as he was under twenty-one, he could not marry without parental approval. So he and Minnie set up house together in Fourth Street in the Cape Location and put the wedding off to the following year. Their home had three rooms and Billy took pride in furnishing them. He felt great; he was young, making good money as a waiter and doing very well for himself. And in the Coloured community, he found the affirmation that was denied him in the other location just over the road, on the other side of Bloed Street. Being lavish in his ways, he was very popular with the young partying crowd and never missed a dance. But his love of dancing and his flirtatiousness led to serious trouble in his marriage.

One Friday night, he upset Minnie dreadfully when he spent most of the evening dancing with a new and very beautiful arrival at the dance hall. After work the next day, he came home to find that Minnie had tried to poison herself with a large dose of caustic soda. He rushed her to the hospital where they managed to save her life but she never recovered fully. She remained sickly and ailing and for the next four years Billy devoted himself to caring for her while his mother-in-law looked after their son. Then Minnie died. When Billy remarried, his mother-in-law adopted his son.

Unfortunately for Billy, Thanga was from an orthodox family that did not approve of Western-type dancing. She didn't go to dances but dancing was Billy's life; he couldn't give it up. On Friday nights, he simply left her at home with the baby, while he went dancing into the wee hours of the morning. Frustrated and angry, Thanga found ways to punish him. One Saturday, he returned home in the early morning darkness, he found the door locked, knocked in vain, and being quite drunk, slumped onto the veranda where he sat singing the pop song Ramona.

Some hours later, when Aunty Poppie saw Billy sitting in the cold, she became very angry with Thanga.

"Hoekom het jy nie die deur oopgemaak vir Billy nie?"

"He left me with the baby at eight o'clock last night and he comes home now. So I didn't open the door for him."

Thanga, who knew that this was no solution to the problem, did the only sensible thing – she learned to dance. With Billy as her teacher and partner, she came to love dancing as much as he did.

In the next year, Thanga and Billy found that their quarters in Cowie Street were becoming quite uninhabitable. As the place was old with a roof that leaked badly, they decided to move. And they did – across the road to the old Tamil School yard. The classrooms had been converted into living quarters while the schoolyard had been portioned off into tiny plots to accommodate about fourteen families living

in typical location shanties. When Thanga and Billy discovered that a small section of the playground right next to Sinthumbi's house was still vacant, they decided that that was where they would build a little home and Sinthumbi helped them to acquire the land from the Tamil League. When they were about to put up their little structure, Thanga's cousin asked to share the plot. Though Thanga was reluctant, she couldn't refuse. Aboo Chetty, Thanga's uncle, had been a tremendous support to Valliamma and her children when they were struggling so she felt obliged to help his daughter. And two tiny units went up on that little piece of land. The room and kitchen that Thanga and Billy built would be their home until they moved to Laudium over a decade later.

Thanga, who was still working in Johannesburg, employed Ouma from Atteridgeville to look after little, Nimmi. As Ouma, who had a drinking problem, was not reliable, Thanga was never sure she would arrive on time to take charge of the little toddler before she left for work. While Billy was still working as a waiter, he took care of Nimmi until about nine in the morning before setting off to the restaurant. Billy, however, was very uncomfortable about leaving his daughter in this precarious situation; it haunted him all his life. "I am sorry when I think about Nimmi. It couldn't have been a happy childhood."

When Thanga became pregnant again, she gave up her job to stay home with her children. Her son, Jyothi,²¹ was born in 1956, the year of the women's march against passes for African women. Though she was pregnant at the time, when Thailema approached her, Thanga became one of the 20 000 women who marched to the Union Buildings that ninth of August in 1956.

In the meanwhile, Billy, who had given up his job at the restaurant was working at a big linen company, Ace Imports. The owner, Mr Lulu Ginsberg, a regular client at Janina's Restaurant, had singled Billy out as his special waiter and they had become well acquainted. Realising that Billy was an intelligent, hardworking man, Ginsberg offered him a job as a buyer and dispatch clerk in his company. Billy, who was going nowhere in his present job, accepted Ginsberg's offer and went to work for him only to find that he had not improved his prospects. He was working harder than ever but wasn't being paid for the extra time and effort that was required of him. Ginsberg took it for granted that Billy, because of his experience as a waiter, would be on duty for weekend functions at his home. Billy, feeling trapped and helpless, succumbed to these exploitative conditions and stayed with Ace Imports for the next seventeen years.

Partly because of one huge benefit: Thanga was offered CMT (cut, make and trim) projects for *Laura Linens*, an outlet for Ace Imports' manufactured goods. To fill the

²¹ Thanga's son, Jyothi (Jody Kollapen) became Chairperson of the Human Rights Commission in 2000.

orders, Thanga needed a big machine that cost about eight hundred pounds. As she had no funds, she approached her grocer, Choonilal Chagan, who loaned her the money. When she discovered that the work was more than she could handle alone, she decided to use the expertise and experience she had gained in other people's factories, to start her own factory. After Jyothi was born, Thanga turned earnestly to setting up her enterprise. She employed several women from the location to work with her in her home and Jan, a young boy from Atteridgeville, to look after her baby son. She had already sent Nimmi off to school in Pietermaritzburg where she would stay with friends until she had completed primary school.

Thanga, who had begun her factory with one machine, needed to expand when the volume of work increased. She did so to the extent that her tiny home would allow. She bought two more machines and increased the number of employees to seven. Among her first group of workers were the machinists Parvathy and

Thanga, Billy and grandchildren



Salatchi from the Asiatic Bazaar, A. Williams from the Cape Location, and a table-hand, Selina from Mamelodi, who measured and ironed curtains and other large items. The articles that they made for *Laura Linens* – pillowcases, sheets and curtains – arrived cut and ready for sewing. Thanga was paid four pence a piece for pillowcases and thirty-five pence for two pillowcases and a sheet. Her little factory also manufactured theatre gowns, boots and caps for doctors. In addition to CMT items for Laura Linens, the factory began producing goods for other retailers. Soon Thanga was supplying a number of shops – *Ahmed Tayob's* and *Osman's* in town, their branches in Laudium, *Jubie's* in Brits and *Solomon's* in Pretoria North. So when *Laura Linens* closed down, Thanga's business didn't collapse. Her factory continued to operate.

It was a very busy factory and most of the packing was done at night. That was Jan's job. He folded and packed with such distinction, that their products looked like Christmas gifts. All Thanga's employees were registered, paid the minimum wage and received bonuses and gifts. They were carefully trained, became highly proficient and went into business for themselves when they left her little establishment.

When the general trek from the Asiatic Bazaar to Laudium began in the sixties, Thanga and Billy saw no reason not to move. Though they had taken over the quarters of people who had moved to Laudium, they wanted better conditions. Using their place as a factory by day and rearranging it into a home at night, was onerous. If they moved to Laudium, they would have a home separate from the factory. So they sold two of their insurance policies, obtained enough money to buy two plots and three years later, in 1969, moved into their new house in Laudium.

The factory continued to operate in the Asiatic Bazaar for the next ten years with Thanga travelling to work by minibus taxi. When practically all the Indians had moved out of the location in the late seventies, Thanga moved her factory to her garage in Laudium. Jan, an invaluable part of the enterprise, came too and continued to work for her.

Sadly, he came to an untimely end just two weeks before Jyothi's wedding in 1981. On a Friday after work, having collected his wages, Jan went to see his girlfriend and the mother of his two children, who worked for an Indian family in Laudium. When he arrived at his girlfriend's room, he found another man with her. There was a fight and Jan was stabbed to death. When Thanga heard, she immediately informed Jan's aunt in Atteridgeville, made arrangements for his body to be taken there and paid for the funeral. She felt Jan's loss very deeply.

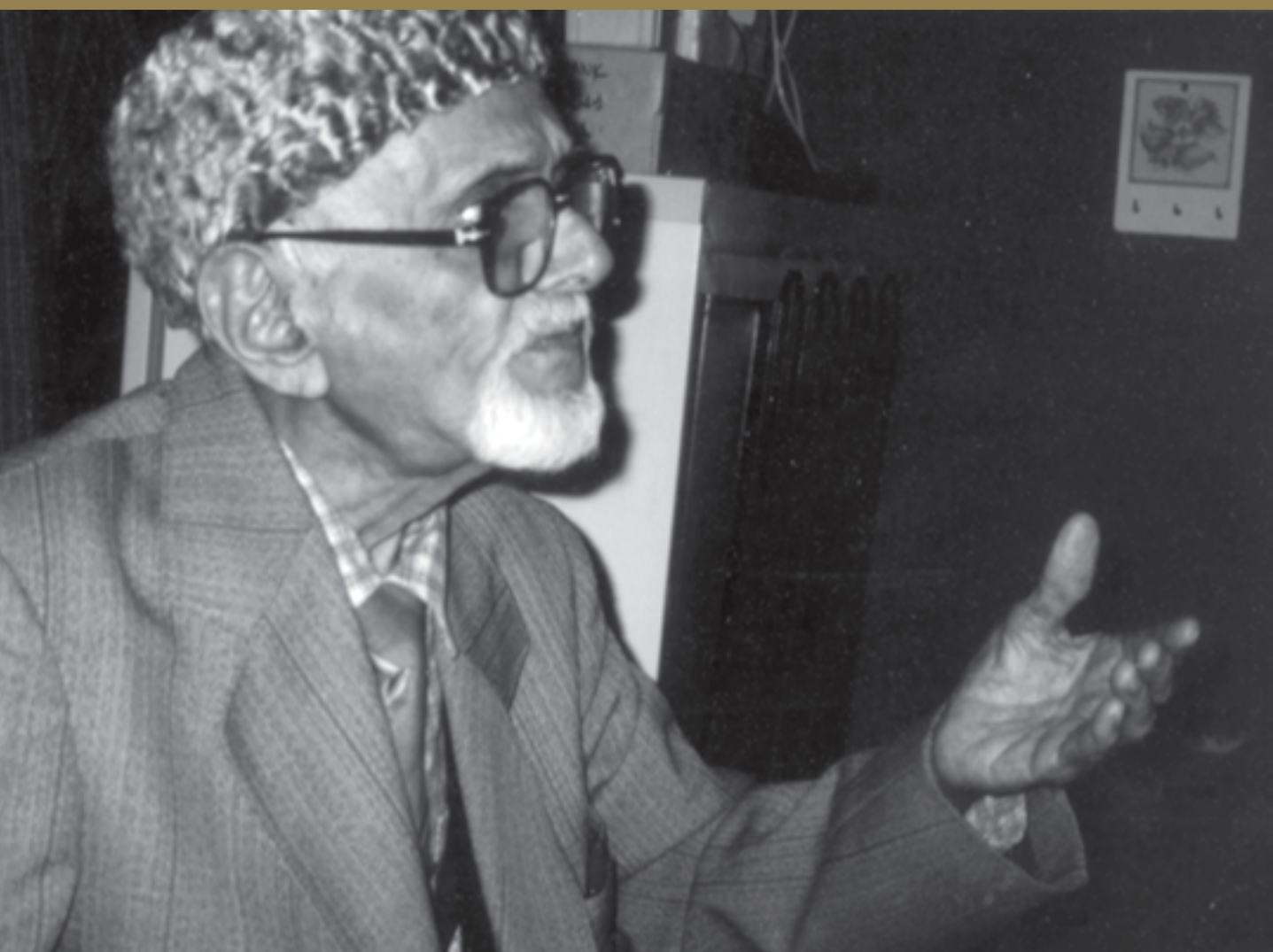
Thanga continued to run her business for another fifteen years or so but in the mid 1990's, after she suffered a mild stroke, her children insisted that she close the factory. But she is still very busy. She continues to sew little household items such

as oven gloves, tablemats and covers for wastepaper baskets. She brings these and other projects to the Senior Citizens' Club where she teaches people to sew, crochet and knit. She devotes much of her time to social welfare work: raising funds for handicapped children, distributing Deepavali hampers to poor families, finding shelter for abandoned and abused women and working with senior citizens. She has set her heart on establishing an old age home in Laudium but like everything in her life, it is proving to be an uphill battle.

Thanga, however, is a go-getter – nothing stands in her way.



Senior Citizens at Warmbaths



OMARJEE SULIMAN

Filmmaker of the Location

“Asalaamu alaikom,” Omarjee home from school greeted his mother. Usually, she answered, *Oh, you’re back, Walaikom Salaam*. But today, she did not give him her usual smile and actually avoided his eyes. “But Mother, what’s wrong?”

“You know your father says he’s got a lucky son that made his eyebrows to burn.”

“God forbid, I did nothing. I was at school. What happened?”

“What have you got in that room?” She was referring to Omarjee’s laboratory – a disused latrine, cleaned out and converted into a tool room, which Omarjee used for his experiments with projectors, films, and other mechanical and electrical items.

“I had film on that little projector that I made the wheels big and I bought more film.”

“Your father was upset. He says you are wasting your time. You mustn’t be doing this kind of thing. He took all that and he went and threw it in the big drum.” They used the drum to burn up waste. “Then he lit a match and threw it in.” Apparently, the match fell right to the bottom and the film took a little time to catch alight. When Mr Suliman, wondering why the stuff was not burning, leaned forward, there was a sudden flash and flames leapt up and burnt his eyebrows clean off. Mr Suliman was not aware of the highly flammable nature of nitrate-based film.

Mr Suliman regarded Omarjee’s obsession with technology as worthless; he was ‘wasting’ so much money on useless toys. First there were the magic lanterns that his son bought in the bazaars to put on ‘film shows’. When Omarjee discovered that by inserting images printed on glass into the lantern and switching on the light he could throw the pictures onto a screen, he turned the yard into a little bioscope where he entertained his friends. Then he began experimenting with toy projectors. He saw that when you turned the handles, the filmstrip inside moved and gave the illusion of action. But the filmstrips in these projectors were too short to satisfy Omarjee. As he wanted to create much longer moving pictures, he

decided to make everything bigger. He took empty paraffin tins, cut bigger disks and made large reels. Then he went to the “Doll’s Hospital” in African Arcade where he bought film that was sold by the yard and rolled the film onto the reels. When he projected the pictures on a sheet and turned the reels to make the images move, he was able to entertain his friends with longer showings.

Despite his father’s objections, Omarjee, driven by his interest, continued studying film manuals, especially the illustrations. His mother tongue being Gujarati, he learned from drawings rather than instructions in English. He was careful not to let his father see how many pounds he was spending on his books. As it was money that he had saved or that his mother, who colluded in the deception, had given him, he didn’t feel too guilty. Nevertheless, to avoid confrontations with his father, he tore the covers off the books to make them look old. When his father asked where he’d bought them, he told him that they were from a second-hand bookshop where no book cost more than a shilling so his father couldn’t really get angry.

Mr Suliman, however, could not reconcile himself to his son’s interest in film and continued to nag him. He wanted his son to become a trader like himself. He believed that trade was trade and labour was labour. Trade had no barriers; labour, fit only for the lowest caste, had limitations. He believed that his son’s interest in electrical engineering would make him a labourer. “There is no future in an occupation as a technician.”

Mr Mohammed Essop Patel, his father’s friend, who lived across the street, didn’t agree. “The planes that you see flying over the Asiatic Bazaar, where do they come from?”

“From the airport of course,” replied Mr Suliman.

“Who’s flying them?” Mr Suliman wasn’t sure where this was going, but Mr Patel was confident that he had made his point. “There must be people to do different, different work.”

Mr Suliman wasn’t convinced. “Show me one Kanamia boy that is doing this. Why does he always do different things?”

Though Mr Patel, who was to become Omarjee’s father-in-law, was sympathetic to Omarjee, he himself was a very strict father. His children lived in fear of him. His daughters had to come straight home from school; were not allowed out alone; were not allowed to answer the door; were not allowed to speak to other people. When Mr Patel’s eldest daughter, Amina, was about sixteen, it was time for marriage so she had to leave school. A marriage was arranged between Omarjee’s parents and hers. Even though the Patels and Sulimans were neighbours, Omarjee and Amina didn’t know each other. Amina, who had seen Omarjee at school, he was in a higher standard with her brothers, regarded him as a complete stranger.

Suddenly she was told that he was to be her husband.

They were married in 1942.

To her surprise, Amina entered a new life that gave her great freedom. She had married into a very small family, just Omarjee and his parents. Preoccupied with his experiments, Omarjee didn't exercise the authoritarian control typical of an Indian husband and left her free to develop in her own way. So in addition to her duties as housewife, she assumed responsibilities that probably were her husband's. She took over management of the properties that the Sulimans owned in Cowie and Sixth Streets, collected the rents from hawkers who had hired the stables on these stands and handled their complaints. In fulfilling these duties, she helped to shield Omarjee from his father's frustration.

To Omarjee, Amina was a gem. Without her support he would not have been able to give free reign to his creative spirit. His father tried to restrain him but his wife made it possible for him to follow his own interests. "I have a wonderful wife. She was my secretary, my treasurer, and she gave me all the time in the world to move about. When we no longer had horses, we converted the stables into a workshop and I would work there till late at night. At about ten, she would bring tea and sandwiches. At two, sometimes three in the morning, she would tap at the window, "*Come on, it's getting late*". Even today, in their home in Laudium, he has his own den in which he keeps all his recording equipment and video and audiotapes. Amina never intrudes into this private space.

"She was the big help in my life. Rich people have servants to serve them. God gave me a wife who did all my work. Today, I think back to how she and her sister would walk all the way to town to do the shopping and then walk back from town. The poor wife has arthritis. Recently, she had knee-replacement surgery and is now walking freely. God has helped her. But for safety she uses a crutch; she cannot risk a fall that could break the joint replacements." So this Kanamia boy who did everything differently and had the knack of creating his own freedom, had, in the process, allowed his wife to find her own.

Would it have been so had he remained in India?

Would Omarjee, who was born in 1922 in the village of Paguthan in a farming community near Bharoach in India, have been able to pursue his passion for mechanical and electrical engineering? In Paguthan, people grew cotton, wheat and vegetables and Omarjee and the other children did chores on the farms. They also went to school and madressa and played all kinds of games. One of their games – *galidunda* – was brought to South Africa where it became known as *kennetjie*. In India, they played *galidunda* in trees as well. One player was left on the ground while the others climbed into the trees. Then one of the climbers hit the little stick as far as he could and the fielder below had to find it, climb up and catch one of

the others. The first one he touched had to go down to field. The game depended on the ability to climb, and they climbed high up but stopped just short of where the monkeys were; the monkey hordes could be quite vicious.

Though it was a typically rural environment, it was in this little village of Paguthan that Omarjee's interest in engineering was awakened. Colonisation had brought the industrial revolution even into this remote spot and Omarjee saw machinery and equipment appear magically before his eyes. Suddenly there were trains, mills and other strange things. Giving little thought to the struggle going on around him to free India from British rule, he allowed his curiosity to feed on these new phenomena. He wanted to know how they worked so he began to invent games that reflected this interest. In one game, his friends formed a train and had to pass a signal that he had created. His signalling system consisted of a piece of wood with a little arm and a cotton reel pulley with string around it that he operated from behind a bush. When the signalling arm was up, the train had to stop. His games were really little scientific experiments. While the rest of the country was experiencing British Imperialism as negative and disempowering, the introduction of things British into his environment, had catapulted Omarjee into new worlds and ideas and was liberating his creative energy.

For this Kanamia boy things were always different.

But the political revolution in the country was coming closer to his home. When Mahatma Gandhi came to Bharoach to speak of Deshi Kapra (Weave our own cloth), Omarjee's mother took him to the rally where he heard the great man speak of Britain's monopoly of the cotton industry that had reduced many millions to poverty and brought famine to the country. When Gandhiji, who wanted them to produce their own cloth and not be dependent on Britain, invited people to throw whatever British goods they had on a bonfire right there in Bharoach, little Omarjee was confused.

He was finding himself in European technology.

Such dilemmas, however, would soon be left behind. Omarjee was leaving for South Africa, the land of opportunity where Indians who had emigrated were doing so well that they were able to send monthly contributions to their families in the village. Omarjee's father, already in South Africa, had bought four properties in the Asiatic Bazaar; three adjoining stands in Cowie Street and a fourth in Sixth Street. There were two yards with about fifteen stables that he rented to fruit and vegetable hawkers. Mr Suliman, a fruit and vegetable merchant with stall number 21 at the market in Church Street, bought from wholesalers and supplied hawkers.

It was his plan to bring his two youngest sons to live in South Africa. When Omarjee's older brother turned fifteen, Mr Suliman, who had returned to Paguthan to fetch him, became involved in supervising the building of a mosque in the village and stayed longer than he had planned. As his son turned sixteen before he was ready to leave, he could not bring him back with him. South African immigration laws did not allow Indian children over the age of sixteen into the country. Omarjee was more fortunate.

In 1932, when he turned ten, he set out with his mother to join his father in South Africa. They left Paguthan for Bombay where they would board the passenger ship, *Takliwa*. To while away the hours before departure, they went to the movies and Omarjee had his first experience of the cinema. But he had never been in a big city before and being exposed to so many new, ingenious things, the cinema was just one among many wonders that he was trying to take in. When they eventually got to the harbour and went aboard, Omarjee had to be on the ship's main deck so he could inspect and examine everything. As he moved about, his mother, terrified that he would fall overboard, kept hold of him by the back of his shirt.

In Mombassa, intrigued by electric lights, he observed how they were switched on and off. Though he touched nothing, he was waiting for a chance to work them. When they arrived at Delagoa Bay Harbour, his father, who was there to meet them, took them to stay a few days with an uncle in Lourenco Marques. Omarjee saw the lights in his uncle's house, but didn't try to work them as he did not wish to appear forward. From Lourenco Marques, the Sulimans took the train to Pretoria. As soon as Omarjee arrived in his new home, the first thing he did was to find the light switch. Then he stood there switching it on and off, on and off, on and off; he was going to find out how it worked. He always needed to know how things worked.

Clearly, Omarjee's path was going to deviate quite markedly from that of his father.

Then Omarjee went to school.

As he could not speak a word of English, he was put into Grade I. At ten years of age, he was the biggest child in the class at the church on Cowie Street in the Cape Location, which accommodated the first two grades. There was no building for the English school so different grades were accommodated at different places. Some grades were at the Tamil School, some at the mosque and others in the Royal and Orient Bioscopes. In his early teens, Omarjee found himself constantly on the move from one venue to another in his pursuit of a primary education.

In the afternoons, after English school, Omarjee went to madressa at Moulana Siddiqi's house. Here, he studied the Qur'an and learned Urdu. In the evenings, he attended night school – first with Mr Patel, then Mr Shah, and later, Mr G. Kala. At

night school, he learnt English and studied Gujarati, his mother tongue. Though he soon became quite proficient in English he could not manage Afrikaans and that would eventually force him to drop out.

Nevertheless, it was high school that inadvertently helped to prepare him for his career in technology. When he was in Std. Seven (Grade Nine), because of his interest in mechanical things, he was given the task of fixing door locks. Before going home in the afternoon, the principal would give him the keys to the rooms where locks needed attention. He would take the locks home, clean and oil them, and if necessary, sandpaper them. When he took them back, they worked as good as new. So he became the school's locksmith and handyman.

He was gaining many useful skills – some he actually acquired in the classroom. He became proficient in lino cutting and printing, bookbinding and cardboard modelling – constructing model houses and buildings.

One day his English teacher, Miss Manley, a very artistic woman, who painted and decorated bottles, saw Omarjee cutting pictures out of a book. “Omarjee, don't cut up the books.”

“But, Madam, this is a nice picture.”

“I'll show you how you can draw it.” She showed him how to make drawings using a grid. This trick came in very handy when he began making displays for cinemas after he left school.

But the ones who actually propelled him into the film business, again unwittingly, were his schoolmates. “By the Grace of God, I got into a company of boys, Hindus and Muslims, who were from very rich families.” Amongst them was Ismail, about whom one of his friends remarked: “You know, Ismail, you are not walking straight. You got a funny walk.” This worried Ismail. He had to see for himself so he bought an eight-millimetre movie camera, a projector and screen and asked his friends to film him as he walked about. Omarjee took on the job of cameraman with alacrity. The others knew nothing of filmmaking, whereas he had been studying manuals, knew how to use the camera, how place people and objects and how to create illusions. So they were happy to follow his lead.

Their experiments with the camera created such a buzz among the other students that they began to see themselves as moviemakers and that led to a momentous decision: they would make a film. What had begun as a way to help Ismail improve his posture had turned into an exciting venture into cinematography. They chose a story from one of Ismail's Gujarati magazines. As it was about a person who helped poor people, they called their film *Garib Kabeli* (The Philanthropist). Ismail wrote the script and played the main role, that of Saint Luxmidas's son. Since Luxmidas was a rich Hindu, they had to depict life in a Hindu home so they decorated their set with icons of Rama and Sita.

It did not trouble Omarjee and the Muslims in the group that they were involving themselves in a story about Hindus. In Paguthan, Omarjee had lived with Muslims, Hindus, workers and untouchables. Since the Mosque in the village was right next to the Hindu Mandir, it had been his custom after prayers at the Mosque to visit the mandir with his friends. As they entered, they would call out to an old caretaker, “Bhpuji, Bhpuji” and he would answer, “Chokra Ho, be careful. Don’t knock things over.” Unlike a mosque, which has no icons, a Hindu temple has many statues and lamps. After the boys had taken a turn around the temple, they would leave. They were simply curious children, quite confident in their religion and culture. Visiting a temple posed no threat to their beliefs.

Similarly, Omarjee and his friends in the location, confident of who they were, had no qualms about their film project. They were concerned only with the logistics of production. Since Luxmidas was a rich man, they had to reveal him in all his opulence. They showed him in a Buick owned by G. Kala whose son was in the group. But that was not sufficient. They needed to show that the owner of the Buick lived in a palace. The Asiatic Bazaar with its tin shanties had nothing to offer. Undaunted, Omarjee decided that they would use the Union Buildings as the palace in their scene. His friends couldn’t believe this.

Ismail exclaimed, “Are you joking?”

“You can’t do that, man,” another said, “everyone will know it’s the Union Buildings.”

“No, man,” Omarjee dismissed their objections, “we are not going to show the towers and main features of the Union Buildings.”

He had already reconnoitred the area and knew exactly where they would shoot. There was a secluded section at the back that they could approach by a quiet road. This part of the building with its pillars, little fishpond and beautiful decorations was perfect for their needs. They were going to shoot an accident scene against this backdrop. Omarjee, with knowledge gained from American movie magazines and books on filming, knew exactly how to do it. He held the camera upside down, put the accident victim next to the car wheel, had him get up and walk backwards with the car going in reverse and the spectators walking back six steps. When they showed the film at school, everyone was amazed, especially by the accident. It looked so real that even the principal, Mr Pickles, couldn’t believe his eyes. He wanted to know exactly how they had done it.

Despite his obvious talents and abilities, Omarjee left school at the end of Std Seven (Grade Nine) because Afrikaans was a compulsory subject and he knew he would never master it. He went to work with his father in the market and then married Amina. But he spent all his spare time reading about films and hanging around cinemas watching technicians at work. Soon he began doing little display

jobs around the cinemas. His work with projectors had taught him the secret of animation. He had noticed how each frame of film captured a separate step of a movement so he made a series of drawings based on the same principle. After arranging them in sequence, he flipped through the drawings, saw that the figures appeared to move and was delighted. When he began to introduce animation into displays advertising forthcoming attractions at the cinemas, people were amazed and Omarjee became known for his ability to create unusual mechanical and electrical effects.

He also put to good use the skill he had learnt from Miss Manley, his art teacher, that of copying pictures using a grid. To advertise the film



*Ismaili
Jamatkhana,
Marabastad
1945*

Rainbow on the River, he made a huge image of Bobby Breen's face that went up to the ceiling at the Empire bioscope. Bobby Breen was the young star of the film. Omarjee set up a loudspeaker and record player to create the illusion of Bobby Breen's voice, singing the title song, issuing from the mouth of the image. He also devised a flashing sign of the title over a riverboat with a wheel that turned. Every time the lights came up these images appeared, to delight and amaze the audience.

And recognition of Omarjee's talent was growing.

Habib Velshi Keshavjee, owner of the Empire Theatre, was so impressed with his work that he commissioned him to decorate the Jamatkhana, the Ismaili mosque on Boom Street, for the Aga Khan's visit in 1945. The Aga Khan, the spiritual head of the Ismailis, who was on a tour of Ismaili communities in Africa, would arrive in Pretoria in August and his followers in the Asiatic Bazaar were planning a regal welcome for their Imam. Habib Keshavjee, a prominent member of the Ismaili community, persuaded the Pretoria Ismaili Council to entrust the task of decorating the mosque to Omarjee. The Council had already obtained quotes from a couple of European (white) electrical contractors but Habib considered them mere tradesmen doing a routine job. They wouldn't look upon it as an artistic challenge. "They will just come here and put up a lot of globes and that will be it." He convinced the Council that Omarjee was a better bet as he would bring all his creativity and skill to bear on the project and would produce something outstanding for the occasion.

When Habib offered Omarjee the job, he said, "I am sure you will come up with a brilliant idea. Think of something to make this building really stand out." Excited by the challenge, Omarjee immediately set about designing something that would have special meaning for this community of Shia Muslims. He asked Habib for the symbol that denoted the community and was given a letterhead with a logo showing a decorated turban. After he had fashioned a massive reproduction of the logo and outlined the symbol with small three-watt torch bulbs, he hooked this circuit to a transformer that fed it with low voltage. And voila! A huge highlighted signature of the Ismailis in Pretoria.

Then he got busy with a welcome sign. He recalls with pride, "In those days you couldn't buy machinery for automation but I spotted something in Royal Bioscope one day in the operating box. They had a big drum-like thing with fingers and while the name was going on and off outside, this drum would be turning catching different letters. I thought I must make something like that but small. So I bought a tin of Lactogen – baby food. It was a nice size. I emptied it out, put insulation material on top of it and cut out the fingers from a paraffin tin. I made the whole

automatic machine and I used a motor and lever from a radiogram to make the tin turn slowly.”²² And the end result – a flashing sign on the mosque to welcome the Aga Khan to the Jamatkhana! Omarjee then got permission from the people across the street to set up floodlights on their buildings to light up the mosque.

And it was a spectacular display – nothing like it had been seen before in the location. The Ismaili community was delighted. To show their appreciation, the Council invited Omarjee into the mosque to hear the Aga Khan speak. This was clearly a special honour as he was the only non-Ismaili there.

Afterwards, his friends who had helped him with the project asked, “What have they got inside?”

“I’m not supposed to reveal that. If you think they have all kinds of funny things, that is not so. They pray like us, they have prayer areas and places for prominent people. We have pulpit in the mosque, pulpit in the church; we are not so different. So what are you people worried about?”

Habib Keshavjee was very proud; his trust in Omarjee had been vindicated. To show his appreciation, Omarjee and the friends who had helped him were allowed free entry to the Empire Theatre on Saturday nights.

Omarjee continued his display work at both the Royal and the Empire. Then, in the mid-1940s, when the Chetty Brothers opened a cinema, the *Orient Picture Palace*, Omarjee’s work took a new turn. Through Aroo, his school friend and one of the four Chetty brothers, Omarjee gained access to all behind-the-scenes operations in the cinema and got to know all the Chettys very well. He was considered part of the family and lunched with them on Sundays. “One wonderful thing I notice about Tamil ladies; they don’t sit at the table. They walk around and see that you eat and they feed you saying, ‘Take this, take that.’ They don’t wait for you to reach out. This was something new to me because at our place, the dishes were there and we had to help ourselves.”

The Chettys, who were in competition with the Keshavjees, began upgrading their bioscope, and as they started changing machines, Omarjee found himself in a tremendous learning situation. With his natural aptitude for electrical engineering, simply by watching the white technicians at work, he learned how to install and run the equipment in the projection room. “That was my real schooling.” It was not long before he became sound engineer, then mechanical engineer at the Orient. This was not paid employment; he worked for the love of it. He made his living from his radio and electrical shop that was across the street from the bioscope.

When engineers from Johannesburg put in a cinemascope screen at the Empire Bioscope, Omarjee was there to watch them as they set up a huge metal structure with a curved screen. When Omarjee told Aroo of the innovations at the rival cinema and found that the Chettys didn’t have the funds to make the change, he

²² Interview, Omarjee Suliman, 2001

came up with a plan. Instead of metal structures, he would use wooden frames. As the screen had to be curved, the frames at the top and bottom would have to be built on a curve. He worked out the degree of the curvature with the aid of Mr Jack Tutt, an engineer from Johannesburg, built the frames and attached the screen to them. Amazed at Omarjee's ingenuity, Tutt exclaimed, "Man, this is fabulous. You have cut thousands of pounds off the cost with this simple thing and it's doing the work."

But the same screen had to serve standard-sized pictures as well as wide screen films. The resourceful Omarjee was not daunted. "I got an idea from radio screens. Some had long pointers, from top to bottom. When you turn the pointers, they move in parallel. So I turned them and watched the pulleys. While one pulled, the next released and so on. I did exactly the same."

Sometimes Omarjee felt uncertain, afraid that he would fail and cause damage. Vella Chetty, taking a pinch of snuff, would say, "Don't worry. If it gets damaged, we'll get some white man to come and help us. You go ahead; you do it." This touched him deeply. "Your own flesh and blood wouldn't do it. They'll say, 'Hey, you'll break this thing. Don't do this.'" Vella's wholehearted support and encouragement inspired young Omarjee, "and I made the screen for cinemascope, for conventional films, for Cinerama, for different gauges of pictures. The screen still stands there today. God Bless Chetty Brothers! Mr Vella was my moving force. He was the handyman of the Chetty brothers. The others were mostly in business administration and so on. Mr Vella was the one with the rolled-up sleeves, hammer and nails, always."²³ When new machines came to the Orient, Omarjee, working with a Coloured assistant, transformed all the electrical installations.

Omarjee, who had become the local electrical engineering expert, was soon drawn into domestic and industrial applications as well. When people in the location began to call on him to take care of problems in their homes, his career took a new direction that led to formal qualifications in three-phase installations. And jobs began to roll in. He worked on domestic appliances, dry cleaning equipment, installations in old-age homes in Eersterus and the *achaar* factory of Abramjee, of the House of Delegates.

When Mr Motla, who owned a cinema in Lady Selbourne and operated the first African-owned bus service in South Africa, hired his services, he set Omarjee on yet another path. One day, Mr Israel, Motla's manager, came to the Asiatic Bazaar looking for someone who could fix the projection equipment at the cinema. Mr Israel approached the Chettys who pointed out Omarjee's shop opposite the cinema. Soon afterwards, Omarjee found himself on his way to Lady Selborne with Mr Israel. At the cinema, he got right to work, fixed the machines and set them up for a showing that night. When he discovered that the bioscope had

²³ Interview, Omarjee Suliman, 2001

been closed for at least two weeks, he asked for old posters, paint and a truck. He painted announcements on the backs of the posters, attached them to boards and set them on the truck with a record player, amplifier and microphone. A couple of Mr Motla's men drove the truck, now an advert-mobile, around Lady Selborne to inform people that the bioscope would be open that night.

Mr. Motla had no idea that all this was going on.

The next day, Mr Israel was back in the Asiatic Bazaar looking for Omarjee. He brought a message that Mr Motla wanted to see him. On arriving at Mr Motla's office at the bus depot, Omarjee found himself at a reception. They had prepared tea and cakes in gratitude for his efforts of the previous day. Mr Motla then offered Omarjee the position of technical manager at his cinema and from 1947, Omarjee took care of the equipment at the cinema in Lady Selborne. And he proudly declares, "I was the first Indian in Pretoria to work for an African businessman."

His work for Mr Motla marked the beginning of Omarjee's ventures into the townships. Soon afterwards, he opened up his own cinemas in Highlands and



Eersterus where he hired halls and showed films. With the help of his wife's nephews, he kept all his cinemas running simultaneously. Through his film shows, Omarjee became involved in the social life of the various communities. He helped people needing lifts to hospitals or clinics because he was usually the only person there with transport and he also attended School Sports Days, weddings, funerals and other community functions. Omarjee was happy and at peace with himself because for him time is simply a space in which to be creative and help others.

During the sixties and seventies, when practically everyone in the country was under suspicion and normal everyday activities came under the scrutiny of the Security Police, Omarjee, with his forays into townships and his constant tinkering with odd materials in his workshop, attracted the attention of the Special Branch. One day a car with TJ (Johannesburg) number plates pulled up outside the shop. Two white men in long coats stepped in, questioned him about his work and inspected the premises. One said, "You are not supposed to be working on these things. It is dangerous. We are coming back tomorrow. Pack everything into a box. When we come, we are going to seal it up."

*Omarjee in
the shop in
Marabastad
2002*



Omarjee scrupulously packed everything in a Mazawattee Tea box ready for the Special Branch men, who returned the next day, secured the box with wire and put a metal tag on it. "If you tamper with this, you will receive a five-year prison sentence." Omarjee promised not to touch it. They left and the box remained intact for a whole year. Eventually, one of Omarjee's brothers-in-law decided to take up the matter. He approached the Post Master who advised Omarjee to apply for a radio-repair licence. When he got it, he opened up the box and continued working again.

Omarjee, a totally law-abiding person who did not challenge unjust laws, was to have two more encounters with the security police. His involvement in helping destitute Malawians in South Africa find food and shelter aroused the suspicions of the Security Police who believed that Omarjee was bringing political insurgents in and out of the country. So they kept a watchful eye on him.

Then a little holiday in Durban almost landed him in prison.

Mr Tootla, a friend who owned City Motors in Durban, invited Omarjee to stay at his beautiful house in its scenic setting on the Bluff. Coming from the location with its tin shanties, Omarjee was amazed to find an Indian living in such luxury. Though he knew he could not match the hospitality he was enjoying at the Tootla home, protocol required some form of reciprocation as an expression of his gratitude. So when he was leaving, he invited Tootla's son to spend the holidays in the location. Also in accordance with protocol, the son, who was studying for the entrance examination to medical school, agreed to consider the invitation. He would let Omarjee know once he had completed his exams. After receiving his results, the young man sent Omarjee a telegram that read, "Crossed the border successfully. I'm now holidaying in one of the coastal towns."

The telegram immediately brought the Security Police to Omarjee's door but Omarjee was not home when they arrived. That evening his distraught family showed him the telegram and wanted to know whom he had helped across the border. They told him he was to report the next day to the COMPOL Building, Pretoria headquarters of the Security Police. When Omarjee read the telegram, he was quite annoyed with Tootla's son for sending this frivolous message in such times. On the following day, Omarjee presented himself to an officer at the COMPOL Building, who asked him into his office and then, ominously, closed all the doors. After waving Omarjee to a chair, the officer began his interrogation with a threat, "I know where you were born. I know when you came to this country. I know who you are. I know what you are doing. So answer my questions truthfully. Don't lie to me. If you don't cooperate, we are going to deport you to India. Now tell me about your work."

After a few questions about his business and family circumstances, the official waved the telegram in front of Omarjee. "Whom did you help across the border?" Omarjee burst out laughing. "Do you think this is a joke?"

"No sir. I am laughing because this telegram is just a schoolboy prank."

"What do you mean 'prank'? This telegram came through the Post Office."

"Yes, but it's not meant seriously. The boy simply means that he passed his examinations. That's what 'successfully crossed the border' means."

"You Indians don't joke like this. Stop lying to me."

"But you can check it out. The boy's father owns City Motors in Durban and he will verify what I have said."

After a few more questions, the officer said, "Look, Suliman, we have an inquiry going on in Durban. If the people there corroborate what you have told me, then we will consider the matter closed. If there is any discrepancy, you will hear from us."

When the people from Durban confirmed Omarjee's explanation, the matter was dropped. However, when relatives from Zambia came to visit, Omarjee was called in a second time, again on the suspicion that he was helping people infiltrate the country. As before, the Security Police discovered that their suspicions were unfounded. But the surveillance continued.

These little confrontations with the Security Police, though annoying, had little effect on his activities. The *Group Areas Act*, however, which restricted entry into African and Coloured townships, put an end to his bioscope shows. But Omarjee wasn't stumped. If Muhammad can't come to the mountain, then the mountain must come to Muhammad. Omarjee turned his business at the Oriental Plaza in Marabastad into a workshop. The walls of his shop are lined with film projectors, 16-millimetre along one wall, 35-millimetre along another. Stacked on shelves next to these are cases containing 16 and 35-millimetre films. To this little film Mecca, come many budding entrepreneurs from the townships to receive training in operating projectors and showing films. They buy equipment from the shop, go into the townships and informal settlements, find suitable venues and open their own little bioscopes.

Thus they spread the cinema legacy of Omarjee Ahmed Suliman, a Kanamia boy who always did things differently. From his shop in the Oriental Plaza in Marabastad where he sits at his bench in the repair room upstairs, putting in a full day's work, he is still reaching out into the townships.



‘THE KHOJAS’

A Vanished Community

70 000 pairs of eyes, mesmerised by the hand on the large round dial of an enormous weighing scale, watched as it inched its way up and up. On this sunny morning, the flash of diamonds – thousands of diamonds – in small hermetically sealed glass containers, tantalised the huge gathering seated around the high platform erected in the middle of grounds that had been converted into “Diamondabad” in the city of Dar-es-Salaam.

The first boxes of diamonds were placed on the scales by those who had contributed the highest amounts... Following this there were presentations by school children, bearing banners from all the African territories, including East African territories, Madagascar and South Africa.²⁴

The crowd watched spellbound as container after container put on the scale shook the hand and forced it upwards. Some craned their necks, others squinted, and all focused on the dial, willing more and more diamonds onto the scale as the hand moved clockwise, very slowly towards its target – the weight of the regal person seated at the end of the platform, serenely awaiting the outcome. His weight in diamonds would represent a fortune and the weighing-in was a sumptuous display of wealth, power and charity in one spectacular event.

Ismailis from all parts of the world sat tense with suppressed excitement. Finally the weight on the scale matched the weight of the man and a tremendous cheer broke from their lips in praise of their leader on the platform, His Highness, Sultan Mohammed Shah Aga Khan. He had succeeded to the Imamate at the age of eight in 1886 and they were celebrating his sixtieth anniversary as Imam.

²⁴ H.B. Keshavjee, *The Aga Khan in Africa*, p.192

The Aga Khan, moved by this presentation, explained how the gift would be used.

“As everyone is well aware, the value of these diamonds has been unconditionally presented to me on this occasion. I do not wish to take this money for myself but to use it for any object that I think is best for my spiritual children. After long reflection, I have come to the conclusion that the very best use that I can make of it is that after expenses of these celebrations, in the wider sense of the word, have been paid for, then the whole of the residue must be given as an absolute gift to the Diamond Jubilee Investment Trust.”²⁵

He told them that the Diamond Jubilee Investment Trust had been created to build up:

“a totally new financial outlook among the Ismailis. Co-operative Societies, Corporations, and, I hope and believe very soon, Building Societies, too, will draw from the Investment Trust sums equal to their capital but at a level of three per cent. And they are not allowed to charge more than six per cent under any conditions from their borrowers.”²⁶

With this internal banking system, the Aga Khan was setting up the means to ensure financial security for all his people. Stirred by his wisdom and his concern to preserve the *ummah*, his followers there in Dar-es-Salaam felt reaffirmed in their faith and in their leader. Just being in the presence of His Highness was an honour that each individual would cherish forever.

After the weighing-in, the Aga Khan joined his family on the dais where the ceremony continued with speeches and special acknowledgment of the outstanding work of individual Ismailis in the fields of health, education and economic development in various communities throughout the world. Among the Ismailis being awarded special titles of authority were two from the Asiatic Bazaar in Pretoria – Allijah Velshi Keshavjee and his son, Allibhai V. Keshavjee who became Vazier and received a diamond ring and gold medal.

When all the awards had been presented, a voice on the loudspeaker cut through the jubilation with an unexpected announcement. A very unusual announcement! The Master of Ceremonies read out the names of two people and asked them to come up to the dais. The couple concerned were shocked to hear their names called out before a crowd of 80 000. They were just ordinary people and being

²⁵ Ibid. p. 194

²⁶ Ibid. p.194

requested to come forward into the presence of the Aga Khan and his family – his son, Prince Ally Khan, and his grandsons, Karim and Aryn – was overwhelming. For a moment the couple stood frozen. On being urged forward by their relatives, they made their way to the dais. Hardly aware of what they were doing, they mounted the platform and unsteadily approached their Imam.

When they were beside the Aga Khan nervously mumbling the characteristic Ismaili greeting *Ya Ali Madahd* (with the blessings of Ali), chairs were brought, and they were seated. The Aga Khan then introduced Habib Chagan and Miriam Dearman, a couple from the Asiatic Bazaar, to the whole gathering. The Aga Khan had singled them out from the huge crowd for a special reason. Habib and Miriam with their four children lived as a family even though their union had not been consecrated. Because Miriam was Coloured, the local Ismaili Council in Pretoria, believing it could not admit her into the community without authority from the Supreme Council in Nairobi, had not allowed a Muslim wedding ceremony. Miriam was not taken into the Ismaili fold and she and her children had been left in limbo for ten years. Such inconsiderate treatment, was disturbing and a cause for concern.



The Aga Khan, who had made a grand tour of Ismaili communities in Africa the year before, 1945, had stopped in Pretoria and spent several days with the Ismailis in the Asiatic Bazaar. He had visited the Jamatkhana on Boom Street, which had been specially decorated for his visit. He had walked along Boom Street, taking note of the social, educational and economic enterprises of the Ismaili community. Hundreds of people from the Cape Location, the Asiatic Bazaar and Marabastad, regardless of religious affiliation and race had lined the streets to catch a glimpse of him. The Pretoria City Council, waiving race restrictions, had permitted the Ismailis to hold a huge banquet for him in the City Hall with Jan Hofmeyr and General Jan Smuts present among the dignitaries.

Even Habib Chagan, looking very handsome in his tuxedo, had attended.

Miriam, not accepted as an Ismaili, had not accompanied him and the matter of their marriage had not been brought to the Imam's attention during his visit. Born an Anglican, Miriam had converted when she married and though she had not been accepted, she wanted her children to take their rightful places in the community and had asked her sisters-in-law to instruct them in Ismaili beliefs, customs and traditions. When Miriam heard that the city of Dar-es-Salaam had been chosen for the Aga Khan's Diamond Jubilee celebration, she convinced Habib that they should go to Tanganyika to put their case before their Imam. Habib approached Mr Hasan Naran Keshavjee, a member of the Pretoria Ismaili Council and found him very sympathetic. He agreed to speak to the Imam at the Diamond Jubilee celebrations and that is how the Aga Khan came to hear of their plight. As their treatment went against Ismaili teachings, reparation had to be made for their humiliation and frustration.

And His Highness, the Aga Khan took action. Right there in front of his followers from all over the world, he wiped out the injustice suffered by Habib and Miriam with one spontaneous and magnanimous gesture. He married them on the spot, on that dais in Dar-es-Salaam with members of the royal family in close attendance. The wedding that had been denied

*The Aga Khan
walking down
Boom Street in
Marabastad,
1945*



them in their own tiny community became an international event in front of 80 000 Ismailis. After he had pronounced them husband and wife, the Aga Khan performed chato (a ceremony similar to baptism). He gave Miriam a new name; she was to be called Amina after the Imam's own wife. Her youngest son, Edward, who was with them, was renamed Amyn after the Imam's younger grandson. The three children left behind in Pretoria, were also renamed. Sylvia, the eldest, would be called Layla, her sister would retain the name Miriam and their brother would be called Karim, after the Aga Khan's older grandson, who was destined to succeed his grandfather in 1957.

Telegrams were immediately dispatched to Pretoria instructing the local Ismaili Council to go to Habib's home, take the two daughters and the son to the Jamatkhana in Boom Street and perform chato. On that very day, Habib, Miriam and their children, by the grace of the Aga Khan, were immediately accepted as full members of the Ismaili community. According to Miriam's daughter, when the Aga Khan married Habib and Miriam, he said to his followers, "Let this be a lesson to you. You must go and look for my Ismaili children."²⁷ It was a warning to guard against prejudice. Miriam and Habib's wedding took place just two years before the Nationalist Government came into power in South Africa. Among the first

laws passed by this new government were the *Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act* (1949) and *The Immorality Amendment Act* (1950).

Miriam and Habib moved through all the proceedings at the Durbar in an almost comatose state. The clearest impression that Miriam retained of her wedding and chato was that of the Aga Khan's grandsons, completely absorbed in their own little world, tickling each other and giggling throughout. The Aga Khan, who wanted to speak more with Miriam, invited her and Habib to a reception in his bungalow later that evening. But Dar-es-Salaam in 1946 was not a highly developed city. The streets were not paved, and after the celebration that day, it rained hard and the roads were muddy so they could not go. They would have had to walk and would not have been presentable.

Amina Chagan
(formerly Miriam
Dearman)



²⁷ Interview, Miriam Moosa, p. 2001

Although it all turned out to be such a brilliant triumph for Miriam and Habib, they had almost not made it to East Africa. Getting to Dar-es-Salaam had been a nightmarish experience. Miriam and Habib with Edward, their youngest, Habib's father and one or two of his sisters and brothers had obtained passports and set off for Lourenço Marques where they would board the boat, *The Kandala*. When they embarked, though they were on a very old vessel, they had no qualms about their trip. Once the journey was underway, however, the boat buffeted by the rough seas



Jivan Keshavjee
Pioneer
of the Ismailis
in Marabastad

made them very seasick and they vomited copiously and ate nothing. When the boat began to list dangerously and their luggage went flying all over the deck, they prayed that they would survive. For at least two hours they travelled in a vessel that was sharply tilted to one side.

Meanwhile, having heard that a boat bound for Dar-es-Salaam had gone down with all its passengers, the children back home were crazy with anxiety. They tried desperately to get information from people in Lourenço Marques, from the authorities, from relatives. Eventually, their parents got through to them, reassured them that they had arrived safely and had settled into the old refugee camp set aside for the South African contingent. Their accommodation was in large halls with many beds, like general wards in hospitals. They had communal showers and toilets and the use of a kitchen. Since large pots of food were brought to them for every meal, they had no real need of the kitchen. They were very comfortably settled.

Their return journey to Lourenço Marques would have been trouble-free but Miriam had contracted malaria while in Dar-es-Salaam and was quite sick on the boat. In Lourenço Marques, she saw a doctor who prescribed quinine; she recovered temporarily but suffered a relapse some time after her return to Pretoria. On the day they arrived in the Asiatic Bazaar, however, they were heartily welcomed by the family. Miriam's mother-in-law took off her gold bangles and gave them to her daughter-in-law, a traditional gesture signifying that she was now officially a part of the family.

*Velshi Keshavjee
with HH Aga
Khan, 1945*



And Miriam, now Amina, became an accepted member of the Ismaili community in the Asiatic Bazaar. She was offered a post at the crèche and the clinic that Habib

and Sherbanoo Keshavjee, son and daughter of Velshi Keshavjee, had started at the Jamatkhana. Her dedication and commitment to her work, the children and the community won her great respect, and when Karim Khan, the new Aga Khan who had succeeded his grandfather, Sultan Mohamed Shah, came to visit the Asiatic Bazaar in 1957, members of the Pretoria Ismaili Council were very proud to introduce her to him. They recalled to him her

wedding in Dar-es-Salaam at which he, still a little boy, had been present. They also informed him that Amina's daughter, Layla, had achieved the distinction of being the first female in the Ismaili community, and one of the first women in the Asiatic Bazaar, to qualify as a teacher.

In 1995, Amina received further recognition for her services to the Ismaili community. The Pretoria Ismaili Council recommended her for Didar (conference) that was being organised by the Ismaili Council of the United Kingdom in London. She was very surprised and honoured. When she received a ticket and found that travel and accommodation arrangements had been made for her, she felt even more privileged. But a greater honour was in store for her. In London, she discovered that she had been granted an audience with the Aga Khan. This was beyond expectation – a second chance for a private conference with an Imam. She had missed the first opportunity with Sultan Mohammed Shah Aga Khan in 1946 but nothing stood in her way in 1995. She so cherished her interview with Karim Aga Khan that she never revealed any part of their discussion to any one, not even her family.

The community of Shia Muslims to which Miriam and Habib belonged was small but very enterprising. Its founder, Jivan Keshavjee, had arrived in Pretoria in 1894, about the time the Coolie Location was set aside for Indian occupation. He was from Chotila, a village near Rajput in India, where his family was engaged in commerce. He came to South Africa with a friend, Ganibhai Haji Cassim, who had relatives in the country. Jivan and Ganibhai worked in Port Elizabeth for a short while before they left for the Coolie Location in 1894.

In the next year, with the help of other Muslims already established in the area, Jivan started a business at 112 Prinsloo Street, *K.J. Keshavjee and Sons*, so named as he was known as “Khoja” Jivan Keshavjee. ‘Khoja’ means trader. His relatives who were not Keshavjees, entered the country as “Khojas,” adopted the designation as their surname and used it for their businesses. At some point, Jivan Keshavjee dropped the term and when his brothers, Velshi, Manjee and Naran, arrived in Pretoria, they came in as Keshavjees.

In 1903, in an attempt to confine Indian trade to the location, the Coolie Location was given bazaar status and became the Asiatic Bazaar. This meant that Indians could own property, establish businesses and build places of worship. So the Keshavjees, Jivan and his brothers, acquired a number of stands on which they built their homes and shops. They had businesses on almost every corner of Bloed Street. Jivan Keshavjee's shop was on the corner of Fifth and Bloed Streets; Manjee had a shop on the corner of Jerusalem and Bloed. On the corner of Fourth and

Bloed was *KK Khoja and Company* and there was another shop on the corner of Bloed and Sixth. Velshi had a shop at the corner of Grand and Sixth Streets. Other Ismailis, relatives of the Keshavjees, MA Khoja and HK Khoja, also owned general dealerships along Bloed Street and in other places in the location. The Ismailis were hardworking and successful businessmen, and the location, as tiny as it was, was a fortuitous place to have a shop. It consisted of a grid of a dozen streets that housed about twenty thousand people. So business boomed.

By 1920, the Keshavjees, having established flourishing general dealerships, began to diversify and expand their interests. Velshi Keshavjee acquired the *ABC Bakery*, a tiny business in a tin shanty that made deliveries by horse and cart. He bought out the owner, a Chinese man who had gone bankrupt, modernised the bakery and put in the latest equipment and machinery. Under Rajabali, Velshi's eldest son, it became the eleventh most advanced bakery in the country. Rajabali was an enterprising businessman and a progressive thinker. As a young boy, he had lived at Tolstoy Farm, the satyagrahi settlement that Mahatma Gandhi had established in 1910 at Lawley on the outskirts of Johannesburg. So he was interested in the political movements of the time and in social upliftment and supported the work of the Indian Congresses.

His large, spacious house behind the bakery became a guesthouse for many prominent political figures. As there was no hotel accommodation for people of colour in the area at that time, when the Kajees (A.I. Kaje was chairman of the Natal Indian Congress in the 1940s) came to Pretoria, they went straight to Rajabali's home at the bakery. In 1952, Rahemtullah, Rajabali's son, took part in the Defiance Campaign and marched to Germiston Location in Patrick Duncan's batch, which also included Mrs Thayanayagie Pillay. His involvement in politics brought people like Ahmed Kathrada and Walter Sisulu to the bakery. Though their visits were very discreet, the police were aware of the activities at the bakery and raided it frequently.

But the Ismaili community, in general, did not become involved in political activities; it concentrated its efforts on business and building a sound economic base for social services. Among the most successful Ismailis, were the Keshavjees whose various branches comprised many enterprising individuals. In the Velshi Keshavjee family for instance, in addition to Velshi himself there were his sons, Rajabali and Habib, and his daughter Sherbanoo. They took on interests as diverse as the bakery business, the film industry, social work, education and the building of the Jamatkhana, the white mosque in Boom Street.

In the 1920s, when the Ismaili community was ready for a new mosque, Velshi Keshavjee, made that his special project and headed up a committee that undertook

²⁸ Omarjee Suliman, Chapter 8

to replace the little tin shanty set up as a mosque by Velshi's pioneer brother, Jivan, with a magnificent jamatkhana. The committee commissioned an architect who drew up plans for a fine building with interior décor of wood panelling and plush carpeting. When work on the building in Boom Street was completed in 1928, the Asiatic Bazaar had a new landmark – a beautiful white mosque, the Jamatkhana. A black plaque proudly displays the legend that Velshi Keshavjee laid the foundation



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stone. As fate would have it, Velshi Keshavjee died in an accident right at the doors of the mosque in 1954. He was crossing the road when a Putco bus hit him and dragged him to the gates of the Jamatkhana where he died. The Jamatkhana, the pride of the Ismaili Muslim community in the location, became renowned among Ismailis throughout Africa. It still stands on the corner of Boom and Fifth Streets and is now a national monument.

During their time in the location, Velshi's son, Habib, and his daughter, Sherbanoo, a social worker, turned the Jamatkhana into a community centre. Habib helped Sherbanoo establish a clinic on the premises with visiting doctors who came in on a regular basis and more frequently when there were epidemics of one sort or another. In 1944, their aunt, Mrs Manjee Keshavjee, donated a plot of land behind the mosque for a crèche and enabled Sherbanoo and Habib to start the first nursery school in the location. Habib recruited Glennie Tomlinson, a teacher from Cape Town, and went from door to door to encourage people to send their children to the crèche. The response was good and they employed several teachers for whom they provided training in Montessori methods. Habib was also something of a dietician and insisted on healthy nutrition at the school.

In 1949, after donating a plot of land on Barber Street for a madressa, Habib recruited Mowlana Sadruddin Khimani and his wife, Malek, from Pakistan, to induct Ismaili children into the Shia understanding of Islam. The Jamatkhana, with the madressa on Barber Street, became the hub of Ismaili community life. It was a multipurpose community centre, with its clinic, nursery school, madressa, a Council Room downstairs and a prayer area upstairs. With the exception of the prayer area, which was restricted exclusively to Ismailis, the venues at the Jamatkhana were open to all.

Habib's involvement at the mosque consumed only a small part of his energies. His main interest was in the cinema business. In the 1920s, the Keshavjee brothers, Jivan, Velshi, Manjee and Naran, originally part of the firm of Keshavjee & Co. split up, formed separate companies and went into independent ventures. Some branches of the clan acquired sites that had been used for showing films, such as the Bombay Star Bioscope and the Nav Jivan. The new owners, of these venues, converted the Bombay Star into a shirt factory and sold the Nav Jivan. They left the development of cinemas to Habib and his uncles KK Khoja and Goolam Manjee Keshavjee. Habib had been running film shows for African audiences at the Dougall Hall from about 1926. When, in 1928, his uncles built the Royal Theatre on Grand Street that was the start of a rivalry that gave rise to a thriving cinema industry in the location. Bioscopes were a lucrative venture for the Keshavjees

because the entertainment business provided a world of make-believe that allowed people to escape the squalor of their surroundings. In Marabastad, there was a large population hungry for escapist fare. So stars like the young Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney, Frank Sinatra, Betty Grable, Nelson Eddy and Jeanette McDonald, Tyrone Power, Boris Karloff and Johnny Weismuller became icons in the locations.

At the Royal, KK Khoja and Goolam Manjee showed Warner Brothers movies. In order to outdo them, when Habib acquired the Empire Theatre around 1933, he obtained contracts with MGM, United Artists and Twentieth Century Fox. As a showman, he did everything he could to bring people into the Empire. He kept abreast of technological developments and ensured that his theatre offered the highest quality entertainment. He employed an African pianist to provide background music during the silent film era, and in the forties, he commissioned Omarjee Suliman²⁸, a young man with a passionate interest in film technology, to create special exhibits using animation. So there were flamboyant displays at the Empire to advertise new features such as *David and Beersheba*, *Samson and Delilah* and *Mighty Joe Young*.

Habib also used the cinema to promote local talent. In 1947, Miriam Makeba performed at the Empire for five pounds a show. Other African artists who appeared there were the Manhattan Brothers and the cast of the film, *The Magic Queen*, starring Dolly Rathebe. Habib devised a promotion campaign for the film with photo sessions that took the stars to various venues and landmarks such as the Union Buildings.

At Easter, the bioscope was crowded mainly with African people. They came from Marabastad, Bantule, Lady Selborne, Newclare and locations all over Pretoria, to continuous showings of *The Life of Christ*. These performances, which began early in the morning and finished late at night, were always sold out.

In 1949, when Canada Lee and the young Sydney Poitier, stars of the film, *Cry the Beloved Country*, were on location in South Africa, Habib invited them to the Empire. From the stage of the bioscope, they encouraged the mostly African audience not to give up hope for freedom.

Though there were restrictions regarding the admission of African people to the bioscopes, cinema owners ignored them. With the coming of apartheid, however, the authorities began to fine cinema owners for admitting African people to “violent” films, American gangster movies and such like. People like Habib could see the writing on the wall and believed that their progress would be stunted under apartheid. Soon after the Nationalist government came into power in 1948,

His Highness, Sultan Mohammed Shah Aga Khan, the Ismaili Imam, called on his followers in South Africa to leave the country. As they saw no hope of a viable future in South Africa, the Keshavjees sold their cinemas to the Chetty brothers, the emerging cinema moghuls, and emigrated.

Habib, like his pioneer Uncle Jivan, was a charismatic figure. When he left in 1952, he drew people to Kenya in the same way that Jivan had drawn people from India to the Asiatic Bazaar. Almost everyone followed. Ten years later there was no longer an Ismaili Muslim community in Pretoria. A few individuals remained but the majority had made their way to other parts of the world.

The 'Khojas,' as the Ismaili Muslims were called in the location, had always been something of a mystery to other Indians, who imagined that Ismailis practised peculiar rites. Absurd rumours spread amongst them. Some Hindus, believing that Ismaili Muslims were confused about their religion, assumed that their prayers were borrowed from Hindu texts. This confusion arose from several factors. One was the similarity between Hindu and Ismaili names. Many Ismailis in the Asiatic Bazaar were Gujaratis from Kathiawar in India. Their ancestors had been Hindus. When they became Muslims, their names were adapted to reflect their new faith. So Keshav became Keshavjee, Madhav became Madhavjee, Chagan is both a Hindu and an Ismaili surname and first names like Naran and Jivan are common to both Hindus and Ismailis. As Ismaili Muslims also retained some old cultural traditions from India, non-Ismailis were perplexed and thought the "Khojas" didn't know what they were about. Such confusion arises from the fact that outsiders do not easily understand Ismailism, which is an "esoteric interpretation of Islam that emphasizes the spirit and is akin to Sufism."²⁸ According to Karen Armstrong, who gives an account of Ismailism in her book *A History of God*:

*Their (the Shiis') piety was too abstruse for most Muslims, who regarded this incarnational idea (the Imam) as blasphemous, so Shiis were usually found among the more aristocratic classes and the intellectuals. Since the Iranian revolution, we have tended in the West to depict Shiism as an inherently fundamentalist sect but that is an inaccurate assessment. Shiism became a sophisticated tradition.*²⁹

But it remains a minority tradition. The majority of Muslims in the world are Sunni Muslims (Sunni from Sunnah meaning 'practice as prescribed by The Prophet'). About ten per cent of Muslims are Shia Muslims and Ismailis are a minority of this minority. Sunnis believe Muhammad was the last Prophet to appear on earth and that no one succeeded him. But according to Shia Muslims, the Prophet decreed that there always be a spiritual guide (Imam) for Muslims and those appointed

²⁸ Mohammed Keshavjee

²⁹ Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*; New York: Ballantine Books, p. 163

to take over leadership after the Prophet's death, fulfilled this function. Sunnis, however, believe that these Caliphs were administrators rather than spiritual leaders and their function was to preserve and protect the *ummah* and the principles and practices of Islam. For Sunnis, there can be no spiritual leader after Muhammad; the Qur'an and the sunnah provide all the spiritual guidance needed by a Muslim

Consequently, some Sunni Muslims in the location could not accept the Ismailis as true Muslims because of their allegiance to the Aga Khan. These Sunnis believed that the Ismailis worshipped the Aga Khan and regarded him as divine. It is true that Ismailis revere the Aga Khan, who holds a special place in their beliefs and in their hearts, but he is not regarded as divine. According to Karen Armstrong:

The veneration of the Imams was no mere political enthusiasm, however. As we have seen, Shiis had come to believe that their Imams embodied God's presence on earth in some mysterious way. They had evolved an esoteric piety of their own which depended upon a symbolic reading of the Koran. It was held that Muhammad had imparted a secret knowledge to his cousin and son-in-law Ali ibn Ali Talib and that this ilm³⁰ had been passed down the line of designated Imams, who were his direct descendants. Each of the Imams embodied the "Light of Muhammad" (al-nur-al-Muhammad), the prophetic spirit which had enabled Muhammad to surrender perfectly to God. Neither the Prophet nor the Imams were divine, but they had been so totally open to God that he could be said to dwell within them in a more complete way than he dwelt in more ordinary mortals.³¹

Shia Muslims believe that "after the Prophet's death, Hazrat Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, became the first Imam – the spiritual leader – of the Muslim community, and that this leadership (known as Imamate) continues thereafter by heredity through Ali and his wife Fatima, the Prophet's daughter. Succession to the Imamate, according to Shia doctrine and tradition is by way of nass (designation), it being the absolute prerogative of the Imam of the time to appoint his successor."³² The term Shia derives from Shi'at Ali (party of Ali) and Imams, being descendants of the Prophet, combine both a temporal and spiritual power.

A principle function of the Imam is to enable believers to go beyond the apparent or outward form of the revelation in search of spirituality and intellect. A believer who sincerely submits to the Imam's guidance may potentially attain the knowledge of self. The tradition attributed

³⁰ ilm = true knowledge of God

³¹ Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*; New York: Ballantine Books, p. 177

³² Mohammed Keshavjee

to both the Prophet and Imam Ali: “He who knows himself, knows his Lord”, conveys the essence of this relationship between the Imam and his follower. The Shia thus place obedience to the Imams after that to God and the Prophet by virtue of the command in the Quran for Muslims to obey those vested with authority.³³

*The Ismaili
Jamatkhana, the
white mosque
on Boom Street,
Marabastad*

Hasrat Ali, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet was the first Imam and his son, Hussain, grandson of the Prophet and martyr of Karbala, was the second.



³³ The Ismaili Imam, p 3

Unanimous Shia acceptance of the dynasty continues to the fifth Imam, Jafar as-Sadiq. Then there is a split. Jafar as-Sadiq had two sons. His eldest son, Ismail, died before he did and his second son, Musa al-Kazim, claimed the title of Imam. But those who felt that Ismail, designated Imam before he died, was the true Imam, became his followers and are known as Ismailis. The other, larger group of Shia Muslims, recognising Musa al-Kazim as Imam, became known as the Ithna asharis (the Twelver Shia) as the line of descent ended with their twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi. 'A messianic strain appeared among the Twelvers, who believed that the Twelfth or Hidden Imam would return to inaugurate a golden age.'³⁴ The majority of Iranians belong to this Shia denomination. For Ismailis, however, there is an unbroken line of descent from Ali, through Jafar as-Sadiq and Ismail to the present Aga Khan, HH Karim Khan. He is the acknowledged spiritual guide of Ismailis all over the world.

*An honest believer accepts the norms and ethics of the faith which guide his quest, recognises his own inner capacities and knows that when in doubt he should seek the guidance of the one vested with authority who, in Shia tradition, is the Alid Imam of the time from the Prophet's progeny.*³⁵

In the time of the Islamic Empire, Jewish and Muslim scholars involved in profound philosophical inquiries into the nature of God, had amongst them many Shii scholars who were a powerful influence in developing new understandings and interpretations of the divine. According to Karen Armstrong, they exerted a powerful influence on the Islamic world in the tenth century.

*Although they remained a minority form of Islam, the tenth century is known as the Shii century since Shiis managed to establish themselves in leading political posts throughout the empire. The most powerful of these Shii ventures was the establishment of a caliphate in Tunis in 909 in opposition to the Sunni caliphate in Baghdad... Their North African caliphate became extremely powerful: in 973 they moved their capital to al-Qahirah, the site of modern Cairo, where they built the great mosque of al-Azhar.*³⁶

When the Ismailis left Marabastad, Pretoria lost the contributions that fine minds make to enhance a society. Had the "Khojas" remained in the Asiatic Bazaar, however, many avenues of development would have been closed to them. In other countries they had the freedom to fulfil their potential. In Canada and the United Kingdom, they embarked on careers that carried the most gifted – among them the

³⁴ A History of God, p 163

³⁵ The Ismaili Imam, p 3

³⁶ A History of God, p 176

descendants of Velshi Keshavjee – to the top of their professions. In 1987, Murad Keshavjee, Velshi Keshavjee's grandson, who became a member of the Ontario Liberal Government of David Peterson, was deputy whip of the Liberal Party, Chair of the Committee of the Ombudsman and Parliamentary Assistant to the Ministry of Citizenship. Shafique Keshavjee, Sherbanoo Velshi Keshavjee's grandson, is the leading heart-and-lung thoracic surgeon in Canada and director of the Toronto Lung-Transplant Programme.

The successes of Ismailis, even in diaspora, are clearly attributable to the cohesiveness of their community, a unity fostered through religious beliefs and the spiritual guidance of the Imam.

The essence of Shi'ism lies in the desire to search for the true meaning of the revelation in order to understand the purpose of human existence and its destiny. This true, spiritual meaning can never be fettered by the bounds of time, place or the letter of its form. It is to be comprehended through the guidance of the Imam of the time, who is the inheritor of the Prophet's authority, and the trustee of his legacy.³⁷

³⁷ The Ismaili Imam, p.4



CHAPTER TEN

JERAM AND JAYDEVI

Seeking the Beloved

JAYDEVI JOSHI

When Jaydevi, looking out of the schoolroom window, saw her father coming through the school gate, she grabbed her bag and, ignoring her teacher's attempts to restrain her, ran out of the classroom and into her father's arms. She would have to put up with her teacher's scolding the next day, but she

didn't care. She would do it again and again because her delight at seeing her father expressed not only her love for him but also her desire to escape from school. It wasn't that she hated school; she loved Gujarati School but English School was boring. The white teachers, who were not as good as the vernacular teachers, worked at a much lower level, especially in maths. Though she was a timid child, Jaydevi loved her father so dearly that she didn't care about breaking school rules.

She was, after all, from feisty stock.

Her grandfather, BR Joshi, had run away from home in India when he was only ten. Being from a Brahmin family, the caste



system, which did not allow him to do manual work, required him to go begging for food (bhiksha) from house to house. As he hated the tradition, Grandfather couldn't bring himself to follow it and, with a cousin, ran away from home and stowed away on a boat bound for South Africa. When the boys were discovered on board, they pleaded to be allowed to stay offering to pay their way doing odd jobs on the ship. But they were so young.

"You are under age. We can't let you travel by yourselves."

Grandfather would not be put off. "I know I look small but I'm actually sixteen," he insisted. With his blue eyes and white skin he didn't even look Indian. Even though he could not speak English, only Gujarati, he won over the captain and he and his cousin became dishwashers and cleaners and helped with the cooking in the galley.

When they landed in Lourenço Marques, they had to fend for themselves and somehow made a little money buying and selling goods. Eventually, they worked their way to Pretoria and ended up in the location. Here, Joshi found himself in a nurturing community that wouldn't let a young boy starve. While he continued to pursue his little trades, he taught himself English, which he learned to speak and write so fluently that he later became a teacher of English at the school in Cowie Street. As he had a natural bent for bookkeeping, small businesses began to employ him to do their books. When he began to make money, he started sending something home to India every month. By the time he was twenty, he was earning enough for visits to India. On his second visit, his family arranged a marriage for him but he could not bring his wife back to the Asiatic Bazaar, as he had no home to offer her. Back in South Africa, driven by the need for substantial and consistent earning in order to

*Mr and Mrs
Baboolal Joshi,
Baby Shirish and
Jaydevi*



provide for a wife and eventually a family, he did two things: he acquired property in Jerusalem and Moghul Streets and started an accounting firm which became a very successful enterprise. Eventually, as B.R. Joshi and Sons, it would provide financial services to many companies trading in Prinsloo Street and the Asiatic Bazaar. Joshi, who was becoming prosperous, built a suitable home in the location, brought his wife and children from India and supported them in fine style. When his sons were old enough, he made them partners in the business and they in turn were also able to provide very comfortably for their families. His son Baboolal, Jaydevi's father, built a big home and owned a car.

And Jaydevi was part of an extended family with a large number of children; one of her uncles had two boys and five girls, another two girls and three boys and her own family consisted of three boys and two girls. They were a gang of over a dozen cousins who played together, went to school together and devised fun activities together.

When they attended Mr Bhika Chiba's religious education classes on Boom Street, despite the seriousness of the subject, they sat there alert waiting for Pankaj, their most forward and forthright cousin, to liven things up. On one occasion, Mr Chiba explaining the Hindu reverence for the cow said, "We worship the cow because it is like a mother to us; it gives us milk."

"Why don't we worship the goat then? It also gives us milk." Pankaj was in his usual form and the other children were delighted. But at the end of the day, they were all disappointed when Pankaj declared that he would not attend any more of these classes as they did not make sense to him.

This huge band of Joshi cousins, who loved the movies, went to see all the latest features at the Royal, the Empire and the Orient: Hollywood musicals, horror films like *Werewolf* and *Dracula* and serials, like *The Adventures of Zorro*. As they loved Indian films best, they saw many more of them and they were the inspiration behind the shows that they put on in a little fenced off area in the "Greenies" – a park like spot along the Apies River. Jaydevi and her sister, who learnt all the Indian songs and dances, used the dry Apies canal for their practice sessions. With one or two of his cousins, Pankaj, who was fascinated by *Dracula*, depicted his gruesome excesses to the horror and delight of his audience. Children from the neighbourhood, who supported these ventures, paid an entrance fee of sixpence. The money collected was used to subsidise the shows.

On one occasion, Pankaj, whose ambition was to be a doctor, insisted on a doctor's white coat for a role he would play in their next show. When the others asked him to borrow a coat, he refused. Eventually, they reached a compromise when he offered to pay half the cost of a new coat. These concerts, which were great fun, continued for many years. When Jaydevi's family fell upon hard times,

they helped to supplement the family income.

That happened when Jaydevi was thirteen and her carefree childhood was brought to an abrupt halt. “Perhaps I would have grown up a spoilt brat and led a frivolous and superficial existence.” But she didn’t have that chance.

The prosperous Joshis, among the few families in the location with cars, could travel about the country for holidays and often went on trips to one or other of the seaside towns – Durban being their favourite destination. Jaydevi’s father, Baboolal, and uncle Praboolal, Pankaj’s father, organised these excursions and a convoy of two cars, stuffed with children and adults, would leave the little location to make its way into the big world beyond.

In 1959, they arranged to spend their holidays in Cape Town. Baboolal’s nephew, who had been studying in India, was back in the location and was to join them on their trip. This nephew, who had lost his mother when he was a baby and had been brought up in his family, was more like a son to Baboolal. He was a brilliant young man who was on his way to London to take up studies in law. He had stopped off in South Africa for a short break before heading north and was using this little holiday in the location learning to drive. Baboolal, his driving instructor, was very proud of the progress he was making. On the day before they were to set off for Cape Town, they went out for a lesson. They never returned. Both were killed in a car crash.

Jaydevi was devastated. Baboolal, the focal point of her existence, was gone. His sudden death sent her tumbling through a void. “He can’t be gone forever. He has to come back.” She demanded that religious leaders bring him back. Because of her belief in reincarnation and yogic miracles, she knew it was possible for him to return. She wrote to Swami Sivananda in India begging him to bring her father back. But no one could help her. She grieved for a long, long time and did not notice how drastically things were changing for the family. Harsh reality only struck home the day she went out to fetch the milk and found that it was not in its usual place on the doorstep.

“They’ve forgotten to deliver the milk!”

“No, they haven’t,” her mother replied. “They don’t deliver milk anymore; there’s no money to pay for it.”

They were suddenly destitute. One moment they were wealthy and respected with lots of relatives and friends around them; the next they had nothing and nobody. As there was no money to pay the rent either, they had to move. Inexplicably, her father’s partnership in the flourishing bookkeeping firm B.R. Joshi and Sons had amounted to nothing. As her marriage under Hindu rites was not legal in South Africa and she did not speak English, her mother could make no claim. The children were too young to question and accepted their dismal



circumstances as part of the doom that accompanies death. They were poor now and could no longer take anything for granted.

For a nominal fee, the Gujarati community allowed them the use of a big room with a kitchen at the Seva Samaj on Eleventh Street. So they moved from a big house with plenty of space, to one room with a communal toilet and bathroom in the yard outside. Now they were on par with most of the community in the location. It was a reversal, but like the people around them, this mother with her five children, the youngest a baby, would eventually find joy in the fact that they were together and could share in ways they had never done before.

When she became aware that as the first-born she had responsibilities to the family, Jaydevi gave up her mourning and began to take on the role of the head of the household. Her father came back then, quietly and unobtrusively, to live permanently in her heart. She also found him in her brother, Ravindra, four years

*Pretoria Indian
Boys' School
Jaydevi, fourth
from right, third
row*



her junior but mature beyond his years, who became her help, her support and her guide.

Jaydevi walked around now with eyes wide open, alive to any opportunity that could bring in money. She could not appeal to relatives; the old spirit of not accepting bhiksha inherited from Grandfather, remained in her consciousness. With her sister and brothers, she began making little odds and ends for sale. At Christmas and Easter, they made plumes, which were very popular during the festive season and other holiday times. They were small dowel sticks with coloured crêpe paper strips attached to one end. Jaydevi and one or two other siblings stood on street corners selling plumes and little paintings. They expanded their activities to include babysitting and tutoring children in maths, typing and other subjects. They were often paid in kind and came home with a bag of potatoes or other vegetables.

When Jaydevi's mother left for India on family business, the children went around to vegetable hawkers and stall holders in the market asking for samples – a potato here, an onion there – promising to make purchases if their mother approved of the quality. The hawkers understood, cooperated in their little subterfuge and helped them to feed themselves. The children also found jobs in various shops and offices. Jaydevi, Shirish, Ravindra and Niroo, helped out at the bookkeeping offices of B.R. Joshi and Sons, now run by their Uncle Praboolal. At Makooloo Hopaan, the Chinese general dealership, they pumped paraffin into bottles. These small ventures that helped to sustain the family, continued as long as Jaydevi was in school. Her grandfather had obtained a government grant for their schooling but there was no money for books. As there wasn't a library in the location, the children went to bookstores, stood at shelves and read until closing time.

Jaydevi attended the Pretoria Indian Girls' School (PIGS) – the acronym exacerbated her dislike of English school. The principal was Miss Wolf. As in the fairy tale, Jaydevi felt like one of the little pigs trying to make something of his life but being thwarted by the big bad wolf. At that time, the authorities believed that Indian girls did not need higher education as all they wanted out of life was marriage and a family so education for girls went no further than Std 8 (Grade 10). When Jaydevi completed her studies at PIGS, she asked Miss Wolf for a transfer card to the Pretoria Indian Boys' School. But Miss Wolf huffed and puffed and sternly refused to give her the transfer. Though the principal frightened her, Jaydevi, who knew what she wanted, was determined to get it. Without looking where she was going, she made a mad dash over the principal's flowerbeds towards the gate. Propelled by the flurry of angry words from the office window, she charged into the boys' school nearby, burst into the principal's office and blurted out, "Miss

Wolf won't give me a transfer card and I want to come to this school so that I can finish my matric." Desperation had made the usually tongue-tied Jaydevi quite reckless. There was, however, no problem. Mr Colinette had already admitted a few girls to the school so he enrolled her and she began attending the boys' school. A group of her friends took courage from her example and also sought and gained admission to the boys' school.

*"Education at the girls' school had been a complete waste of time. We were learning nothing there that could not be learned at home. But at the boys' school, we were suddenly being challenged with physics and maths and other subjects. For the first time, I began to enjoy English School."*³⁸

After she completed her matric in 1964, Jaydevi went to work at Pretoria Distributors – the first Gujarati girl in the location to go to work! Other Gujaratis were outraged. How could her mother allow it? Allow her daughter, a Brahmin girl, to become a 'prostitute'? But her mother was proud of Jaydevi who had voluntarily stepped into her father's shoes to provide for the family.

With her mother's support, Jaydevi was able to ignore her detractors in the Gujarati community but she couldn't avoid poor whites on Potgieter Street, who harassed her on her way to work. She did not respond to their shouts of "Coolie" and avoided the stones they threw at her. When they chased her, however, she ran for her life. It was a nerve-racking journey every morning. As she made her way to work, she tried to make herself as insignificant as possible, keeping her focus on herself and her purpose – to work, work, work, to make lots and lots and lots of money.

Following in the family tradition, Jaydevi had become a bookkeeper like her father and grandfather before her. Being a woman, however, was a break with tradition. But the owners of Pretoria Distributors, the Kalas, had employed her because she was a woman. In addition to bookkeeping, as a woman, she could take on various other functions such as helping in the kitchen or cooking during weekends – all for R10 a month.

One day when she came home from work, she got the shock of her life. Her uncles had come to the house to inform the family that she was to be married. The parents of the young man chosen for her would be coming the next day to make a formal proposal. She was stunned. She had long made up her mind that she would never marry and now, without any warning, she was being married off. But she said not one word. Her uncles had taken charge; she was powerless. It was only in private that she confessed to her sister and brothers that she did not want to get

³⁸ Interview, Jaydevi Bhana



*Jaydevi, Ravindra,
Shirish*

married. When Ravindra urged her to make this known, she did not. She felt too intimidated to say anything. She couldn't understand why this was happening to her. Were they ashamed that she was working? Had they come up with this idea to stop her bringing disgrace upon the family? Her grandfather, who would have been her ally, was on a visit to India. She felt trapped. The next day, the proposal was made, the family accepted on her behalf and, at the end of the day, she was engaged to be married. What was she going to do? She spent many futile hours weeping and feeling sorry for herself. When her grandfather came back from India and saw what was happening, he diplomatically put a stop to the wedding.

Jaydevi could go on with her life as she had planned it.

After a year at Pretoria Distributors, deciding that she could do better for herself, Jaydevi applied for and obtained a situation at *Mod Homes*, a Jewish firm where she was offered the princely sum of R30 a month. She felt on top of the world. By comparison with what she had been earning, she was rich. Despite having to put up with certain demeaning conditions like entering by the backdoor and working where customers would not see her, Jaydevi was happy at the firm. Racism wasn't a consideration; she had lived with it all her life. At least no one was throwing stones at her. Her white colleagues, who were friendly, loved the Indian food that she shared with them. But when she discovered that compared to them she was earning a mere pittance for equal if not more work, she felt humiliated.

But she couldn't give up her job; she was putting her siblings through school and college. Her brother, Shirish, was at a teacher training college and Ravindra would be going to Salisbury Island University College (later the University of Durban-Westville), the university in Durban designated for all Indian South Africans. Fortunately, it was only in his first year that Jaydevi had to provide for Ravindra. Thereafter, he won scholarships year after year that paid for the rest of his university education. But in that first year, 1967, she had to pay his fees. It was a struggle but she was determined. She took on extra work and saved as much as she could, but found that she would not meet the deadline. When she tried to raise a loan, she had no luck until she approached her best friend's father, Naren Kala, the uncle of her former employer, who helped her out.

After her father's death, Jaydevi had set her mind on one thing and one thing only – money! In order to restore her family to its former status, she had to get rich. To do that, she had to become a chartered accountant. That meant university. So she began to save. Despite having to pay all household expenses, support her brothers and sister at school, college and university, she managed to put away money for the time when she would be able to go to varsity. When Shirish, the oldest of her brothers, obtained his teachers' diploma and took up an appointment, he relieved

her of the responsibility of providing for the family. This meant she could at last enrol at university.

A month before the university term began, relatives in India invited her to visit. Though she knew that this was another scheme to get her married, that her maternal grandfather was behind it, probably her mother as well, she agreed to go. In India, after she had been with her relatives for a short while, she impulsively went on a solo tour of the country. Alone in a foreign country, in unfamiliar situations among strangers with no father or grandfather to depend on, she learned to fend for herself. And in finding her way around, she found herself, found her voice and learned to speak her mind. At the end of her stay, when the family approached her about marriage, she flatly refused.

In 1969, after she returned from India, she went with Ravindra to the University College of Salisbury Island and enrolled for a bachelor's degree in Commerce. Ravindra, who was working on an Honours Degree in Mathematics, questioned her motives when he discovered his sister's course of study. But she was quite clear: she wanted to be rich. When she thought of what it had been like when her father was alive, she wanted to live like that again. Though Ravindra scoffed at the subjects she had chosen, regarding them as mundane and practical, he helped her with her work, explaining concepts that she found difficult to understand. Because she was older than most students and had worked for several years, she did not have their carefree attitude. She was serious, took responsibility for herself, understood the consequences of her actions and worked hard. At the end of her first year, she won a scholarship, which was a useful supplement to the R600 she had saved to cover her university expenses.

After two years at Salisbury Island, Jaydevi returned home, went to work in Johannesburg for a Mr Friedman, who owned *Chicktique* and *Harlequin Fashions*, enrolled with the University of South Africa (UNISA) to complete her degree by correspondence and was articled to a chartered accountant. In addition, she was making and selling dresses to people in Laudium. On one of her visits to Mogi Kollapan's house, she saw musical instruments in the lounge. When she found out that classes were being held there every Sunday morning, she became quite excited. She loved singing and impulsively decided to join. At the beginning of 1971, she became part of Jeram Bhana's Sunday classes in Laudium and began her musical education.



JERAM BHANA

*M*r Bhowan Lalla, the tailor, kept to himself and was virtually a stranger to his wife and children. He preferred to spend his time at his tailor shop in Mitchell Street in Pretoria West rather than at home in Ninth Street in the Asiatic Bazaar. He stayed in a little backroom at the shop during the week and only came home weekends. His children wondered why. They found his presence vaguely disturbing. He was like a visitor that overstays his welcome and they were impatient for him to be gone. He didn't talk to his children or prescribe what they should do; still it was irksome having this 'stranger' around. He himself had no idea why he came home; he had a hazy notion that that was what was expected of a father.

He enjoyed a drink or two and played the harmonium but he didn't try to communicate with anyone, not even his wife. She was a simple woman from a village in India who had never learned to read or write, not even in the vernacular,

and she kept to her chief functions of cook and housekeeper. She was as much a stranger to her children as their father. "It didn't matter at all what we did. I can remember sometimes coming home late in the night. We would just jump over the gate and enter the house. There was really no kind of security. Sometimes, we would stay over at some friend's place and only pitch up the following morning. She wouldn't even know that we hadn't been home all night." She and Bhowan knew each other exclusively in the Biblical sense, had produced a family in the biological sense, but in the social sense had little idea what to do with it or with each other. They understood that they had to make material provision for the children, and so they did, but that was where it began and ended. They imposed nothing on their children; their love of India and the Indian culture and their fear of the children becoming too westernised were transmitted unconsciously. The youngsters were basically left free to develop in their own ways.

Fortunately for Mr Lalla and Mrs Lalla, the community in the Asiatic Bazaar was small and cohesive and provided an extended family for their children. Most of the people were poor, but it was a stable, close-knit community in which human weaknesses were motes, not beams, and people struggled together, laughed together, cried together and celebrated together. It was a community of people recently arrived from India with strong cultural ties to the mother country and strong yearnings to return to the land of their birth someday. They thought of themselves as Indians with loyalties to Bharat (India) rather than the country in which they had come to live. In South Africa, they concentrated on their own individual needs and focused on making enough money to return to Bharat as wealthy citizens; African problems were not their problems. So they kept to and revered Indian values, customs and traditions.

The Bhana³⁹ children, growing up in this environment with almost no parental supervision, were free to select a lifestyle from the norms of this generally homogeneous community. But they did not choose any formal or organised religion. As their parents had not insisted on any religious path and had not subjected them to prayers, rituals and attendance at temples, the children grew up free of religious dogma and open to people of any colour, creed and culture – quite unlike their father.

When their uncle married a Coloured woman, their father would have nothing more to do with his brother. Much later, when their uncle took a second wife, an Indian woman, and his Coloured family moved to the Cape Location, Bhowan still remained very cool to his brother even though both his brother's wives and their children got on very well together. Bhowan, however, believing that his brother had brought shame upon them all, constantly warned his children against

³⁹ Bhana is a corruption of Bhowan and was the surname given to the Lalla children at the Registration Office.

fraternising with Tamilians, Muslims and *adhmania* (half-castes).

In general, however, Bhowan let his children be and sat alone with his bottle. His wife did the same.

This kind of *laissez faire* parenting might be considered parental neglect, but it actually provided these children with the rare opportunity to find and make their own ways in the world. Since their basic needs were taken of, they were free to explore and discover themselves and follow their own interests and talents. That made school a huge problem because of its prison-like conditions, its prescriptions and its imposition of values and standards. Of course, Mr Lalla and his wife were completely unaware of this as they took no interest in their children's education; she, because she was illiterate; he, because it was none of his business. They had no idea what grades their children were in or how they were progressing. All decisions about school had to be made by the children themselves.

And Jeram hated school. "It did not interest me at all and I would hardly spend any time on school work because to me it was a big pain. It was like being in jail. I remember years later after I had left school and it was no more a part of my life, if I dreamt that I was in school, the dream would be a nightmare. The minute I woke up, it was such a relief to realise it was only a dream."⁴⁰ He attended the Pretoria Boys' High and the only subjects that interested him were History and Woodwork: History because it required illustration of the events and he loved drawing; Woodwork because it allowed him to be active and creative. And Fridays were like holidays because he spent most of the day doing woodwork. But for the rest, it was all very painful and restrictive. Furthermore, instruction was in English, not in his mother tongue, Gujarati, and it was the apartheid era with mostly white teachers, who were paid a tolerance fee for teaching in black schools.

Jeram's real education happened outside of school. His very good friends were Sinthumbi's sons, Ronnie, Bobai and Raymond and as he spent a lot of time in their home, Sinthumbi became a surrogate dad. Unlike Mr Lalla, Sinthumbi was keenly interested in moulding his children. He wanted them to be exemplars of Tamil culture and scholarship, perfectly fluent in high Tamil and with a sound knowledge of Tamil customs and values. In 1958, after the Marieamman Temple on Sixth Street had been renovated, and new murthis, statues of deities, Muruga and his two consorts Velli and Devayanai, were being installed, there was to be a forty-eight day consecration ceremony and Sinthumbi was preparing a group of Tamil children to sing and recite from the Thevaram, the Tamil hymnbook. There were practices every evening and Jeram, who is Gujarati-speaking and of a different ethnic background, joined in and learned to sing Tamil songs. He had to learn to pronounce Tamil words correctly, because Sinthumbi, who was very

⁴⁰ Interview Jeram Bhana. All further quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from this interview.

proud of his mother tongue, was fastidious about the way it was spoken and sung. "He would say you must scrape your tongue every morning to get all the scum off it so you can speak the language properly." Although he did not understand what he was singing, Jeram learned the songs and took part in the celebrations. Being involved in this musical activity gave him a great lift and a sense of purpose. Because of his close association with Sinthumbi and his sons and his participation in their cultural activities, some people believed that Jeram was a Tamil boy. Years later, when he went to study art in Bombay, his school toured the south of India where Tamil people live. As he walked around in the villages, visited the temples, saw musicians on the street playing the nageshvaram, the South Indian flute, and other instruments, he felt he had come home.

Jeram also joined the Bharatia Orchestra that his friends Ronnie, Raymond and Bobai had formed. Because he didn't bother about schoolwork, he was always free for band practice two or three times a week and for long sessions on Sundays. "We practised in the lounge of the Kollapan home in Moghul Street or at Rajagopal's place." The band included youngsters from the Kollapan family – Mogi, Nadas and Jimmy. Though Coopoo Paul, who played the accordion, was the band manager, the working adults in the band, mostly waiters, willingly accepted his leadership. Mogi, Raymond, Bobai and Ronnie were the singers, Jeram, the violinist, and Kanda, the drummer. "We always have a good laugh when we think of Kanda; the way he used to play – Tut, tut, boom, boom, that was his basic beat." But in fact none of them had had any formal training. They all played by ear and were quite unaware of the range of their instruments or the variety of sounds and rhythms that they could produce.

The band, which played Indian music, had a repertoire chiefly of music and songs from the movies. In those days the most famous Indian artists were P. Sushila, Soundarajan, (South Indian singers), and Mohamed Rafi, Lata Mangeshkar, Talid Mahmood (North Indian Singers). And the music was good not like the film music of today which imitates western pop. The band would get the records of the latest film hits, listen to them and imitate what they heard. "We did the best we could and we thought it was great, of course."

So did the community. They were hired to play at weddings in the location and in Indian communities in Johannesburg, Benoni and Boksburg. They were spurred on in their efforts by rivalry from the Nadaraja Orchestra, which had a similar repertoire and was vying for the same market. When Abdul Gani, a Memon singer, despite opposition from some Muslims, joined the Bharatia Orchestra and sang a Tamil song, Kanay Rajah, the rival group rushed to include people from other groups in their band. For a little while, there was even a Muslim band, the Taj

Entertainers, with a lead singer, Ossie.

Though Jeram thoroughly enjoyed his involvement in music, it was just a hobby at this stage, as he was busy exploring all his options. Living on Ninth Street, it was inevitable that he would become involved in sports because the Dhiraj Soma family lived at the end of the street. The father and sons, whose whole world was sport, swept all the youngsters into teams for every game and sporting activity: *kennetjie*, cricket, tennis, athletics and soccer. Jeram, who was a good athlete, was a striker for All Bharats, the Ninth Street soccer team. At first, competition was mainly with other street teams in the location. Then, as their confidence grew, they became involved in matches with teams from other areas. Soon, the team was travelling to Laudium, Atteridgeville and other places for soccer competitions. In those days, Jeram loved sport as much as art as much as music – they were all ways in which he could actively express himself.

But he believed that art was his true vocation.

As art was not offered at school, Jeram began a course of self-study. He bought instruction manuals and art books from the CNA, read about Renaissance artists like Michelangelo and Da Vinci and wanted to become a great artist like one of them. As he did not know of any art schools or the kind of apprenticeships that these great men had been involved in, he began his study of art by copying pictures, mainly representations of Hindu deities on calendars. After he had drawn the figures, he painted them in watercolours. “Religious pictures have to be gaudy. The more they resemble the original, the greater the praise.” And there was much praise for his work. When people began to commission paintings, he realised that he had no need of school and dropped out. But he still wanted to study art.

While he was trying to figure out how to do that, he went to work in his father’s tailor shop. When he heard that his eldest sister and her husband were planning to visit India, he suddenly realised that this was the opportunity he had been waiting for. Images of Indian art had been imprinted on his memory when he had lived in the village of Matvad as a young child. When he was six, his father had taken the family back to the village of his origin in India and they had lived there for two years from 1946 to 1948.

Matvad, a tiny village quite close to Dandhi, the seaside town where Ghandi’s famous salt march ended, is right on the shore. Jeram remembers that when the tide was in, children would rush out to swim and play in the water that came right up to the doorsteps. They made little fishing rods and had fun pretending to fish. It would have been idyllic had the village not been plagued by hundreds of monkeys that raided the fields and houses. It was scary yet thrilling to see them come right into the house and grab a roti right out of someone’s hand. “Those monkeys were big and quite vicious. They would attack you if you went after them.” Even dogs were no match for them. But the beautiful peacocks that roamed about freely,

compensated for these nasty creatures. “You were virtually living with nature.” And the simple people of the village, who had not spoiled their environment, sang the most beautiful religious and fisher folk songs to express their oneness with their surroundings and the creator. Jeram still remembers one song:

Holiwala hodali hunkaar

Mare jawu Prabhu male vale

(Boatman row me across the ocean, to the other side

My Beloved⁴⁰ is waiting there for me.)

So in 1959, when he heard of his sister's trip, he instinctively knew that he had to go back to India. He approached his dad, “My sister and brother-in-law are going to India and I can go with them. I'm doing nothing here.” His father, who had no idea of his son's involvement in art or his status as an artist in the Asiatic Bazaar, thought his son just wanted a holiday in India. Jeram made no attempt to enlighten him.

*Jeram in his
workshop in
Laudium*

“But what are you going to do there? There is nobody in the village.”

“Don't worry about that. It's only for a little while.”



⁴⁰ The Beloved in Hindu songs refers to God even when the song makes specific reference to a lover

Mr Lalla eventually agreed. A trip to the motherland would be good for Jeram, probably bring him to his senses. He paid for his ticket and made some financial provision for his visit.

Jeram made his way to Matvad and stayed with an uncle from the extended family. As soon as he arrived in the village, he began making enquiries about art and music schools. One of the villagers suggested that he send for prospectuses from Baroda University and the J.J. School of Art. Because of its location in Bombay, Jeram was inclined towards the J.J. School of Art, and a visit to the school clinched it for him. He discovered that the school offered art classes for two hours every morning from eight to ten with no obligation to sign up for a degree or any course of study. In the same vicinity was the Deodhar School of Music, offering training in all Indian instruments. Jeram couldn't believe his good fortune.

He was not one for institutions and all his life had followed his own interests. Now he was being presented with the opportunity to choose everything he had ever dreamed of without being tied down to someone else's curriculum. Naturally he wanted it all. Seeing the wonderful possibilities before him, his latent love for music suddenly came to the fore, overwhelming his interest in art. He enrolled at the School of Art, attended art classes from eight to ten in the morning, then spent the rest of the day at the Deodhar School of Music learning to play a variety of musical instruments – the sarod, sitar, violin, flute and tabla. All his spare time was given to practising on the various instruments. His day, which began at eight in the morning, continued until late into the night.

The local people couldn't understand this foreigner's fanatical interest in so many instruments. They had no idea that Jeram having escaped from an environment culturally impoverished in terms of his personal artistic needs, had landed in one that was overflowing with riches. People said, "You're crazy. Just to do one instrument is more than enough for a whole life time."

Jeram responded, "That can't be. What's so involved about it?"

As he now says, "I was still living in a dream world and trying to make it a reality." At that time, having no idea of the complexities of the music and the subtleties of interpretation, he tried to absorb in three years, a whole musical tradition that had taken centuries to develop. What he got was "a little taste, a little insight." In the years to come, as the complexity of the music began to reveal itself to him, his ability to understand and appreciate it would deepen considerably.

When Jeram wrote to his father explaining that he was going to study art, Mr Bhowan did not object. "He felt that staying in India would be good; I would have some culture." Mr. Lalla informed his son that he could make use of the five hundred pounds he had left in the bank of Baroda in 1946. This amounted to about ten thousand rupees. In the early 1960s, people who earned 200 rupees a

month considered themselves very well off so Jeram believed he was quite rich. He withdrew about six to seven hundred rupees every six months, paid sixty rupees for board and lodging and ten rupees for fees. He believed he could survive on a little over a hundred rupees a month and knew he had enough to see him through the three years of his study. What he was getting in return for this small investment was of incalculable worth and he came to believe that “the best things in life are free.”

He lived in Nil Bazaar, within walking distance of the central area of Bombay, near the beach and near his schools of art and music. He was glad he was only minutes away from his classes; he had a three-year visa and no time to waste. While he studied and worked hard, he wondered what he would do with all the new knowledge and skills he was acquiring when he returned to the Asiatic Bazaar. He had no idea. There was little place for such refined art or music in the location. There seemed to be no future in it; still he was glad to be following his instincts.

Jeram returned to the Asiatic Bazaar in 1961, to find that his father, who had been evicted from his home by his brother, had bought property in Laudium and he had come back in time to help him move.

Jeram tried to pick up the life he had led before his trip to India. He went back into the tailor shop, into the old friendship circles, the football team and the jogging, but his priorities had changed. He wanted to get on with music but didn't know whether he would find like-minded people to share his love for it. Even though there was no financial pressure on him as his father still provided for all his needs, Jeram wanted to be a professional musician who could earn his keep through his music. Sinthumbi invited him to the Marieamman temple to play during the morning meditation and he was gratified to find that when people heard his flute, it opened their hearts.

Though people loved his music, they still thought of him primarily as an artist and began to commission him once more, this time to make clay models of Hindu deities. As he needed to earn a living, he agreed. He converted some space in the backyard into a working area and began to look around for suitable modelling clay. His good friend, Ronnie, Sinthumbi's son, helped him by introducing him to Kansamy Chetty, a potter who came from the only family of potters in the location. Kansamy, who was working out in Benoni, promised to bring him the kind of clay he needed. After a while, Jeram started accompanying Kansamy to work. They caught the five o'clock bus to the station to get the five-thirty train to Germiston station, where they boarded the Randfontein train to Benoni. When they arrived there at seven, they walked to the factory to begin work at seven-thirty.

Jeram met Kansamy's boss, Harry Duys, a very amiable and cheerful Hollander, who had just joined the Divine Life Society. Duys considered Kansamy, known as Bob at the factory, to be the best thrower in the country. According to Jeram, Elias Bosch had at one time taken lessons from Kansamy. Duys wanted to know, "Are you Bob's friend?"

"Well, I've just met him and he has been giving me clay for modelling. I've just returned from India where I was studying art."

"Oh, so you're in art. That's very interesting." But Duys was not interested in the paintings that Jeram had brought for him to look at. He was worried about his pottery business, which was on the verge of collapse. He took Jeram aside, out of Kansamy's hearing, "Look, I have a big problem with Bob. He is a very hard worker and a perfect gentleman but he is an alcoholic. He often goes missing for days at a time. He is my only thrower and his erratic attendance will force me to close down. Do you think you could bring him to work every day?"

Jeram became Kansamy's constant companion even over weekends just to make sure he didn't go on a binge. As he was at the factory everyday, Jeram became involved in the work, took to making pots himself and soon became a second thrower at the factory. Then Duys was able to relax because he was no longer solely dependent on Kansamy. When he suggested that Kansamy and Jeram move to Benoni to cut out the long hours of travelling, they went to live there and remained in the town for the next twelve years.

But Jeram did not give up music; in his spare time he was performing at community centres in Indian areas along the reef. When Mrs Lilabehn Desai, a member of The Indian Arts and Culture Academy, who promoted cultural shows, invited him to perform for the community in Johannesburg, Jeram found the people there very receptive and broached the idea of music classes for young people. Mrs Desai was delighted and organised Saturday sessions at the patidar in the Bharat Shree Mandir opposite the Fordsburg Plaza. As Jeram did not have to work at the factory on Saturdays, he took the train to Johannesburg on Friday afternoons, started classes on Friday night and continued with them for the best part of Saturday. Then in the late afternoon, he took the train to Pretoria for Sunday classes in Laudium, an arduous routine that he followed for about ten years.

In 1971, Jaydevi Joshi joined his classes in Laudium. Though they had both lived in the location, not very far from one another, and were Gujaratis, they had never met before. When Jaydevi joined his class and came to know Jeram, she regarded him as a foolish dreamer who took things as they came and pursued the interests of his heart, with no thought to money whatsoever. She, on the other hand, planned every step of her life and couldn't understand a man who did things on

impulse. He thought of her as dreadfully worldly because she was studying to be a chartered accountant and wanted to be rich.

In 1972, to give his students the opportunity to perform and demonstrate their skills, Jeram arranged a tour of Southern Rhodesia. Jaydevi asked if she could bring her brothers along. Easy-going Jeram cheerfully agreed. Her brother, Ravindra, now a lecturer at Salisbury Island University College, had won a scholarship for a master's degree in Mathematics at Stevens University in New Jersey and was home for a while before leaving for the States. He and Jaydevi's youngest brother, Paresh, accompanied the musicians on their trip. Because Ravindra was knowledgeable about music, Jeram made him Master of Ceremonies for the tour.

The company, having enjoyed great success in Rhodesia, were making a triumphant return when disaster struck. As they were approaching Pietersburg in the Northern Province, one of the drivers suffered a stroke and his vehicle overturned, killing five people and injuring several, among whom were Jaydevi's brothers. The injured were taken to Pietersburg Hospital. The accident, which brought back memories of her father's death, filled Jaydevi with anxiety and distress and would not leave and stayed to help nurse all the injured back to health. She remained at the hospital for six weeks. As a result, she lost her job and her apprenticeship with the chartered accountant. When they returned to Pretoria, it was time for Ravindra to leave for the States. He found a job on a ship, worked his way over and after completing his degree, stayed on to lecture at Boston University for a few years.

During the time that Jaydevi was at the hospital in Pietersburg, Mrs Desai who had been observing Jeram and Jaydevi for some time, decided to match-make. She knew that these two, with their heads in clouds of music, had no idea of their growing attachment to





Jeram's workshop in Laudium



Jeram's assistants in the workshop

each other, or if they had, had no idea what to do about it. Jaydevi, who had spent much time sharing ideas and discussing her problems with Jeram, had come to rely greatly on him. He had helped her discover that there were more important things in life than being rich and that her real interest was in music. Nevertheless, he admired her for her resourcefulness, her courage and determination to succeed in life. Neither of them recognised that they loved each other. So when Mrs Desai suggested to Jeram that he and Jaydevi were right for each other, he was taken aback. He hadn't thought of Jaydevi in that way. Mrs Desai insisted that he write to her. He did. When she received his letter, Jaydevi couldn't believe what she was reading but from then on they began to talk and a new relationship developed.

On 27 December 1973, they decided to get married and set the wedding day for 29 December. Jaydevi's relatives were horrified, not by the short notice, but because she was marrying out of caste. She belonged to the highest caste, the priestly caste of Brahmins. How could she marry someone of a lower caste? A Koli (craftsman)! What kind of an example was this dreadful girl setting for her siblings? Jaydevi ignored all objections but she needed someone to give her away. As a widow, her mother could not and her uncles refused to have anything to do with her wedding. Cousin Pankaj and his wife stepped into the breach, and as surrogate parents, took responsibility for ensuring a good marriage. In the presence of members of the immediate families, Ram Ram, a local priest, married Jeram and Jaydevi on the stage of the empty hall at the Marieamman temple.

After they were married, Jaydevi wrote to Ravindra in the States. He was happy; he felt she had been too dependent on him. Now he didn't

have to worry about his sister any more. After the wedding, though Jeram was still working in Benoni, he came back to live in Laudium. When the travelling, became burdensome, he gave up his work at Duys's company.

Once again, he was at a loose end and once again there was a fortuitous solution. Their matchmaker made them an offer they couldn't refuse.

Mrs Desai, daughter-in-law of Pragjibhai Desai, who had been part of Mahatma Gandhi's Satyagraha community and had lived and worked at Tolstoy Farm in 1910, was on the Gandhi Centenary Committee that was trying to obtain and restore Tolstoy Farm in order to turn it into a national monument. She invited Jeram and Jaydevi to live there as custodians and provide music lessons. This was a wonderful opportunity for the couple. Once the house on the farm was ready for occupation, Jeram and Jaydevi moved in. Virtually alone in beautiful surroundings, they spent their mornings hiking in the hills, practicing yoga, singing and playing music. In the afternoons, they conducted music classes for students from Lenasia. When visitors arrived, they welcomed them and showed them around. In these peaceful and beautiful surroundings, they were happier than they had ever been. Though they were close to Lenasia and Soweto, they felt completely cut off from the world and no hint of the chaos of the Soweto Uprising of 1976, filtered into their sanctuary.

But their blissful existence at the farm came to an end after three years. The Centenary Committee's inability to get things moving led to conflict between various groups. When Jeram and Jaydevi felt they were being dragged into a situation that really had nothing to do with them, they quit and in 1978, left for India to further their studies in music. In so doing, they moved from clean, beautiful surroundings into a Mumbai slum. At first, Jaydevi was very unhappy. Disgusted by the filth, poverty, disease and living conditions worse than anything she had ever seen in South Africa, she didn't think she would survive. Jeram, on the other hand, seemed oblivious to it all. He attuned himself to the music, which, like the musicians who made it, transcended the squalor from which it emanated. Master musicians lived all around them, devoting their energies to the unending quest for sublime new harmonies. They gave no thought to material circumstances or to fame and fortune. Totally immersed in music, they had nothing and nowhere else to live. Students like Jeram and Jaydevi, who came to learn from them, gave them what little they earned. These masters played, sang and taught for almost nothing.

Jaydevi's voice teacher was Agni. When she met him, enthralled by his genius, his vision, his artistry, she bent down to kiss his feet and forgot all about her discomfort. She longed to be able to improvise in the way he did. When she



brought a tape recorder to try to capture his creative style, the device alarmed him and his singing became mechanical. He understood what Jaydevi was trying to do but he discouraged her from wanting to copy him. He told her she was missing the point; the essence of music is the expression of one's own uniqueness. With every rendition of a *raag*, one goes within to find oneself in order to interpret the *raag* in terms of that self. Agni, like his fellow musicians, lived only for music. Jaydevi

couldn't help but feel sad that the divine music that he made in the slum, was born to die there. Jeram and Jaydevi knew they would not find this total surrender to music anywhere else in the world. They wanted to stay forever but the debilitating conditions under which they lived overcame Jeram, who developed tuberculosis. They moved out of the slum and when Jeram had recovered sufficiently, took a short tour of India before they returned to Pretoria in 1980.

Unlike the musicians in Mumbai, Jeram was unable to live by music alone. He had a family and needed to earn a living so he fell back on producing temple icons. He became involved with artists working in the same medium, discovered new techniques and materials, learned to mould and cast using resin and silicone to create a variety of textures, and began constructing domes for temples. He has gained wide recognition for his sculpture and his work can be found in Hindu mandirs all over the country. He has exhibited at the Kimberley Museum, at the Art Department of UNISA and examples of his work are in the permanent collection at the Pretoria Museum.

Despite the kudos he has received for his sculpture, his passion is still for music and it is through this medium that he yearns to pursue his quest for the Beloved.

“Music is not just a few notes that are played. Music is what you are. Whatever you are is expressed in your music. We ask questions all the time; what is life all about? What is its purpose? Art does, to a large extent, address these issues. I have learnt that life is beautiful. Behind all the mess that we see in the world, the sorrow and the pain, there is something beautiful, which makes life worthwhile and helps us through the mess because that is not all there is”.

“I have never studied religion. It has never appealed to me. But when I meet religious people – from the Divine Life Society or the Hare Krishna movement – and they start talking about the sound, Ohm, the unheard sound, the sound that is Brahman, God, universal energy, to which you connect and experience moksha (freedom), I understand completely because I have the practical experience through my music. When I play, I lose myself, sometimes only for a few seconds. It is an experience of tremendous power and beauty and sustains me through the chaos of ordinary living. It is fortunate that I have this medium. All arts allow you to get in touch with that central energy but music is the finest, most subtle form through which to do it.”



DHIRAJ SOMA AND SONS

A Family of Sportsmen

“The Dhiraj home, on Ninth Street near the corner of Mogul Street – that was our headquarters. Everybody would meet there and everything happened there. The father was very sports-minded so all his sons got involved and took the lead in sporting activities. And we looked up to them.”⁴¹

When Dhiraj Soma and his sons first took up and promoted sport in the location, it was for purely recreational purposes. Because sport is recreation. Or is it? Does it have other dimensions? For the Dhiraj family in the thirties and forties, it did not, and they had no idea that they were embarking on a quest that would force them to confront the monster of apartheid. As Dhiraj's sons rose in the ranks of soccer and tennis, a remarkable story emerges of a family that fought to take sport beyond narrow ethnic boundaries, beyond racial boundaries and into the arena of equal opportunity.

But they were people who came from humble beginnings. Dhiraj Soma, like most Indian immigrants, began life as a hawker. He was born in the village of Nabalia, Karadi-Navsari near Bombay in Gujarat and when he was eleven years old, his father brought him to South Africa, to 46 Eighth Street in the Asiatic Bazaar. Dhiraj's father, who had been in Pretoria since 1905, was a successful hawker who had started with a barrow and had graduated to a horse and cart. By 1922, he was doing well enough to go back to India to fetch his son, Dhiraj, and in 1923, his younger son, Morar.

He sent the boys to school at the Muslim Masjid in Mogul Street, an old corrugated-iron structure that accommodated the two hundred pupils and two teachers of the English school. Though they were doing well at school, the boys didn't get beyond the primary level because their father's homesickness got the better of him. He had come to South Africa to make his fortune and set his sons on

⁴¹ Interview, Jeram Bhana

the path to wealth, but after two decades, he still missed the life in India and when he felt his sons were old enough to take care of themselves, he went back to Nabalia for good. Dhiraj and Morar, a couple of teenagers, took over the hawking trade, made a success of it and sent money back to their parents in Nabalia. When Dhiraj turned twenty-one, his parents arranged a marriage and he went back to India to marry Ratanbhen. After his first child, Magan, was born in 1933, he came back to Pretoria with his family and set up home at 478 Ninth Street. Over the years, there were eight more children, and in all he had six sons and three daughters.

Soon after his return to South Africa in 1933, Dhiraj threw himself enthusiastically into sport, which was fairly well established in the location. Football, the most popular sport, had been the first to receive serious recognition when, in 1905, a little more than ten years after Indians had settled in the Coolie Location, the Pretoria District Indian Football Association (PDIFA) was established with three teams: Pretorians, Swaraj and Market Greens. In the early years, progress was slow and it was only after the First World War that there was real growth. By the mid-1920s, there were six teams in a league that competed for the RK Pillay League Trophy and the Mooloo's Knock Out Shield.

"Soccer in those days was played on the old ground in Marabastad and the field was known as the 'Razor's Edge' because there was no grass on it, just sand and a lot of stones."⁴² By the end of a game, players were covered with cuts and bruises even though they wore pads on the sides of their pants to protect them from the rough surface. Boom and Barber Streets formed the north-south boundaries, and Lorentz and Third Streets, the east-west boundaries of the Razor's Edge. The old ABC Bakery was adjacent to the ground and Mooloo's Café was nearby.

Soccer players of those early days, Dhiraj's contemporaries, didn't think much of the footballers that succeeded them in the fifties and sixties and played on turf. They would say to Dhiraj's sons, "Listen, you fullas don't know anything about football. We played football in our time. We kicked the ball harder, we tackled harder, we can take a fall. Football was a tough game. Football in those days was not for sissies. We had guys that could kick and the bars would split."

Though they believed they played better football, they used force to win and many games, particularly cup matches and important league fixtures, were marred by intimidation and violence fomented on the ground and continued in the streets after the matches were over. Cambridge, the most aggressive team, was also the most feared. When Cambridge players threatened their opponents on the field, very few stood up to them; most felt it was not worth their while to get into a fight and some were even too scared to play to their full strength. They knew that if they tackled and outplayed Cambridge, they were in for trouble. People used to say; "If you beat Cambridge in a cup final you must start running home immediately after

⁴² Interview Diar Soma. All further quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from his interview.

the game.” When there were grudge games between Cambridge and Pretorians, both powerful teams, they would tell the referee before the match, “We’re going to win today, man.” But a referee, like Andrew Anthony, couldn’t be intimidated. Though he was threatened on many occasions, he remained very strict and fair.

His sons often teased Dhiraj, who had played soccer for Swaraj FC, but only briefly, “You were too frightened to play football.”

“It’s truth,” he would reply. “I wasn’t prepared to get beaten up after every game.” Nevertheless, he remained a faithful supporter and went to watch soccer matches every Sunday.

But his game was cricket. In the mid-1930’s, he was the wicketkeeper for Azad’s Cricket Club that competed against teams like Kismet, Old Boys, Clydes and Navyugas. Cricket was also played at the Razor’s Edge on the very hard pitch that was bouncy and dangerous. On one occasion when the ball rose unexpectedly high, it hit Dhiraj in the mouth and knocked out his front teeth. But that did not dampen his enthusiasm for sport. He loved all games, formal and informal, and drafted his sons and all the boys living in Ninth Street into the excitement of sporting competition.

Jeram Bhana’s eyes still light up as he recalls those early days. “We lived in Ninth Street, the same street as the Dhiraj family. There were so many boys just in that one street alone that we could make our own team. The Dhiraj brothers took the lead in forming a club, giving it a name and making arrangements to play other football clubs. We were the All Bharats. At first we were called All India. When India changed its name after independence and became Bharat, we changed our name to All Bharats.”

“We played everything from *kennetjie* to soccer and cricket. It’s amazing! With hardly any facilities in those years, sport became a vibrant activity in the location. We had to raise funds for our equipment and everything was organised from the Dhirajs’ house. I can remember we used to make plumes over the Christmas period so that we could buy the jerseys and all that. And we would go around selling these plumes in town for tickey and sixpence and make quite a packet. Afterwards, all the chaps would get together and go on a picnic to Warmbaths. We would ride to Warmbaths on our bicycles! When I look at the life we led then – we were living in the real sense.”⁴³

All Bharats also played against clubs in Atteridgeville. “We would catch the bus in location, then go to Atteridgeville. The first time we went to Atteridgeville Stadium, we came back to the change room after the game to find all our clothes gone. The officials of the club said, ‘Why didn’t you tell us you were going to leave your clothes here, we would have locked the room. Anyway, just wait here.’ We waited for about an hour and a half and then the officials came back with all our things. ‘We’re sorry about this. Here’s your stuff.’ They had gone straight to the

⁴³ Interview, Jeram Bhana

thieves and retrieved everything from them. 'We know who these people are. So don't be afraid to come back here. You won't have trouble again.'

All Bharats was a team of Gujarati boys. As Gujaratis, they were expected to attend the community functions that usually fell on weekends and clashed with sporting events. As Dhiraj had encouraged his sons to take up sporting activities, he didn't insist on their attendance at these gatherings. "He never restricted us and said, 'You can't go play soccer this week because I'm taking you to a wedding.' No, he gave us that freedom." It was perceived as release from social obligations but it really was

Dhiraj Soma family
Dhiraj standing
extreme right,
Diar standing
extreme left.



recognition of individual freedom, and therefore a challenge to convention and to ethnicity, the thin end of the wedge that would eventually go further than Dhiraj had anticipated. As his sons began to invest more and more time and energy in sports and sports administration, their ties with the traditional, cultural core of the Gujarati community would weaken.

Though sport is about competition, it is also about interaction. And at school, in inter-class, inter-house and inter-school games, teams consisted of children from diverse backgrounds who mixed freely together and in embracing one another, learned to embrace one another's differences. In addition, school fixtures on Wednesday afternoons interfered with vernacular classes and forced awkward choices that challenged traditional loyalties. "When there was a fixture for my standard, I used to dodge Gujarati School. I used to say, 'I rather go play football.' And the next day my teacher would call me, 'Come here. You were not here yesterday. Why did you stay away?' I became targeted as far as that went. We used to play at least one Wednesday a month and I knew I was going to be punished the next day. I usually got a couple of whacks on my hands."

Diar Soma



Involvement in sport was carrying the Dhiraj boys into wider social settings where they were mixing freely and forming friendships outside the Gujarati community and when they married they did not stay within ethnic confines. "Almost all of us are married to Tamil girls. My father was of course very disappointed, and mother too, but that was part of life and today we're a very close family. The Gujarati community recognises us, Dhirajbhai's sons, and is proud that we are Gujaratis. When you look at sport, the Gujarati community is not so prominent, especially at national and provincial level. So they feel very proud and they say, 'That's Dhirajbhai's son.'"

But in the early 1950's, Dhirajbhai's sons, still teenagers, were developing their skills, proving themselves as sportsmen and taking the games as

they came without any consideration of social and political consequences. Their focus was on immediate developments in the tiny world of the Asiatic Bazaar. And when the Asiatic Bazaar got a new turf sports ground in 1954, there was great excitement in the location! A new turf sports ground! Turf! As a result of the efforts of Bob Maharaj, Ramlall Mooloo, Bhai Singh, Siva Chetty and Solomon Ernest, members of the Sports Board, who had approached the City Council for better grounds, two beautiful fields were laid out next to one another at the lower edge of Marabastad where the market is today. No stands, no seating of any kind was provided, but the sporting community was thankful just to have playing fields with surfaces that wouldn't cause injuries. But they had to get used to the new pitch so different from the Razor's Edge, where the ball had been much faster and had bounced very much higher. The new grounds were opened by the Sporting Board and inaugurated with exhibition matches between the existing PDIFA teams, Stellas, Swaraj, Pretorians and Delfos.

Delfos Football Club
Diar Soma, Vice
Captain, seated
second from right,
Gonaseelan Pillay,
goalkeeper, middle of
back row



After the new grounds were opened, junior club fixtures were organised for Sunday mornings as curtain raisers for the main matches in the afternoon. Although there were efforts to accommodate junior soccer in the fifties, a properly organised Junior League would only come into being in the 1970's; too late for Dhiraj's boys, who were already playing in the Senior League in the late 1950's. Magan had joined Pirates FC and Delfos FC recruited Diar, the star footballer of the family, when he turned seventeen. "There were no coaches, in those days, in the fifties, no coaches. You went to the grounds, you ran round for stamina building, you kicked the ball as much as you possibly could, you played 'pick-and-play' football. Everything you learnt on your own and by watching others playing. I was never one that went and watched games that whites used to play. Others picked up a lot from that. I never could go. I never wanted to support white soccer. But I did watch overseas teams that came to the Caledonian Grounds and I always supported the visitors." The managers of the teams, who told their players how and where to play, never came to the grounds to coach players. Bala Pillay, who had played for Transvaal and was "a right-winger, fast, very fast, and intelligent," was manager of Delfos FC. But the players did not expect him to interfere with their individual styles or try to weld them into a team. Each one nurtured his unique talent, believing that that was what counted. They were a team of individualists tied together by their desire to win. Tall, well-built Diar, Delfos's striker, who stood out from the other players on the field, had a powerful kick and great speed but it was his ability to think on his feet that made him such a valuable player.

At the time that Diar was playing for Delfos, he was studying at the Johannesburg Institute for Indian Teachers. When he qualified, he was posted to a school in Standerton and couldn't play for his club. Young men in those days had to spend several years in the 'bundus' before they could get a posting near home. One weekend, when his club was to play Farouk Rangers in a final, Delfos manager, Khandabhai Niccha, knew that they would have to pull out all the stops if they were to beat Rangers with the powerful Moosa brothers in their side. There was only one thing to do. He sent his car all the way to Standerton to fetch his star player and with Diar in the team, Delfos beat Farouk Rangers and it was Diar, who scored the winning goal.

At first, soccer was played only at local level and all competition was between teams in the PDIFA. When Diar began playing in the fifties, Indian soccer had reached provincial level and competition was with teams from all over the Transvaal. "At Sooboo's Café, they used to put up the League positions and the results as they came in by phone. On Sunday evenings, there was always a crowd at the café waiting to hear the results. In 1957, we (Delfos FC) were running for the League

and everybody used to rush in there to find out what was happening. And there was great excitement when Delfos became the first team to win the Transvaal Football League Cup in 1957. ” It was a specially proud achievement for young Diar, the Vice Captain of the winning team.

With the establishment of the Sam China Cup Tournament, Indian soccer advanced to inter-provincial level. This bi-ennial tournament, held every two years in a different province, gave players the opportunity to represent their provinces. “For every Indian it was a real honour and privilege to be selected to play in the provincial side. A number of players from the Asiatic Bazaar played for Transvaal at different times: Boet Gamer, Bala Pillay and Nithia Moodley of Delfos FC and Rajendran Pillay from Swaraj FC.”

At that time, soccer was racially segregated. Africans, Coloureds and Indians had separate associations and did not play against each other as they had before apartheid began to be more strictly enforced. But the need for more competitive soccer was driving the sport to the next logical development – inter-race competition. With racially based associations, however, winning and losing were linked to racial superiority or inferiority and competition reinforced prejudiced. Inter-race games were played at local, provincial and national levels. At the top level a South African Indian side, a South African Bantu side, and a South African Coloured side competed for the Godfrey Williams Cup. Diar represented the Transvaal Indian Football Association in 1959.

*Gonaseelan Pillay
(Gono)*

At the time, there wasn't a Coloured FA in Marabastad as the Coloured community had been moved to Eersterust. So Coloured football players joined the Indian Association even though this was against the law. They simply adopted Indian surnames and registered with the Indian Association. As inter-marriage between Coloureds and Indians was common, they could get away with this. But there were occasions when protests were registered against teams with Coloured players, especially if those were winning teams. This was a way to get them disqualified and overturn their victories. “In sport you like to win; sometimes you use any tactics to get a win. So we even promoted racialism to a certain extent. And we always wanted to prove, ‘We Indians are better than Bantus, or better than Coloureds’”



This attitude led to racial violence at games.

Realising that inter-race matches stimulated and reinforced racism, administrators, took the next step forward. When the call for non-racial sport was raised, the attack on apartheid that had been incipient became a recognised objective.

This is when Gonaseelan Pillay entered the scene. Gono, as he was popularly known, came from a family of political activists. Being Thailema's⁴⁴ son, he brought the struggle for democracy into soccer.

Gono's family played for Swaraj, the club of mostly Tamil players. "His cousin, Rajendran Pillay, Krishnannè's son, was a top footballer in the club so naturally Gono started playing for Swaraj. He was a goalkeeper but was never selected to play. The team had an experienced and competent goalkeeper and they didn't want to take a chance with the inexperienced Gono." He began to feel he was wasting his time in the club. Aware of his frustration, Delfos officials, Bala Pillay, Teelak Singh, Boet Gamer, Karia Moses and Bhai Singh invited him to join their club. Without hesitation, Gono left Swaraj and went to play for Delfos. "Gono was a hit from the very beginning, a fantastic goalkeeper. Afterwards, they (Swaraj) would come to him and say, 'Hey, come play for us.' He'd say, 'No, I'm sticking with Delfos.' So he stuck with Delfos and was selected to represent Transvaal. And many of us felt that he should have represented South Africa as well."

During this time organisations like SACOS and SANROC had come into being and were calling for non-racial sport. But with Group Areas relocations, clubs were finding it difficult to put mixed teams together. The African population of Marabastad had been removed to Atteridgeville and the Coloured population to Eersterust. When Gono became President of Delfos FC and soon after President of the PDIFA, his leadership gave soccer in Pretoria the impetus that was needed to propel it into non-racialism. First, he challenged the PDIFA for maintaining the Indian tag and got the organisation to agree to be called the Pretoria District Football Association (PDFA). "It was quite an intense fight at the time with the old crowd, especially Mr Siva Chetty who had been the President for quite a number of years. The old establishment – Ponsamy Chetty, Pullai Chetty, Perithumbi and Moothoo – was fighting to retain the Indian way of life. For these old people change was very difficult." Eventually, they gave way to the youngsters and a united association, the PDFA, was established in Marabastad. Thereafter, mixed teams represented districts rather than races and selection for these teams was made from Indian, Coloured, and African players. But the move to non-racial soccer led to the dissolution of the old Transvaal Indian League, brought the Sam China Cup tournaments to an end and left a gap. Various football associations then took it upon themselves to organise tournaments.

⁴⁴ Thailema's story, Chapter 4

Between 1965 and 1967, the PDFA organised four non-racial tournaments.

“The first tournament – the first time that Marabastad was holding a tournament – was on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the PDFA, formerly the PDIFA, that was founded in 1905. And we celebrated in style. We organised a tournament to be held over two days and invited teams from Johannesburg and Lens⁴⁵. From Pretoria, we had our local teams, Delfos, Pretorians, and Sundowns, and it was really a big social event. There were marches through the streets: the Pretoria Muslim Brigade in front and our girls, the drum majorettes, marching behind. We held a beauty competition and chose a queen for the tournament. We went from street to street throughout Marabastad making announcements with a loud hailer. Then you had people flocking to the tournament. The whole community took part in it – ladies selling foodstuffs and things.”

Meanwhile, Gono was working on the Northern Transvaal Indian Football Association (NTIFA), which had accepted the government's racial policy – now called multi-nationalism – and had refused to merge with the non-racial PDFA. As Gono was dealing with a very conservative group, all his efforts failed. But in 1967, the NTIFA elected a new President, Sathia Pillay, who was willing to listen. That wasn't enough, however. And Gono, who was quite prepared to relinquish the presidency of the PDFA in order to achieve his goal, took the bold step of offering the NTIFA all the executive positions in the organisation if it would merge with the PDFA and adopt a non-racial policy. This did the trick. The NTIFA agreed but offered to share the cabinet positions and Gono became Secretary of the PDFA under Sathia Pillay, the President.

While the PDFA was fighting to establish non-racialism in the district, it also had to contend with the move towards professionalism. ‘Professional’ in those days meant sharing the gate. In 1960, Delfos was invited to turn professional but did not and instead began playing friendly matches against pro clubs. This kept the team alive. Other clubs were losing players to professional teams and amateur competition was beginning to decline. When they saw this, the old guard in the PDFA, began to harp back to the Sam China Tournament and Indian soccer. They did not prevail.

Then Delfos and the PDFA suffered a great loss. In 1968, Gono became ill and died. He was only thirty-five years old and still at the beginning of what had promised to be a brilliant administrative career. For twelve years, he had been the inspiration behind progress in soccer and the establishment of non-racial soccer among Africans, Indians and Coloureds in Pretoria. He didn't live long enough to tackle the last barrier, the barrier between black and white soccer. His club and his

⁴⁵ Lenasia

team-mates, Diar, in particular, felt his loss keenly and today, after thirty-five years, Diar is still in mourning for his old friend. As a tribute to Gono, Delfos organised the Gonaseelan Pillay Tournament, an event that took place annually from 1972 to 1977. Only the first one was held at the Indian Grounds in Marabastad; the rest were at the Laudium Stadium.

Dhiraj Soma's sons were active sportsmen at a time when progress in sport was on a collision course with apartheid objectives. Sport is about trying out and testing physical and mental skills. Dedicated sportsmen don't give up until they have reached the maximum of their potential and competition is the driving force that takes them as far as they can go. This intrinsic feature of sport was inimical to the apartheid policy of restricting and confining black endeavour. Despite apartheid restrictions, however, organisations like SACOS and people like Gono were able to move soccer out of the ghettos even if they could not bring it into the mainstream. The attempt to break down the last racial barrier in sport was left to Jasmet, the fourth of the Dhiraj boys.

"Dhiraj (Jasmet), born in Marabastad ... had no interest in tennis during his early years and only played football in the dusty streets of Marabastad. Then, at the age of 14, an uncle of his, Mr D.D. Patel, bought him a tennis racquet and taught him the game. He so impressed Mr Patel that he was included in the Indian High School team."⁴⁶ But Jasmet did not restrict himself to tennis; he continued to compete in athletics, played football in winter, cricket in summer and in between was serving and smashing his way to top tennis honours.

In Marabastad, there were gravel tennis courts for Africans near the Dougall Hall and for Indians and Coloureds on the corner of Cowie and Struben Streets in the Cape Location. When Africans were relocated to Atteridgeville, Saulsville and Mamelodi, the Dougall Hall and the tennis courts were taken over by the Indian and Coloured communities. Jasmet and Hiralall, the fifth of the Dhiraj boys, played at the Cowie Street courts. Herman Abrahams from the Cape Location, who would become Jasmet's doubles partner in the late sixties, learned his tennis at the courts near the Dougall Hall. There was no coach and people learned the game from books and each other. They simply picked up a ball, began hitting around and developed enough competence to have fun and enjoy some friendly competition. There were no clubs, just individuals playing individuals. This was Sunday tennis.

But DD Patel was serious. Though he himself was an average player with mostly book knowledge, he could spot talent and undertook the training of Jasmet and his brother, Hiralall, who went on to become national champions. In 1960, Jasmet

⁴⁶ Newspaper article from Diar's scrapbook.

only eighteen, created a stir when he beat Parbhoo Roopnarain to win the South African (Indian) Open Men's Singles title in Durban. He made a clean sweep of it that year, taking mixed doubles and men's doubles titles as well. He was singles champion for three successive years, 1960, 1961 and 1962. "In 1962, Dhiraj, who possesses a wonderful temperament, physical fitness, and a large variety of fluent strokes, retained his men's singles South African Open title at Newlands."⁴⁷

Jasmet won these titles while still a student at the Johannesburg Institute for Indian Teachers. After he qualified as a teacher of History and Physical Education, he was appointed to the Pretoria Indian Boys' High School in 1964. Four of the Dhiraj boys were teachers; sport was their vocation but not their livelihood. At the same time as he was beginning his career as a teacher, Jasmet was having to adjust to new challenges in tennis.

Like soccer, tennis, having gone through the phases of local, provincial and national racial competition, had moved through inter-racial competition and was now non-racial among Africans, Coloureds and Indians. Though Jasmet was the top Indian player, it took him a couple of years to get into his stride in non-racial tennis. But his belief in himself and his dedication to the sport, eventually took him to the top. In 1966 and 1967, he won the Southern African Lawn Tennis Union's singles championship. The Southern African LTU had been set up in opposition to the white South African LTU. "Jasmet was one of the youngest champions of the South African Tennis Association"⁴⁸. He played against people like David Samaai and there was great competition between the Transvaal and the Cape: the Samaai brothers from the Cape and from the Transvaal, Herman Abrahams, Jasmet and Hiralall Soma."

Once they had proved themselves in their home country, these champions, with Wimbledon in their sights, were ready to conquer the world. The Samaai brothers, the first to make their



Jasmet Dhiraj

⁴⁷ Star Newspaper article from Diar's scrapbook

⁴⁸ Newspaper article from Diar Soma's scrapbook

DHIRAJ

Speaks his MIND

JASMAT DHIRAJ, South Africa's Non-White wizard of the courts (tennis) won't give up hope that he will be given a break to play in the White S.A.L.T.U. tournaments.

In an exclusive question and answer interview with MIRROR, the ace tennis star slammed home several things he had in mind.

MIRROR: Do you think you could beat our White tennis stars?

DHIRAJ: If I were given a chance to play in the all-White S.A. Open, then depending on the draw, I would lick most of the local players and stand a good chance against overseas players. In fact if I had an equal chance to play against anybody here, I would have been tops.

MIRROR: Are there any prominent White tennis players that you have already beaten?

DHIRAJ: Yes. I have beaten Allen Fox of America and Derek Schroeder.

MIRROR: What about Cliff Drysdale. Can you gain mastery over him?

DHIRAJ: Drysdale is great. I couldn't beat him despite the tough showing I put up against him. But I learnt a tremendous amount from him and improved my practices with him.

MIRROR: Could you ever make the Davis Cup?

DHIRAJ: Yes, if I had enough competition against our top White stars.

MIRROR: How much competition do you need to reach world status?

DHIRAJ: One year's experience overseas. However, somebody would have to sponsor me to do this.

In fact, the decision to send a team overseas has been taken, but for such a trip to become a reality will depend on finance — and not that of the officials alone, but of the thousands of tennis players who are members of SALTU, and who have been asked to personally donate and help make this trip come true.

Our top non-White players will be able to hold their own in English tennis.

MIRROR: What do you think about Arthur Ashe?

DHIRAJ: Ashe is very good and it is a pity we

cannot see him in action. By refusing Ashe a visa we have put South African tennis in a very difficult position for the next few months.

MIRROR: Is it true that you said you would never play so-called "Indian tennis"?

DHIRAJ: Yes! If we are forced by legislation to Indianise our tennis and not play with other non-White races, then I will not play tennis at all.

MIRROR: What is your reason for this?

DHIRAJ: I owe my position to all non-White players throughout South Africa and I WILL NOT BETRAY THEM NO MATTER WHAT THE SACRIFICE.

I was an Indian champ at 18 and was virtually unranked amongst the other non-Whites. I was well below Samaai, Abrahams, Mogoi, Basil Smith and others.

Constant competition against them and all the other Coloured and African players has made me what I am today. Therefore I will NOT INDIANISE MYSELF IN SPORT!

As South African non-White tennis champion, Jasmat Dhiraj has applied to play in the White championships.

Considering the fact that this is a S.A. Open championship and that professionals are not affiliated to any unit, but are recognised on merit and accepted for any championships, the question now is: Are there any grounds on which Dhiraj's application can be refused?

Refusal can only come by one of two decisions: Either that Dhiraj is not good enough — and Basil Ray from London can really say this: or that Dhiraj is being refused on the grounds of affiliation.

If affiliation is the reason, then the question is: Why was Dhiraj accorded to play in the ITF tournaments in 1968-69?

Mr. Alf Chalmers should break the Dhiraj decision to us very shortly.

way to the UK, were followed in 1968 by Jasmet Dhiraj and his partner, Herman Abrahams. Playing in county tournaments, they discovered that even at local level the standard was much higher than anything they had experienced at home. Though they met with little success at first, their enthusiasm and willingness to learn brought them some reward when they became the North of England doubles champions and gained admission to the qualifying rounds at Wimbledon. Though they were knocked out, they were not discouraged. Despite the realisation that they were ill prepared for international competition, having tested themselves in the arena, they did not feel that it was out of their reach. Confident that with proper coaching and the requisite experience, they would succeed, they spent three months in the UK playing in various local championships before returning to South Africa.

It was more a visit than a return home. Back in Pretoria, they immediately set up a rigorous training schedule and began to prepare for their next attempt at Wimbledon. In 1969, they returned to Britain, played in the county circuits with greater success this time and even beat one or two white South Africans along the way. Dhiraj knew that in order to make it to the very top, he needed to be involved at this and higher levels of competition all the time. That meant that he couldn't go on dividing his time between tennis, athletics, cricket and football, as he was doing, as his brothers were doing, as all sportsmen in the location were doing. If he wanted to play like a professional, he had to dedicate himself like a professional.

*Jasmet Dhiraj
with Herman
Abrahams*

This was the problem when he returned to South Africa at the end of the tour. Having surpassed the challenges of non-racial competition, he had nowhere to go. As a teacher, he didn't have the freedom or the means to come and go as he pleased. If he was to remain in South Africa, there was only one thing left to do; he had to take the battle for normal sport into the white arena. He had to break through the racism that kept the doors of the white SA Lawn Tennis Union closed to black people. It wasn't politics; he just wanted to be the best tennis player he could be.





U.K Veteran Tennis players, Hiralal and Jasmet Soma with friend

At the beginning of 1971, he took the unprecedented and immensely courageous step of applying to play in the white South African LTU Championships. “Dhiraj sent in his application after an invitation had been extended to Evonne Goolagong, the young Australian Aboriginal. At that time, Dhiraj said: ‘If Goolagong can play, why can’t I? I should have a stronger claim because I’m South African.’”⁴⁹

But Apartheid was in its heady days. Nevertheless, there was a little uneasiness within the ranks of SALTU and some found it necessary to justify the rejection of Jasmet’s application. They began by questioning his competence but he submitted to ‘tests’, and was pronounced more than eligible by Cliff Drysdale, the number one white player at the time. Despite Drysdale’s endorsement, SALTU, comfortable under apartheid policy, would not take responsibility for a decision and referred the matter to the apartheid government. They passed the ruling on to Jasmet: if he joined the South African National LTU, the black tennis association that had accepted the policy of segregation, his application would be considered. This proposal, with its convoluted logic and its despicable attempt to get him to endorse the government’s policy of segregation, was an insult and Jasmet did not pursue the matter any further. Needless to say, he never got to play in the white South African Open.

In the meantime, the Southern African LTU, the non-racial union, had come up with a sponsorship scheme to give talented players exposure to world-class competition and had collected funds to send six of the most promising players overseas. Though Jasmet and his younger brother, Hiralall were included in the squad, this kind of visit didn’t really serve Jasmet’s purpose. Tennis had become the driving force in his life and he needed to be where the opportunities were.

He decided to emigrate.

Some time after he had left, he learned that a South African Tennis Players’ Association had been set up and from London, made one last effort to open up tennis in South Africa; he applied for membership and received the following response.

You are no doubt aware that at the 1971 annual general meeting of the association it was unanimously carried by a quorum of 42 members that should you apply to join the association, you would be welcome as a member and that your application should be granted. Our constitution contains no racial qualification for admission as a member and the committee’s decision is based solely on the applicant’s ability as a tennis player.

However, we have grave doubts as to whether such a move would be

⁴⁹ Newspaper article from Diar Soma’s scrapbook

*legal and we are accordingly taking counsel's opinion on the point. We must advise you that should we be advised by counsel that such a move is prohibited by Statute, we will have no alternative but to reject your application.*⁵⁰

In the UK, Jasmet and Hiralall became coaches and continued to play tennis. And for the first time, they became political as well as sports activists. They joined Samba Ramsamy in his work, and vociferously and actively supported the sports boycotts and sanctions that SANROC initiated against South Africa. "Today they represent Great Britain in veterans' tennis tournaments and play in Australia, America and all over the world."⁵¹



⁵⁰ Star Newspaper article from Diar's scrapbook

⁵¹ Interview Diar Soma, 2003



The Orient

THE CHETTY BROTHERS

Bioscopes and Achaar

Today we have television, which brings packaged entertainment right into the comfort and intimacy of our homes. Many homes have several television sets that allow one, the emphasis is on the singular, to stretch out on the sofa or sit up in bed to indulge one's individual tastes. This culture of private casual comfort that has developed around the box has moved into movie theatres as well. In fact, the word 'theatre' which implies an audience, a social gathering and a social occasion, seems inappropriate. The cinema has become much smaller and more private and more and more people treat it as an extension of home. Some throw their legs over the seats in the row in front and stretch out as if on their sitting room sofas. Viewers enter dimly lit cinemas, sit in the dark in secluded seats, watch in silence, file out in darkness as soon as the credits begin to roll and return as individuals to a crowd of individuals.

It was different in the location. Going to the bioscope was a social occasion. Families, friends and neighbours, all dressed up, walked together to the bioscope for an afternoon's or an evening's entertainment. Outside the bio, there was the buzz of people in close interaction: vendors of stamvrugte, peanuts, *achaar* and kerriballs, impatient children stretching out their pennies for these goodies and gangs playing dice on the corners.

According to Uncle Surti Baba,

There was only one gang, you know, they called themselves Mafia. It was Coloured, all Coloureds. They used to come and hang around, these Coloured gangster. They used to worry lot of Indian youngsters who came to Royal Bioscope, Empire Bioscope – most of the Prinsloo Street boys, you know, Muslim boys. Most of their families had shops in

Prinsloo Street. The gangster, they see Indian boys, then they say, 'Give us money. If you don't give us money, we going to hit you, take your watches, everything.'

They thought it's only one way to get help – they come to me, you know, because I was very mean. I wasn't acting like a gangster, but I used to help Indian boys who had trouble from the gangster. I told them, 'All right when you go to bioscope, you just let me know, then I'll be around there. Whoever comes, and ask you money, you don't have to speak to them. The rest I'll do it.' So when they stop the youngster there, on the stoep of the bioscope, then I go there and say, 'You want money.' I say, 'No, leave the childrens and get off from here. If I see you next time, you what you calling, asking money, taking their watches, and things, then you will get me because I'm not scared of your gangsters. I'm not gangster but I'm not scared.' So they used to leave them.

You know what made me so brave, I had a cousin, you know, they also stayed in location; the one chap had a gambling house at Mooloo's kaffee. Now the chap who was running the gambling house, this gangster used to come and worry them. Then one day, it happened like that, that they hit my cousin very bad at the Mooloo's kaffee. I was in bed. Somebody came, knock at my door, my wife open. 'Uncle is sleeping.' 'No, tell him to wake up quick, they are killing his brother.'

So I got out of the bed and I went in the kaffee you know. I didn't waste time. You know that time I was young, very young and I didn't waste time. And I had a bayonet by me. And I went. The first to get hold of is the leader of the gangster, and I chopped him here, open. Then I wanted to chop again, then my other cousin caught me.

He say, 'Broe, what are you doing?'

'Let me take this bastard away, they worrying our Indians too much here and we can't take it. They can't overrule us.' Then I left him.

That's how I got well known by the Indian boys. After this, wherever I go, when they see me coming, they used to give way because they know that they can't stand front of me. You know, when I was a young boy in India we used to hire a teacher, who can learn us how to fight with the stick, like Zulus do, how to fight with the stick, how to defend yourself. There I learn in India all this tricks. I was quite healthy⁵² you know, nobody could overpower me.

When the Chetty Brothers took over the management of the three bioscopes in the location, they kept a stern eye on the gangs. Gang members, who interfered with customers, were banned from all the cinemas. This was a death sentence to

⁵² strapping

offenders who begged and pleaded with the Chettys to let them join their friends inside. As people's lives revolved around the cinemas, to be denied entry was severe punishment indeed.

Inside the bioscope, there was as much of a hubbub as outside. It was cheerfully noisy, especially as the theatres, each with a capacity of six hundred seats, were always full and the large brightly lit open halls with flat floors encouraged interaction among people who knew each other well. They moved about freely and there were always children running up and down the aisles.

In front was a stage with a proscenium arch and heavy curtains behind which was the screen. One child, Boma, whose father ran the café at the Empire, always stared intently at the proscenium arch, hoping to catch actors in the act of slipping onto the screen. She always wondered where they were hiding and how they suddenly appeared before her. Once, she even climbed the little stairway at the side of the stage and slipped in behind the curtain to see if the actors were waiting in the wings. She didn't find anyone and couldn't understand it but no one else seemed to be bothered by it. Other children simply waited to enjoy the performance. Children paid a tickey for the hard seats in front while parents paid sixpence to sit in cushioned seats in the back rows. Once in a while parents and children sat upstairs in the raked gallery with its comfortable seats. Then they didn't have to strain to look over or between heads or move their own heads when the heads in front swung from one side to the other.

At the Empire Theatre, where the hatch of the café looked out into the main hall, people who sold refreshments watched all the films. When children got tired or bored, they turned to look at the sweets, chocolates, nuts and cool drinks. During intervals, everyone headed for the café. There was always an interval before the main main feature. As cinemas usually had a single projector, there were breaks when reels were changed. The programme began with newsreels, followed by cartoons, serials like *Zorro* and *Fu Man Chu*, and trailers (previews of forthcoming attractions). The interval before the main feature was long, at least fifteen minutes – time to get drinks and snacks. When the bioscopes showed double features to bring in the crowds, there were two intervals, another before the second film. During the main feature people laughed loudly at the antics of comedians like The Three Stooges, Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin, cheered and clapped for heroes like Gene Autry, *Roy Rogers* and *Tarzan*, and shivered when *Frankenstein*, *The Undying Monster*, *Dracula* or *Werewolf* appeared. Boma, who thought the actors were hiding at the side of the stage, couldn't look at the monsters. She covered her eyes or ducked down behind seats praying that they would not come out into the audience to get her.

The Empire Theatre, the Royal Theatre and the Orient Picture Palace, as their names suggest, looked far beyond their settings in the tiny Pretoria location and the escape they provided was to very distant lands, real and imaginary. There were two shows a day, a matinee in the afternoon and a show in the evening and the three cinemas were always full. They catered to a very small area so overcrowded that it easily sustained the three bioscopes and cinema owners became prosperous and powerful. Bioscopes served people from the Cape Location, the Asiatic Bazaar, Marabastad, Bantule and the surrounding areas. People went at least once a week, Friday and Saturday nights being the most popular times.

Serials kept them hooked.

Biera, who lived around the corner from the Royal Bioscope, like most children and adults too, was addicted to the serials. As she just had to see each week's episode, she and her friend Joan would sneak off to the bioscope without their mothers' consent.

"After school we used to run to the bioscope. They used to have this Zorro serial. Joan would tell her mother, she's coming to me because I had the cotton and I would tell my mother I'm going to Joan because she has the mat. You know we did that type of cotton work at school and we used that as an excuse. You know the Royal bioscope and Uncle Poonie, the ticket collector, the big fat one; he had big eyes. We get to Uncle Poonie, 'Please, please, please, let us just go and see the serial.' We go in the bioscope, see the serial and run out. He say, 'Kom, kom, gaan julle nou, julle ouers kom vir my raas,' because he knew we'll say, 'Uncle Poonie het ons laat gaan.' Then they used to go and scold him. O Hene! If they caught us, we got lekker hiding."

During the silent movie era, piano players from Marabastad and Bantule provided appropriate background music while women in the location swooned over matinee idols like Rudolph Valentino and everyone laughed at comedians like Charlie Chaplin. In the forties, with the advent of the talkies, there was a flood of musicals starring Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney, Jeanette McDonald and Nelson Eddy, the singing cowboys, Roy Rogers and Gene Autry, and crooners, Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra. Indian movies also came in with talking films. People from the Asiatic Bazaar and surrounding Indian locations flocked to the Orient to see comic stars like TA Mathuram and NS Krishnan, and stars of melodramas and tragedies, Thiagaraj Bhagavathar, Leela Chitnis and Ashok Kumar. As all Indian films were musicals, the music and dancing were as important as the drama. Afterwards, people bought the records, the large black 78 discs, learned the songs and tried out the dances. On Sunday mornings, the Asiatic Bazaar rang with the sounds of Indian film music issuing loudly from every radiogram in every home.

But the bioscopes were more than places for films; they also provided venues for social, cultural, educational and political events. In the early years, before schools were built, they accommodated school classes. On Sundays, when there were no screenings because of the Christian Sabbath, the bioscope halls were used for social functions and local entertainment – meetings, weddings, physical culture exhibitions, drama productions and dances. Miriam Makeba, Dolly Rathebe, the Manhattan Brothers, the African Inkspots and Hugh Masekela were some of the entertainers, who performed at the bioscopes and celebrities, such as Canada Lee and Sarojini Naidu, addressed audiences from their stages.

Before bioscopes were built, films were shown in makeshift venues. Habib Keshavjee began his career in this way, showing films to African audiences at the Dougall Hall in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The Bombay Star, a little tin shanty on Boom Street, in which silent films were shown, was the first bioscope in the location. It opened sometime in the 1920s and was not far from the building that was to become the Orient Picture Palace. After it closed, a new Bombay Star was built further along Boom Street where the Blue Lagoon Café now stands. When Ismail Keshavjee bought the building, he turned it into a shirt factory.

It is not clear when a Mr Patel and his partner, Mohamed Jeeva (Jeeva Barber) acquired the Nav Jivan Hall in Boom Street. This double-storey structure built in 1905, had shops in front and a dance hall upstairs. Additions, in 1915, included a much bigger dance hall at the back. Patel and Jeeva, who did not keep the property long, may have used the big hall for film shows. Before Athieammal Chetty acquired it, the property appears to have changed hands several times and others, including a group from Durban, may also have used the big hall for screening films.

Sometime in the mid to late 1930s, when the property was up for sale, Mrs Athieammal Chetty, a mother of six sons, put in a bid. Everyone knew Mrs Chetty, a big light-skinned woman, who became the head of her family when her husband died in 1934. They saw her everyday, pushing her barrow all the way to the market on Church Street where she bought the vegetables and fish that she hawked around the location. She also collected bottles and sold them. How could this widow, a hawker with six young sons, afford to buy the property? People thought she was mad. How would she keep up the exorbitant instalments of £50 a month?

But she had six sons.

The three older boys, who had attended the Good Shepherd School, began working after they had completed their primary education. Kanabathy, the eldest, in his early twenties, was a bookkeeper employed by one of the Keshavjees. Her

teenage sons, Vella and Siva, who had taken up the hawking trade, also ran a stall in the fruit and vegetable market at the corner of Vermeulen and Church Streets. When Mrs Chetty bought the property, these three boys undertook to make the payments. This was a family enterprise, Kanabathy, who had helped to purchase the property, did not get involved in developing it. Namasivayam, the fourth brother, was killed in a horrific car crash in 1938. Aroomoogam (Aroo) and Shunmugam (Sanoo) were still at school. Vella and Siva took initial responsibility for its development and were joined by Aroo and Sanoo when they were old enough. As the enterprise grew and flourished, these four men, Vella, Siva, Aroo and Sanoo, came to be known as the Chetty Brothers.

Like their mother, the Chetty boys were driven to succeed and worked very hard. When they acquired the Orient property, it comprised a double-storey building with dance halls, a barbershop with the striped pole in front, a billiard room and a café. At first they concentrated on developing the potential of the venue virtually as it stood. After they had improved the café, they kept it open

Standing: Kanabathy,
Vella

Seated: Siva, Aroo, Mrs
Athieammal Chetty,
Sanoo, Namasivayam



twenty-fours a day. They kept the dance halls open but converted the billiard room into a grocery store. Though they worked extremely hard, they couldn't afford to give up hawking or their stall in the market and had to manage all their ventures at the same time. Their most successful undertaking was the café; it became the goldmine that allowed them to meet their financial commitments, expand their fruit and vegetable trade and upgrade their grocery business.

On Saturdays, the grocery store stayed open until 18:00 or later. By law, they were required to close at 13:00 but the demand from African customers was so great that they continued business behind closed doors, making sure that customers slipped in and out unobtrusively. When they bought a lorry, they took their business into

Marabastad and Bantule where they made deliveries of groceries, fruit and vegetables and supplied the malt and corn for making beer that African people were not allowed to buy. There were harsh restrictions against Africans, who were subject to curfew laws, liquor laws, and restrictions as to where they could shop and what they could buy. As they were not welcome in the CBD, where there were no facilities for Blacks, no restaurants and toilets, African people went to Boom Street where Indian businessmen, who had to obtain special permits and display prominent signs advertising "Native Trading," reaped the benefits of discriminatory regulations and, in the 1950s, led the Chettys to establish a General Dealers' Wholesales that supplied stores in Atteridgeville and other townships.

The Chetty's Ninth Street Home



Before the Chettys took over the Orient property, the two halls in the building had provided venues for recreation and entertainment. On Sunday afternoons, there were dances in the upstairs hall, the "Steppie Jan", patronised mostly by African people from Marabastad and Bantule. The men, formally dressed in black coats and white trousers, and the women, in elegant dresses, danced there in the ballroom style. On Friday nights in the hall downstairs, the big dance nights of the Coloured community, people danced *lang-arm* to the

⁵⁶ Amina Jeeva's story is told in Chapter 6

music of live bands and brought the night to an end with the grand finale, the squares, when the entire crowd divided up into small groups, formed squares and danced as in folk dances with the leader of each square signalling the different variations to his group. The loud and vigorous music went on until one or two in the morning.

But dances had to move to the Dougall Hall on Von Wielligh Street and to other venues when the Chettys converted the Orient Hall into a cinema. They put in fixed seating and a projection room and turned the hall into an elegant auditorium with a stage and facilities to cater for live performances as well. They called their cinema The Orient Picture Palace and it soon became as important to the location community as the Royal and Empire Theatres. Ezekiel Mphahlele recalls the opening of a cinema, perhaps this one, in *Down Second Avenue*. "Talking pictures had just arrived in Pretoria. A new Indian-owned bioscope hall, the Star Picture Palace, opened for the first time in the Asiatic Bazaar with a showing of *The Singing Fool*, featuring Al Jolson. Excited crowds flocked at the cinema to see the new wonder in the history of film."⁵³

At the beginning, when they were competing with the Keshavjees, the Chettys had difficulty getting rights for films. After the Ismailis left the location, however, they acquired the monopoly. Then the Orient showed English films most days of the week but reserved Wednesdays for Indian films. And Wednesdays were always sold out in advance to people who came from all over Pretoria and the nearby towns. As Indian films, in the old days, depicted stories from Indian mythology and folklore, they gave children of the Asiatic Bazaar a glimpse into their ancient heritage.

The Orient Café, the mainstay of the Orient enterprise, flourished even more after the cinema was built. Vella, responsible for trading activities on the property, managed the grocery store and wholesale business, while his wife, Govindammal, ran the café with the help of her sisters-in-law. They produced two items, egg sandwiches and *achaar*-bread, which were extremely popular with the bioscope crowd, especially with African patrons. Govindammal and her sisters-in-law, who spent about three months during the mango season making the year's supply of *achaar* in the big yard behind the café, found that with the bioscope open, there was a much bigger demand. Ten bags of green mangoes no longer sufficed, they needed hundreds of bags and what had begun as a small snack item for the café suddenly took on a life of its own and burgeoned into an industry when merchants in the area began putting in orders for *achaar*.

As a result, a little factory was established behind the café. The Chettys were extremely innovative in devising equipment for the manufacture of *achaar*. They

⁵³ Ezekiel Mphahlele, *Down Second Avenue*, London: Faber and Faber, 1959, p. 95

invented and patented a machine that chopped the hardest mangoes into chunks, and bought a concrete mixer for blending chopped mangoes with spices and oil. The sons of Jimmy Kruger, former Minister of Justice, from whom they had obtained a monopoly, supplied mangoes from the Northern Transvaal. As mango pickles are made from hard green mangoes, soft ones being quite unsuitable, the moment a shipment arrived, the mangoes had to be chopped up. If the shipment arrived in the middle of the night, the family had to jump out of bed and begin the pickling process right there and then.

Very soon, they were producing twenty-five thousand to thirty thousand 25-litre tins a month of “Orient *Achaar*.” But when the manufacturing, marketing and distribution of *achaar* became more than they could manage, they restricted themselves to manufacturing and supplying to wholesalers who put their own labels on the product. The success of the Chettys, pioneers in the *achaar* business in the Transvaal, stimulated the establishment of rival companies.

In the 1950s, when the Ismaili community left the location, the Chetty Brothers bought the Royal and Empire bioscopes from the Keshavjees, gained the monopoly of the cinema business in the location, and became prominent, powerful people.



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DEPARTEMENT VAN
GEMEENSKAPSONTWIKKELING



Republic of South Africa
DEPARTMENT OF
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
TRANSVAAL PROVINCIAL ADMINISTRATION

PERMIT

Nº 7322

[Uitgereik kragtens artikel 21 van die Wet op Groepgebiede, 1966 (Wet 36 van 1966)]
[Issued in terms of section 21 of the Group Areas Act, 1966 (Act 36 of 1966)]

Lêer No. 17/2/4/1/2-P43/83
File No.

1. Uitgereik aan
Issued to CHITTY BROTHERS

2. Ten opsigte van die grond of perseel
In respect of the land or premises ORIENT PICTURE PALACE
441 BOOM STREET
ASIAN BAZAAR
PRETORIA

3. (a) Doel waarvoor uitgereik
Purpose for which issued TO ADMIT MEMBERS OF ALL RACEGROUPS TO THE THEATRE.

(b) Onderworpe aan die voorwaardes
Subject to the conditions

THAT THE RIGHT OF OCCUPATION AUTHORISED BY THIS CONCESSION SHALL NOT BE
TRANSFERABLE TO ANY OTHER PERSON WHOMSOEVER.
THAT THIS CONCESSION BE SUBJECT TO WITHDRAWAL AT THE DISCRETION OF THE
ADMINISTRATOR.

4. In die geval van 'n verkryging van onroerende goed of die okkupasie van grond of 'n perseel vervall hierdie permit
In the case of the acquisition of immovable property or the occupation of land or premises this permit will lapse
as die onroerende goed nie verkry of die grond of perseel nie ingevolge die permit geokkuper word
if the immovable property concerned is not acquired or the land or premises occupied in terms of this permit
binne
within
maande vanaf die datum hiervan nie.
months from the date hereof.

1966-10-14

Datumstempel
Date stamp

REGIONAL REPRESENTATIVE

Gemagtigde Uitreikingsoffisier
Authorized Issuing Officer

1986. Orient
Permit allowing
African
attendance at
cinema

The cinemas were money-spinners and patronage, especially African patronage, set the Chettys on the road to a business empire. At Easter time, all three cinemas catered specifically for the African communities with simultaneous showings of *The Life of Christ*. The film, originally a silent black-and-white movie, was hand-coloured and more frames added to make the movement more natural. On Good Friday, continuous performances began at 06:00 and ended at 01:00 the next morning. Even after Group Areas relocations, when African people were moved out of cities, there was still a demand for the film and the brothers continued to dispatch copies to townships all over the country for many, many years.

The admission of African people to the bioscopes was risky but cinema owners, who depended on African support, turned a blind eye to the law. And when African people, trapped by curfew regulations, looked for places to hide out for the night, they often came to The Orient. The police, well aware of this hiding place, often raided the bioscope. They arrived in big vans, kicked down the doors, and viciously rounded up the people they found there. Nothing, however, not curfew laws, not prohibitions, nothing could stop people from coming to the bioscope, the place that provided magical escape from everyday living in the location. As a result, the doors of the Orient Picture Palace, like symbols of liberation, remained under constant attack during the days of apartheid.

*The site of the
Royal Theatre*



When the Chettys began to build their cinema network with bioscopes in Johannesburg, Durban and Mafekeng, they gave up the *achaar* business for cinema-related enterprises such as film and video distribution and advertising. When these ventures extended their network into other parts of the country, into neighbouring countries and into the Middle East, it dawned on them that theirs was more than just a flourishing business; it was a corporation and needed appropriate management. They set themselves up as a board of managers and each one took on a different responsibility. Siva, the administrative genius, became the CEO; Vella, the manager of the wholesale and catering

business; Sanoo, the manager of the cinemas and Aroo, the advertising manager – Tip Top Printers and Publishers had been established on a stand next to the Royal Bioscope.

Constantly alert to new development opportunities and optimizing them, these brothers had created a financial empire. Their vast network had emanated from their humble beginnings as hawkers in a tiny location, Marabastad, a grid of a dozen short streets. Their acuity, perseverance and hard work, which had taken them to the highest levels of achievement, received national recognition in the 1980's, when they were nominated for the Businessman of the Year Award along with Martin Jonker and E.G. Chapman. Their phenomenal financial success, which gave them the power to negotiate within the apartheid system, led to relations with officials in high places and benefits of preferential treatment.

But the enforcement of the *Group Areas Act* sharply halted their runaway success. Though the relocation of Indians opened up some opportunities in new Indian townships, the brothers lost a great deal in the Asiatic Bazaar. The biggest blow was the loss of the Royal bioscope. When they were given notice to close the cinema and Tip Top Printers and vacate the sites, they fought hard against the rulings. But the supply of electricity to the bioscope was cut and that put it out of commission. Then on the pretext that a highway was to be constructed through the property, the Royal Picture Palace was demolished. It was the only building to be torn down in that street and the plot has remained vacant ever since.

After the National Indian Council (later the South African Indian Council and then the House of Delegates) appointed by the government in 1964, took control of trading and zoning rights in Indian areas, the progress of Indian merchants was severely curtailed. The Chettys' ownership of the Orient was threatened when the site was put up for sale by the authorities. As properties in the location were on 99-year leases from the City Council, people owned only the improvements that they had made on sites. Despite furnishing proof that all the improvements at the Orient belonged to them, the Chetty's were not allowed to purchase the site. The town planner, Mike van Blommenstein, who supported the Chettys' claim, petitioned the Council on their behalf but to no avail. It was only in 1995 that the brothers became the official owners of the land and the property. It was not an unqualified victory; they were restricted to running the cinema, nothing else. The bottle store was closed but the grocery store and café, though they were in jeopardy, stayed open.

Today, the Orient, the only bioscope still operating in the location, has two showings, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. There are no late shows as the location is not safe at night. When the Chettys were nominated for

Businessman Of the Year, it was on the basis of the number of properties they owned. Ironically the nomination came at a time when they were forced to watch their most cherished enterprises being reduced in scope or destroyed one by one. Now the Chettys, with all the other people who have put in claims for restitution of property in the Asiatic Bazaar, wait for the return of their homes, the sites of the Empire and Royal Theatres and other business ventures.

After 1994, large-scale poverty with its concomitants of crime and violence that had been contained in apartheid townships all over the land, burst into the developed areas of the new South Africa announcing the HIV+ status of our country. The poor and homeless who invaded the Asiatic Bazaar, now Marabastad, declared in their silent way that nothing will go forward as long as they cannot. Marabastad in central Pretoria becomes more and more of an eyesore and more and more crime-infested. But descendants of the Chetty brothers still have a vision for the future, which does not differ markedly from official proposals for redevelopment of the area. They too envision good roads, proper housing and sanitation, shopping areas and other facilities.





But these things happen only when individuals see the opportunities for development and, like the Chetty Brothers, seize them.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ABDUL RAHMAN DAWOOD (APMAI)

Aluta Continua

*U*nder the guidance of their teacher, the children sang:

*I love the Hindus
I love the Muslims
They are brothers unto each other
They are the two stars of my eyes
How can two brothers
Fight each other?*

Then they raised the flag. It was the first anniversary of India's independence, 15 August 1948, a day for joyous celebration. But the little faces were tense and the singing mechanical. The moment they left the school grounds they dropped all pretence and settled into their anxieties. One group of twelve-year-olds, on their way to their *lahti* (stick fighting) instructor, specifically recruited to teach the villagers how to defend themselves, looked very worried. .

"Did you see the people who came into our village last night? The man's face was covered with blood and his wife's clothes were torn."

"I saw. I was frightened."

"That's my uncle. He lives in the next village. When he came to knock, my father took his stick before he opened the door."

"Your uncle! What happened? What happened?"

“He says the Hindus came and killed all the people in the village. They are coming for us next.”

“God help us, what are we going to do? We can’t stay here.”

One of the boys looked gravely at the others. “I’m going to leave Maphral. My father is taking me to South Africa.”

“You are so lucky. People there are rich and they don’t hate each other.”

It was the time of partition. In Maphral, a Muslim village surrounded by about ten Hindu villages, rumours of a Hindu attack were rife and the flag-raising ceremony and patriotic song were a complete denial of reality. The little boy who was leaving the country would find this thread of irony running through the major events of his life.

He left a strife-torn India at about the time the Nationalist Party came into power in South Africa and a Congress alliance was being formed to oppose the new government’s apartheid policy; he was moving out of one situation of political strife into another. But for this little boy his first experience of violence in South Africa was bureaucratic rather than bloody. At the registration office where an official taking one look at his name, Abdul Rahman Shaik Dawood Mahomed Yacoob Jhamaney, decided he couldn’t deal with this, took the first two names, asked for the boy’s father’s name, which was given as Dawood, attached it as a surname and, at the age of thirteen, Abdul Rahman Dawood was born in South Africa.

His father had brought him and a younger brother, Hoosain, to live with his father’s sister’s son, Ismail Ebrahim, a businessman in Prinsloo Street. The Ebrahims, who owned a big general dealership, Ahmed Ebrahim and Company, that sold a variety of goods including clothing and material, lived in rooms behind the shop. There was a room or two for the Ebrahims, another for bachelors to one side of the kitchen with a partitioned room for a married couple and their children on the other. They were crowded but they would have been worse off in the Asiatic Bazaar. After six months Mr Jhamaney, who had stayed to see his sons settled with the Ebrahims, returned to India leaving Abdul and Hoosain with the understanding that though they were now in the care of their cousins, they would have to fend for themselves when they were old enough.

The boys, who had been admitted to the Pretoria Indian Boy’s School in the location, rode the bus that the Prinsloo Street merchants had provided for their offspring. Being in an English-speaking environment was difficult at first, but the relatives and friends with whom they travelled to school became their guides and mentors and helped them to cope.

Abdul, who had been in Grade Seven in India, was put into Grade Three because he could not speak English. Though he struggled with language, he

had no problem with maths, as his teacher discovered to her annoyance. Every morning, after she put sums up on the board, she reached for her newspaper, thinking that the children would be busy for at least half an hour. The moment she sat down, however, Abdul stood up. Somewhat irritated, she would shout at him: "Now what? Get on with your work."

"Madam, I have finished."

"What? Have you written down all the sums?"

"Yes, madam."

"Have you worked them all out?"

"Yes, madam."

"Bring your book here."

When she checked his work, she would find that all the sums were done and correctly answered. After a few months of this, the teacher took him to Mr Collinet, the principal, who promoted Abdul to the next grade leaving the teacher free to catch up with the news. In the new grade, with an excellent English teacher, Abdul made such speedy progress that he became a star student.

Despite his obvious potential, however, he left school after Std Six (Grade Eight). He regretted dropping out but he was eighteen years old. He could not continue to take his cousin's hospitality for granted and had to start providing for himself. So Cousin Ebrahim gave him a job, marking, selling and packing goods in the family shops on Prinsloo Street. He worked from eight in the morning to six at night.

After work, he went with his cousins to visit family and friends in the location or in Lady Selborne. On Saturdays, after they closed the shops at one o' clock, it was time for fun and Cousin Ebrahim took all the boys to the bioscope in the location. But as they enjoyed Indian films best, they couldn't wait for Wednesday nights, for the latest releases at the Orient Bioscope, when the theatre was packed with Indians from all the surrounding areas including Pretoria North and Brits. It was exciting to meet and mingle in this huge crowd – almost like being in India again.

After about three years of working in the shop, Abdul was ready for a change. A travelling salesman, Willy Pockroy, who called often at the Prinsloo Street shops, mentioned that the Feldman Company, wholesale tobacconists and sweets merchants in Skinner Street, was looking for a conscientious, honest, responsible person to manage their sweets section and put an end to the petty thieving that was going on. When Abdul heard Pockroy asking one of his cousins to recommend someone for the position, he expressed an interest in applying and was allowed to go for an interview.

Wolfy Cohen, the manager who interviewed him, was very frank. "Look Dawood, we are experimenting with Indians. If you prove yourself, we will hire

more Indians. If you don't and we are not happy, we'll fire you. You're a guinea pig."

"I don't mind your experimenting with me but I'm leaving a secure job."

"I must be honest with you. You will be on probation for three months and if your work is not satisfactory, you will have to go."

Abdul accepted the job. It was a risk – not because he doubted himself; no, he wasn't sure of his employers. Abdul, now called Dawood, was hired at a salary of thirty-five pounds a month and joined a staff of more than twenty African workers and about a dozen whites. Dawood was the first Indian. When he arrived at work on the first day, he was greeted by Mr Viviers, a security guard, shouting, "Kom, kom, kom." When Dawood went to hang up his coat, he found that there was a place for African coats and a cupboard for white coats but no place for Indian coats. Viviers told him to keep his coat in his department. At teatime, when he saw an African table and a white table, he turned, once again, to his department.

Though the work at Feldman's was more challenging with Wolfy Cohen, the manager, who had married into the Feldman family, demanding hard work and a responsible attitude from everyone, Dawood felt more than equal to the task. He enjoyed taking charge of a department and making it run smoothly and efficiently. When Cohen put his son, who was learning the business, to work there with him, Dawood realised that this was tacit acknowledgement of his competence. Cohen, who expected hard work and dedication from his son, hadn't given him a soft, privileged position; he had made him start at the bottom – packing and sorting. Dawood was privately amused at the interaction between father and son. On one occasion, he saw Cohen standing over a box of sweets lying on the floor where his son was working.

Cohen looked at his son, "Pick that up."

"It's just a box, Dad."

"Yes, it's worth three pounds and it's lying on the floor. If I dropped three pound notes on the floor, would you leave them there? Now pick up the box and pack properly."

Dawood, who had developed great respect for Cohen as a fair man and excellent manager, knew he could count on Cohen's good judgement when he encountered problems in the Sweets Department. As supervisor, Dawood had to give instructions to black and white people, all of whom regarded him as a labourer rather than a manager. If boxes of biscuits had to be taken upstairs, the African workers expected him to carry boxes as well. They didn't understand that as supervisor he had a different task and filling out orders kept him very busy, checking, packing and replenishing. With white workers it was a matter of attitude; they expected

him to take orders not give them. When things got really difficult, Dawood was forced to appeal to Cohen who made it clear to all his employees that they had to respect one another's line functions. When he saw Dawood's coat hanging up in the department, he was surprised and brought that item out of exile. He also insisted that Dawood have tea at the white table.

Cohen found Dawood helpful and considerate and knew he could rely on him. Once, when an important client from a country town, arrived just before one o'clock, a white employee, asked to take care of his order, indicated that he would deal with it after lunch. As the client wanted to get home before dark, Cohen asked Dawood to help out. He got to work right away, had one of the female clerks write out the invoice just before she went on lunch, got a couple of workers to postpone lunch and give him a hand. Within half-an-hour, the selected items were checked, packed and ready to go and the client was grateful that he didn't have to wait and could travel home safely.

When Cohen began hiring more Indians before Dawood's three months of probation were up, Dawood smiled. The risk he had taken had paid off.

A year after he began working for Feldman Wholesalers, Dawood married Mariam

Bibi Abdurahman who also lived in Prinsloo Street. When he had seen her around in the area and in the shops, he had decided that she was the girl for him. Of course, he did not approach her directly; that was against custom. As his parents were in India, he spoke to the Ebrahims who took the proposal to Miriam Bibi's parents after which the families arranged the wedding. Normally, a bride moves in with her husband's family but as Dawood's family was in India, he had to start a new home

*Apmal with
Uncle Bhaimia
Jhamaney
(1966)*



for himself and his bride.

He rented two rooms and a kitchen just outside the location, between Potgieter and Schubart Streets. After a year, he and Mariam had to vacate these premises, as their landlord required them for his own relatives. Dawood then found accommodation in the Asiatic Bazaar. When he and Miriam moved into Mohamed Jeeva's yard in Eleventh Street, they became part of the community in the location. Mariam, who made friends with the Jeeva women, began to attend the Majalis Prayers that Amina Jeeva⁵⁴ conducted in the month of Muharrum. When Dawood began shopping at MK (Moosa Kara) Stores, Mr Kara, learning that Dawood was the nephew of Shaik Ahmed, went out of his way to help the young man. As Shaik Ahmed was well known and well respected for his work in the community, Mr Kara was only too happy to oblige his nephew. Unsolicited, he gave him an open line of credit. Though he would not take advantage of it, Dawood really appreciated this show of friendship.

Following his uncle's example, Dawood also became involved in community service and joined a few organisations in the location. When he became a referee for the Pretoria and District Muslim Football Association, he was surprised to find that there were two separate soccer fields, one for Muslims, the other for Indians, right next to each other with only a fence separating them. He learned that the division in location soccer had come about as a result of partition in the Indian subcontinent and was surprised that the conflict that he had lived through as a boy, had had such far-reaching effects. But he could see that people in Pretoria did not understand the horrors of that situation. It hadn't been a game. In the location, however, it had been played out at the soccer grounds. In the early fifties, when a request to suspend matches to celebrate Pakistan's Independence Day (the same day as India's Independence Day) was turned down by the teams in the Pretoria Indian Football Association, the Muslim teams seceded from the association, formed their own and had no further dealings with the Indian Association. The Muslim Brigade that came into being soon after, marched proudly down the location streets before matches, declaring the independence of the new association. It made Dawood wonder what exactly was involved in the concept of independence.

Though Dawood was living in a time of intense political protest, he was not really politically awake and for him the Defiance Campaign, demonstrations, strikes, marches and the Treason Trial were simply a passing parade. While he was still working for cousin Ebrahim, he had been drawn to the old fruit-and-vegetable market on Church Street to listen to soapbox orators on Saturday afternoons. The communist and trade unionist, Stephen Tefu, had made the biggest impression on him with his forthright denunciations of exploitation and discrimination. Though

⁵⁴ Amina Jeeva's story, Chapter 6

Dawood had admired Tefu for his fearless stand, he had remained detached. Having been in the country less than ten years, he still had an emotional attachment to the mother country and was still an outsider adapting to conditions in a foreign land. In the early sixties, however, Dawood was jolted out of his detachment when the Group Areas Board suddenly issued relatives and friends in Prinsloo Street with notices to move. He couldn't understand how people could arbitrarily be thrown out of homes and businesses that they had occupied for over fifty years. The people in town were the first targets and the people in the Asiatic Bazaar knew they were next. How could this be happening? He didn't understand until he read "*The Plight of the Indian Traders*," a little booklet put out by H.E. Joosub, a leading merchant in the area, and gained his first insight into the precarious conditions of life for Indians in this country. People rallying to Joosub's call, formed a committee to negotiate with the authorities but Dawood did not join them. He was part of a group of friends, about eight young men from Prinsloo Street, among them Sattar Motani, Anver Osman Alli and Ahmed Osman, who were ready to take action against forced removals but were looking for more effective strategies.

They met at Dawood's house to study the situation in depth. As they delved into the issue, they became aware that removals in themselves were only a tiny aspect of all the social engineering that was going on in the name of apartheid and while they were still deliberating, Nana Sita⁵⁵ was already challenging the Group Areas Board. Dawood and his friends watched in amazement his steadfast resistance against efforts to move him off his property. His willingness to suffer imprisonment and his absolute commitment to passive resistance, were awe-inspiring. It was as though Gandhiji had come back to life. Dawood's group was aware that many, believing that passive resistance had played itself out, were opting for guerrilla warfare instead. But with Nana Sita right there in their midst, Dawood and his friends could not easily dismiss satyagraha.

They decided to consult their hero, who had already been imprisoned twice for defying the *Group Areas Act*. Though he was ill, he spoke fervently of his belief in Satyagraha as the only effective strategy against oppression. As they sat around his bed, listening to him, he explained that non-violent resistance was a moral force against injustice aimed at redeeming, not destroying the enemy. He gave them examples of how it had worked in the past and in India and their admiration for this hero of past struggles was boundless.

But when they went away to think about what he had said, they could see that Satyagraha was idealistic. State terrorism had crushed mass action based on non-violent resistance, reducing it to a strategy for the individual, and that could not bring about change. And it wasn't possible to redeem the enemy through appeals to basic human goodness; it had been tried but had resulted in the Sharpeville kind of atrocities. No, the enemy had to be defeated; the entire apartheid structure

⁵⁵ See Chapter 5

had to be brought down. So opting for the course of limited violence proposed by Nelson Mandela, they joined Umkonto we Sizwe (MK) and the armed struggle.

After a period of training in urban guerrilla warfare, they recruited a group of about forty who were divided into different cells with a co-ordinating committee and a chief co-ordinator, Hussein Yacoob, Dawood's cousin. As there were three, at most four, members to a cell, known only to each other, anyone captured would not be able to reveal more than three names. When the Rivonia Trial began in 1963, they got their first opportunity to work underground. Their task was to plaster

*Apmal's daughters
on the veranda
of their home in
Barbar Street*



the town with posters and stickers that read, “The World Is Watching Pretoria,” “Release Our Leaders,” and “We Stand By You”. This was protest not sabotage but the distinction between the two had been blurred after protest in any form had been outlawed and putting up posters had become a treasonous act.

The group worked under cover of darkness. One night, as Dawood’s cell came to Church Street, a policeman suddenly confronted them. They bolted but he followed. Dawood spun around, pulled out a gun and shouted, “You take another step in this direction and I’ll shoot you.” The policeman, stunned by this unexpected challenge, stopped in his tracks and they got away. Another cell was not so fortunate. Two of its members were caught and the police discovered the names of the men who got away, one of whom was the chief co-ordinator, Hussein Yacoob. Both these men had to skip the country.

From being an automaton in a world of everyday things, Dawood had suddenly become a revolutionary. With a purpose that extended beyond family and community, he felt for the first time that his existence had real meaning and he plunged into his new life with passion and commitment. But on the surface, he seemed exactly the same. The MK cadre ready to fight to the death for freedom was hidden under the bland exterior of an ordinary man.

But the spirit of the MK cadre had entered into this ordinary man going about his usual routine, making him much more enterprising and assertive in his everyday conduct. He moved out of the Jeeva’s yard into bigger quarters, two rooms and a kitchen behind a vacant shop at 48 Barber Street. He cleaned up the premises, applied for a licence to open the shop, embarked on a lengthy battle with the licensing office, and was eventually permitted to run his café. After five years, the Group Areas Board unwittingly did him a favour by relocating his business to Third Street, right next to the bus rank, a prime location, where it flourished. He had also quit Feldman’s for a job with Sun Life Assurance of Canada. As an insurance agent, the MK cadre could move about freely without arousing suspicion.

In 1971, Dawood went to London to see Hussein Yacoob, his cousin in exile. Since Dawood was not known as an activist, he was able to obtain a passport to travel to Britain. He returned just at the time that Ahmed Timol was arrested and a list of comrades, who had assisted him in distributing pamphlets and putting up posters, was found in his possession. That led to a police swoop on activists in the Witwatersrand area. Though his name was not on the list, Dawood’s home in Barber Street was also raided: his visit to Hussein Yacoob had exposed him. When the police found firearms and documents, they ordered Dawood to report the next day to the COMPOL Building, the headquarters of the Security Police in Pretoria. A close friend and comrade informed Dawood that his home had also been raided.

Before setting off for security headquarters the next morning, Dawood went to consult with him and to his surprise found him having a congenial cup of tea with a member of the security police. Dawood was shocked and disappointed. At the COMPOL Building, he was interrogated, charged and fined. Although he was not detained, he had to endure frequent raids on his house. Despite the ongoing harassment that he and his family suffered, he did not give up his undercover work.

In addition, he was also embroiled in conflict with the Group Areas Board. He had refused to move and was under unrelenting threat of the bulldozers removed. Following Nana Sita's example, Dawood and his family had defied the Group Areas Board, had not relocated and were still in Barber Street in 1972, watching the location being razed before their eyes. As soon as occupants left a house, the bulldozers arrived. After most of the community had gone, there was no point in holding out especially as their proximity to the sewage works was affecting his children's health. Consequently, Dawood took his doctor's advice, acquired a house in Laudium and moved.

But he was an MK cadre and underground work continued until the Soweto Uprising of 1976 that shook the masses out of their malaise and despair and awakened once more, in ordinary hearts and minds, the strength to resist openly. The government's attempts to co-opt the different race groups through provision of separate development structures, Homelands and Independent States for Africans and separate governing councils for Coloureds and Indians, fuelled the resistance and people laughed at farcical elections with clowns for representatives. The government, however, had no sense of humour and laughter became treasonous. But it did not stop.

In 1981, Dawood joined the Anti-SAIC Campaign, an aboveground protest against the elections, the government's tactic to validate the South African Indian Council (SAIC), a statutory body appointed in 1964 to advise the government on Indian matters. To confuse people, the government had adopted the people's own acronym, SAIC, which had stood for South African Indian Congress. In 1981, the government announced elections for the SAIC, hoping to give the Council a democratic façade by getting Indians to vote for it. But the community rose up in protest against this effort to foist separate development on them. Mass meetings in all Indian townships called for a total boycott of elections. When Dawood was returning from one of these meetings, the Security Police picked him up for questioning.

"Why did you attend the meeting?"

"It was a public meeting."

"But it was in Johannesburg." Activists in Lenasia, the Indian township on the

outskirts of Johannesburg, had organised the meeting.

"What's wrong with attending a meeting in Johannesburg? I go to work there every day."

"You spoke at the meeting."

"Spontaneously, from the floor. I simply supported a motion to boycott the SAIC elections."

The police let him go.

Dawood then took it upon himself to raise awareness amongst Indians in Pretoria. As the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC) was not functioning, Dawood issued a pamphlet in his own name calling for a boycott of the SAIC elections. When he went to leave pamphlets at the mosque on Jewel Street in Laudium, he met Cass Coovadia, also carrying an armful of pamphlets. They eyed each other suspiciously. After Cass read Dawood's flyer, however, he willingly supported his call for a boycott. Dawood's pamphlet announced a meeting at the Laudium Civic

*Apmi's letter to
the Pretoria News,
18 November
1981*

LETTERS

18-11-81

PTA NEWS

Time to scrap the SAIC

SIR — May I, through the medium of your newspaper, reply to the numerous efforts being made to lend new credibility to the Indian Council (SAIC) after its humiliating rejection by the overwhelming majority of Indians.

After the unambiguous election outcome, the statement by Mr Chris Heunis, that: "The council will be considered by the Government as the ONLY representative body of this community" — is the height of absurdity. Instead of accepting the expressed will of the people, the Government and its apologists are blaming intimidation and making other lame excuses for the ridiculously poor voter turn-out.

According to many independent observers and news reporters monitoring the election, there were just no voters to intimidate at the polling booths. For the politically embarrassed candidates to now blame the massive rejection of SAIC on intimidation is a sick joke.

Sir, for 16 long years, respected community leaders have been consistently telling the authorities that the SAIC and its members had no credi-

bility or support in the Indian community.

The November 4 election was the first "acid test" of the Indian community's true feelings on this issue. It was a real trial for the acceptability of the very concept of racially separated and powerless institution as a "substitute for our democratic right to have representation in South Africa's central Parliament. The country-wide support for positive non-participation, was in reality the people's emphatic rejection of this useless apartheid structure and everything that goes with it.

The election was a public exposure of the individuals purporting for so long to represent the Indian people. After this, let no SAIC member claim to articulate the true aspirations of the community.

It also demonstrates, the Indians are not insensitive to the injustice of the system with its callous uprootings and shunting around of thousands of settled families, of which Pageview, District Six and Nyanga are but just a few recent examples.

Government leaders always talk about winning the hearts and minds of all South Africans against the total

onslaught. They boast about their willingness to listen to responsible opinion and reasonable requests made through constitutional channels. Well, using the first and only legal and peaceful means accorded, the ballot box, the people have spoken loud and clear. We do not want the SAIC and its so-called leaders.

Please don't force them down our throats. After the clear election message, let it be now accepted that the SAIC and its new members stand completely isolated from the mainstream of Indian opinion in South Africa.

In spite of the fresh public postures, ministerial statement and appeals to give the elected SAIC a chance, I call upon the Government to reconsider its decision and disband the council. This will save millions of rands of the taxpayers' money on this futile exercise. Any further attempts to give respectability to and project the SAIC as a forum for meaningful consultation and its members as representative leaders, will be a dangerous political deception all South Africans can least afford at this crucial period in our history. — A. R. DAWOOD.
Asian Bazar.

Centre at which Dr Ram Saloojee from Lenasia would be the keynote speaker. Dawood was pessimistic; he thought there would be no more than twenty people at the meeting. But he had underestimated the community. When the proceedings began, he was overjoyed to be able to introduce Dr Saloojee to a full house. At this meeting, the community elected an Anti-SAIC Committee, with Dawood at the head, to launch the anti-election campaign. The Anti-SAIC Committee went into action raising consciousness and consolidating support and in the next year, on election day, 4 November 1981, only about two per cent of the people voted. It was a resounding victory. But the government paid no mind to the percentage poll. For officialdom, all that mattered was that elections had been held, people had voted, and there were elected representatives of the Indian community – that was democracy.

Dawood wrote to the *Pretoria News* in protest.

The government's dismissal of the community's "expressed will," strengthened the resolve to resist. After the elections, activists from Johannesburg invited Dawood to join a steering committee to resuscitate the TIC. The organisation was revived with Dawood and Maniben Sita⁵⁶ as Vice-Presidents. Then the TIC, with other anti-apartheid organisations, began to oppose new constitutional proposals for a Tri-Cameral parliament. In 1983, when the United Democratic Front (UDF) was launched, it brought together over 600 organisations pledged to ending apartheid. The TIC and NIC were key organisations in the Front and the immediate goal of the UDF was to prevent the establishment of separate racially based parliamentary houses. Africans, Coloureds, Indians and Whites worked together for a boycott of elections to the Tri-Cameral Parliaments. Their efforts kept the vote down to between 20 and 30 per cent, but as before, the government was not concerned with numbers. That an election had been held, was sufficient proof of its commitment to democracy.

After the elections, the UDF continued to mobilise people against government policy, and the decade of the 1980s became a period of mass action accompanied by brutal repression and terrible atrocities – torture, states of emergency, mass detentions, gunrunning, bombings, roadblocks, kangaroo courts and necklacing. It was a dark time. Few believed that the end of apartheid was near. Nevertheless, opposition to the government was intensifying and Dawood, involved both above and underground, was working with people like Father Smangaliso Makhatswa, Moses Molefe, Dr AB Nkomo and Peter Mangano in the Pretoria area.

He took part in protest marches, helped to organise funerals of comrades, held secret meetings in his home, helped settle disputes between Atteridgeville and Laudium residents, between Indian traders in Wynberg and civic leaders of Alexandra township and organised local consumer boycotts. When the UDF took command of the struggle inside the country, it outlawed official public holidays,

⁵⁶ Maniben Sita, Chapter 5

declaring new ones – 21 March (Sharpeville Day), 1 May (Labour Day) and 16 June (Soweto Day). Dawood and the group of activists who gravitated around him called upon all people to stay away from work or close their businesses on these people's holidays. They drove around Laudium monitoring the situation, noting those who went to work and those who kept their businesses open. Thus they spread their own minor terror campaign under the official reign of terror.

In 1986, when the UDF planned to mark the tenth anniversary of the Soweto Uprising on June 16, the government declared a state of emergency. Police began picking up hundreds of activists – it was called preventative detention. On the night of 12 June, just after Dawood had finished distributing pamphlets and posters calling on people to close their shops on June 16, a friend and comrade, Umi Ayob, who was dropping him off at home said, “You are the stupidest Kokney I know. Are you a fool? No UDF activist is sleeping in his own bed tonight. Do you want to be picked up?” After Dawood thought it over, he went to stay over at a friend's place. At 1:30 am, the police arrived at Dawood's home, searched the house and left after interrogating and threatening his family. When Dawood heard, he realised he could not go home.

A friend offered to take him to Johannesburg. On the way, they pulled over to pick up a hitchhiker. When they saw that he was a soldier, they got the fright of their lives. What had possessed them to pick up a hitchhiker at a time like this? They exchanged anxious glances as he settled himself at the back with his large kit bag. As they continued along the highway, tense and apprehensive, concentrated only on the moment when their passenger would be gone, they were caught unawares by a roadblock. Dawood thought, “Now we've had it.” They had been unbelievably careless – travelling along the highway and picking up a hitchhiker! They should have expected roadblocks; they ran into them everyday. Dawood sat there waiting to be pulled out of the car and whisked off to prison. To his surprise, the soldiers at the roadblock waved them on, “Julle kan maar deurloop.” The soldier at the back of the car had made the difference. After they dropped him off, they took a back road to Johannesburg.

Dawood got out at the park in Mayfair. As he watched his friend drive off, it hit him that he was now adrift – a homeless person wandering around in a park with nowhere to go. As he looked about at other drifters, he couldn't imagine how they survived. Out of community, out of communion, unconnected. Dropping down on a bench, he thought about how much he took for granted, his family, his friends, his community. Community, the *ummah*, a central concept in Islam! My God, he was a Muslim! As a Muslim he was not alone. He could go to the mosque. He remembered that a friend recently returned from Canada was living in a small

place, two rooms and a kitchen somewhere in Mayfair. He didn't know where but he knew how to find him – at the community mosque.

Ebrahim Dassoo, whose family owned Goldfinger Banana Distributors, gladly took him into his home. After Dawood had been there some weeks, Dassoo aware that he was concerned about his family who didn't know where he was or whether he was safe, offered to go to the shop in the Asiatic Bazaar to reassure them. But this was a mistake. Dassoo, who was not connected in any way with political organisations or involved in political activity, had not been of interest to the police up to this point. After his visit to Pretoria, they began to investigate him so Dawood had to find a new refuge.

It was back to the mosque, this time in Fordsburg. Here, he found help in the person right next to him putting on his shoes after prayers. He knew this young man. He had been to the jewellery store where he worked and remembered him because the young man had the same name as his boss, Aadil. This quirk of memory made it simpler to approach the young man. He could speak to Aadil as an acquaintance, not a stranger. When he explained his situation, Aadil agreed to take him in immediately after his child's birthday party. Two days later, Dawood left Dassoo. Two weeks later, the police were at Dassoo's door.



Opening of Marabastad Development Forum (MDF) offices

MDF Chairman, AR Dawood welcomes guests, Peter Maluleka, Amos Dube, Flora Maliphi, Sicelo Shiceka

During the time he stayed with Aadil, Dawood was very aware that he was endangering this family and knew he had to leave. When a comrade, Pepe Ravat, offered him a flat in Bosmont, he moved again and remained in the flat until the state of emergency ended. After six months in hiding, he returned home to find that his daughters were struggling to manage the business in the location and keep up with their studies at the same time. Although he was very reluctant to do so, he was forced to sell the business.

In the late eighties, when Mosioua (Terror) Lekota, Popo Molefe, Moss Chikane and other prominent leaders of the UDF were being tried for treason at Delmas, Lekota sent for Dawood to ask if he would organise a weekly meal for the twenty-two ANC comrades in prison. Dawood discovering that there were seven PAC prisoners as well included them all in the arrangement. He knew that outside prison, ANC and PAC comrades, motivated by different ideologies and strategies, found it difficult to co-operate, but inside, they were all comrades together. And during the two



President Thabo Mbeki addresses people gathered outside MDF offices, 1999

years of the Delmas trial, Dawood and his family, without any financial assistance from anyone, provided a weekly meal for twenty-nine detainees.

Then came the joyous news of Nelson Mandela's release together with the unbanning of the ANC. Dawood was excited; he hadn't thought he would live to see Freedom Day. Now there was hope for the future. He could openly be part of a new democratic dispensation that would transform the country through recognition of the human rights of every individual. As he saw himself in a position of leadership, his mind began to race with ideas for improving conditions especially for poor people. After the 1994 elections, which brought in the new ANC government, Dawood was given the opportunity to serve in the Gauteng Legislative Assembly but he wasn't there for long. The opportunists whom the UDF had fought to keep out were now very apparent at all levels of government. They understood power politics much better than activists like Dawood, whose idealistic notions made them easy prey to manipulation.

When Dawood began to work at local government level, he became aware that merchants and businessmen in Marabastad, having established the Marabastad Development Forum (MDF), were making land restitution claims. When Dawood joined the MDF and was elected its chairperson, he became an advocate for redevelopment of the area. In his attempts to unite the Marabastad community behind a programme of reconstruction and development, he brought together squatters, traders and managers of public utilities in democratic forums where they could make decisions together. In the five or so years of its existence, the MDF began to make a difference. It was a proactive, progressive organisation but despite its excellent beginning, it fell prey to bureaucratic prevarication, lost its funding, and expired.

Today, Dawood is a tour guide in Marabastad.⁵⁹ He loves the area for its vibrancy and diversity and is determined to be part of its development into a tourist destination.

But freedom cannot live with oppression and the struggle for liberation continues

– the struggle against oppressive conditions of poverty.

Aluta continua!

GLOSSARY

<i>Achaar</i>	spicy, savoury gravy covering pickles, usually mango, lemon and kumquat
Addison's disease	characterized by progressive anaemia, debility and brown discoloration of the skin
<i>Annè</i>	elder brother
<i>Bhajans</i>	holy chants

<i>Borretjie</i>	hopscotch
<i>Broekies</i>	bloomers
<i>Bundus</i>	remote rural areas
<i>Bunsella</i>	a little something extra given gratis to customers, usually sweets
<i>Dharma</i>	virtuous action, the good that we are obligated to perform
<i>Divali</i>	the Hindu festival of lights
Half-crown	a coin worth two shillings and sixpence
<i>Gopuram</i>	entrance tower at a South Indian temple
Joystick	a long strip of marshmallow
<i>Kadlè</i>	brown chickpeas, fried
<i>Kaffee</i> (slang)	tearoom, café
<i>Kala</i>	aunt, father's sister
<i>Kavadi</i>	Tamil religious festival to show gratitude for recovery from illness and misfortune and make restitution for wrong actions.
<i>Kennetjie</i>	a kind of mini golf played with a short and a long stick. The short stick sharpened on both ends is set over a hole in the ground. You hit one of the sharpened ends to make the little stick rise and then you hit it with the long stick and drive it as far as you can. You hit the little stick twice more. If anyone catches the little stick in its flight, your team is out and the rival team come in to play. If no one catches the puck, after the third drive, the distance from the hole is measured with the long stick.
<i>Kerriballs</i>	bhajia, spicy fried chickpea-flour (chana) balls
<i>Kirtan</i>	hymn

<i>Khoja</i>	the word means trader but in the location the term referred to Ismailis, Shia Muslims, followers of the Aga Khan
<i>Koe'siesters</i> (koeksusters)	doughnuts. Koe'siesters is the way it was pronounced in the location.
<i>Kumba Abishegam</i>	Consecration and Inauguration Ceremony
<i>Kunkum</i>	red decorative powder used to dot the forehead etc.
<i>Lahti</i>	Stick fighting
<i>Langarm</i>	ball-room dancing
<i>Lekker</i>	good
<i>Lingam</i>	black stone representing the penis, symbol of the god Siva's power
<i>Marmè</i>	brother-in-law
<i>Moorookoo</i>	a crisp, fried pretzel-like snack
<i>Murthi</i>	icon, statue
<i>Pannetjies</i>	tin caps from cold drink bottles
<i>Pelangoli</i>	a game from India played in a grid of holes in the ground, similar to marabaraba, chess, draughts
Pick-and-play football	A group of players gathered together at the sports ground, picked two team leaders, who then picked their teams, each taking turns and picking one player at a time. Then the two teams played each other.
<i>Poolie-sathum</i>	rice cooked with tamarind
<i>Prasadum</i>	oblations, consecrated food
<i>Purrataasi</i>	the month in which Tamils fast (17 Sept – 17 October)
<i>Sacra-sathum</i>	rice cooked with butter, milk, sugar, almonds and raisins

<i>Samoosas</i>	small, flat triangular pies with mince or vegetable filling
<i>Sample hand</i>	the person who produced the first sample, the prototype
<i>Sarni</i>	cow dung
<i>Satyagraha</i>	Non-violent non-cooperation, usually called passive resistance, but as Gandhi said, there is nothing passive about satyagraha.
<i>Seekoei Water</i>	Witbank
<i>Stamvrugte</i>	a sweet plum-like fruit
<i>Thali</i>	the marriage cord worn by Tamil women
<i>Thaambaalim</i>	round brass tray
<i>Thatha</i>	grandfather
<i>Thinoor</i>	ashes
<i>Tickey</i>	a small silver coin worth three pence
<i>Tricked</i>	bewitched
<i>Two-and-six / half-crown</i>	a coin worth two shillings and sixpence
<i>Vadè</i>	round flat spicy fried cakes
<i>Vathiar</i>	teacher
<i>Vazier</i>	Vizier, high official, state minister, chief counsellor

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Sinthumbi

Vernugopal Vartharajaloo Naidoo
(Sinthumbi) From July 2001 – April
2002

Bobai Naidoo, October 2001

Thailema

Visoo Pillay October 2001,
November 2001, February 2002

Sintha Naidoo October 2001

Vasugie Moodley October 2001

Maniben

Maniben Sita, from June 2001 to
March 2002.

Amina Jeeva

Mariam Bibi Dawood interviewed
(October 2001)

Jainab Dawood, Sheila Hassim,
Banoo Hassim (Amina Jeeva's
nieces) interviewed
January 2002

Koolsoom Hassim interviewed
February 2002.

Chandri Pillay interviewed February
2002

Thanga Kollapen

Thanga Kollapen, 2001

Billy Kollapen, 2001

Omarjee Suliman

Omarjee Ahmed Suliman, Interview
July 2001

Amina Suliman, Interview August
2001

A Vanished Community

Habib Chagan, 2001

Miriam Moosa, 2001

Mohammed Keshavjee, 2002

Jeram and Jaydevi

Jaydevi Bhana, January 2002

Jeram Bhana, January 2002

A Sporting Family

Jeram Bhana 2002

Diar Soma, 2003

Logi Soma, 2003

Newspaper cuttings from Diar
Soma's scrapbook.

Apmal Dawood

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**AN OUTLINE OF
INDIAN SOUTH AFRICAN
HISTORY
1860 – 1960**

Indians arrived in South Africa in 1860 and, at the time of this writing, have been in the country for over 140 years. That would make about five generations born in the country.

1860 - 1914

Indians, brought to the British colony of Natal in 1860 as indentured labourers, coolies, on five-year contracts, came to work mainly on sugar plantations where they lived under very harsh and cruel conditions. After five years, they were given the options of renewing their contracts, returning to India or becoming independent workers. To induce the coolies into second terms, the colonial government of Natal promised grants of land on expiry of contracts. But the colony did not honour this agreement and only about fifty people received plots. Many became independent small holders, market gardeners, fishermen, domestic servants, waiters or coal miners. Some left the colony. By the 1870's, free Indians were exploring opportunities in the Cape Colony, the Orange Free State and the South African Republic (Transvaal). Those who sought to make their fortunes in the diamond and gold fields were not allowed digging rights and became traders, hawkers and workers.

Though sporadic, continued importation of indentured labour until 1911, encouraged opportunistic traders and merchants from India and Mauritius to emigrate to South Africa. These independent immigrants, known as “passenger” Indians, began arriving in the country from about 1875. Many of them quickly acquired land and set up businesses and trading posts. When their enterprises began to encroach on white settlements, laws and regulations were passed to limit their expansion and acquisition of land. Immigrants living in the Republics, unlike those in the British colony of Natal, were not enfranchised and were not welcome in the Republics and laws were passed to contain their growth and development.

The onerous Act 3 of 1885, passed in the Transvaal, debarred them from owning land and confined them to locations. But “passenger” Indians, who believed that as British subjects, they were entitled to the protection of the crown, were not afraid to enter into litigation. As early as the 1880's, Indian merchants in the Transvaal were petitioning the government and challenging its laws in the courts. They sent a petition to the government protesting Act 3 of 1885 and when it was ignored, took their protest to the British High Commissioner. When this failed as well, Ismail Suliman & Co. challenged Act 3 in the courts in August 1888. Before that, in June 1888, Indian merchants had protested against curfew regulations on the grounds that they were not African. So before Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

¹ PS Joshi, *The Tyranny of Colour: A Study of the Indian Problem in South Africa*, Durban: EP & Commercial Printing Company, 1942, p.60

arrived in South Africa in 1893, Indians were actively involved in litigation against governments.

In Natal, the merchant elite, under the leadership of a very wealthy ship owner, Sheth Dada Abdulla, established an Ad-Hoc Committee to deal with restrictive legislation. When the Sheth became involved in a legal battle with his cousin, Sheth Tyeb Haji Khan Muhammed, an equally influential leader amongst Indians in the Transvaal, he wrote to a law firm in India and MK Gandhi, a barrister, was sent to South Africa to deal with the matter. He arrived in 1893 and dealt very competently with the suit, bringing it to arbitration and reconciling the cousins. After the case, the local merchants, realising the value of a lawyer in their midst, prevailed upon Gandhi to stay in South Africa to give proper legal direction to their activities. He agreed and through his involvement with this group, began to learn of the problems facing Indians in the country.

In 1894, when Gandhi became the secretary of the merchants Ad Hoc Committee, he gave it a new name, the Natal Indian Congress, and set about challenging legislation aimed at disempowering Indians. He organised meetings and petitions to stop the Bills, but the Franchise Act to disenfranchise all Indians was passed in 1894 and Law 17, which imposed a poll tax on free Indians, was passed in 1895. Act 17, the most onerous of laws passed in Natal, imposed a £3 poll tax, about six months earnings, on free (ex-indentured) Indians. In 1903, it was extended it to children as well. It was hoped that to escape the tax, free Indians would either leave for other parts of the country or return to India. As the governments of the Republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State and the Cape Colony were restricting entry of Indians into their areas of jurisdiction, many free Indians had no choice but to endure the burdensome poll tax.

Gandhi appealed to the British Government and was successful in getting the Franchise Act overturned. But when Gandhi went back to India in 1896 to canvass support from the Indian National Congress, the Indian Government and influential individuals, the Franchise Amendment Act of 1896 was passed and Indians in Natal were disenfranchised once more.

When the South African (Boer) War broke out in 1899, Gandhi formed the Indian Volunteer Ambulance Corps to serve British troops, as he believed that Indians owed their loyalty to the Empire. He was from India, a British colony, had been educated in Britain, and believed that such efforts would win proper recognition of Indians as British subjects. He made a similar effort with his Indian Stretcher Bearer Corps during the Bambatha (Zulu) Rebellion in 1906. Ironically, Zulus at that time were reacting to a poll tax that had been imposed on them by the Natal government, which was still enforcing a poll tax on Indians. Gandhi's stretcher corps was assigned to caring for wounded Zulus.

During the South African (Boer) War, the majority of Indians left the Transvaal and sought refuge in Natal, the Cape Colony and India. After the war, the new British Military Authority that had replaced the government of the Transvaal Republic, put obstacles in the way of returning refugees by making re-entry subject to permits and passed an ordinance to enforce the provisions of Act 3 of 1885 “to segregate the Asiatics into locations for residence and trade, to refuse licences except in the Asiatic Bazaars and to make the licences of pre-war Asiatic traders non-transferable.”⁵⁷ Gandhi, who had left for India at the end of 1901, returned the next year to assist the Transvaal Indians. In 1904, he set up the Transvaal British Indian Association (forerunner of the Transvaal Indian Congress), composed mainly of wealthy merchants, held meetings and sent off petitions as he had done in Natal. He also became editor of the newspaper, *Indian Opinion*, established in 1903 as the organ of the Natal and the Transvaal Congresses.

After a few years, British Military governance gave way to colonial rule in the Transvaal and the new government, under General Smuts, began debate on the Asiatic Law Amendment Bill (The Black Act), which proposed the registration and fingerprinting of Indians, who would be required to carry registration certificates (similar to passes) at all times. This law, which raised great indignation amongst Indians, led to many mass meetings and at the one held at the Empire Theatre in Johannesburg, Gandhi introduced the idea of satyagraha² – engagement in non-cooperative, non-violent action and sacrifice and when the “Black Act” was passed, there was an almost total boycott of the registration procedures. Gandhi was imprisoned, then ordered to leave the colony and imprisoned again when he refused. Smuts was obliged to enter into negotiations with him and together they agreed on the withdrawal of the Act and voluntary registration. In good faith, Gandhi led the Indians in registering but the Act was not repealed. A passive resistance campaign was organised and registration certificates were publicly burnt in the grounds of the Hamidia mosque in Johannesburg.

In 1908, when the Transvaal Immigration Restriction Act barred all non-resident Indians from entering the Transvaal without permits, Gandhi led a protest march from Natal across the Transvaal border, was arrested and sent to prison while about sixty others were deported to India. In 1909, during negotiations for the establishment of the Union of South Africa, Gandhi, at the head of a delegation of Indians, took the demand for the repeal of anti-Asiatic laws to London. The delegation was unsuccessful and when South Africa became a Union in 1910, there could be no further recourse to British intervention.

Gandhi then set up Tolstoy Farm on land donated by Hermann Kallenbach, an admirer of Leo Tolstoy, follower of Gandhi and a satyagrahi. The farm “was established with a view to training an army of non-violent volunteers.”³

² Gandhi coined the word from *sat* (truth) and *agraha* (firmness)

³ *Tyranny of Colour*, p. 70

Many activists took their families and went to live on the farm for the next three years. In 1913, they were given an opportunity to put their training as satyagrahis into action as a result of:

1. The *Immigrants Regulation Act, No 22 of 1913*, which put an end to Indian immigration and restricted Indian entry into provinces not of their domicile. (There were no Indians in the Orange Free State which, in 1891, had expelled Indian residents and prohibited Indian entry altogether.)
2. A judgement by Justice Malcolm Searle in March 1913 in the Cape division of the Supreme Court that rendered all marriages conducted according to Hindu or Muslim rites invalid because these religions allow polygamy.

So Gandhi planned a Satyagraha campaign that included women for the first time and even allowed them the initiative. Their resistance first took the form of hawking without licences, and then crossing the provincial border without permits, but these efforts did not get them arrested. When they were taken to the coalmines in Newcastle where they brought the coalminers out on strike against the poll tax, they were at last arrested. While they were in prison, Gandhi led the striking miners and others across the Natal border into the Transvaal. During the march Gandhi was arrested three times at various towns along the way and released twice. He was in jail when the marchers reached Balfour just before Heidelberg, where they were all arrested. The coalminers were put on trains, sent back to the mines, forced down shafts and severely flogged. Their compounds became prison camps. Though Gandhi and many marchers had been arrested and imprisoned, the protests did not stop as people in other parts of the country came out on strike and began marching. When white railway workers on the Witwatersrand went on strike, Gandhi put an end to the satyagraha campaign as it was not to be confused with the railway strike.

General Smuts met with Gandhi and their deliberations led to the *Indian Relief Act* of 1914, which repealed the poll tax on free Indians in Natal, recognised Hindu and Muslim marriages and abolished the registration and finger-printing requirements of the “Black Act” of 1907. But major issues such as restrictions on land ownership, trading rights, immigration and movement between provinces remained unresolved and resistance would continue for many decades to come. In 1914, Gandhi left South Africa to begin his work in India. His legacy to South Africans was the strategy of non-violent non-cooperation (satyagraha) and belief in that strategy sustained mass protests until the demise of apartheid.

After 1914

Indians continue their struggle.

Very soon (after Gandhi's departure) renewed friction developed under existing restrictive laws. Thus, in the Transvaal, Indians discovered that it was possible to evade the Gold Law and Townships Act of 1908 by establishing businesses under the Transvaal Companies Act of 1909, and to evade Law 3 of 1885, respecting ownership of property, by registering it in the names of companies, which was declared lawful by the courts in 1916 and confirmed on appeal in 1920. The number of Indian private companies in the Transvaal grew from three in 1913 to 103 in 1916.⁴

As a result a South Africans' League under Sir Abe Bailey was formed in 1919 for "the expropriation of Indians."⁵

An anti-Asiatic League congress met in Pretoria in September that year, attended by twenty-six local authorities, thirty chambers of commerce, nine agricultural societies, twelve religious congregations and forty trade unions.⁶

Their recommendations led to the Transvaal Asiatic Land and Trading Amendment Act of 1919 that "exempted Indians with businesses in mining areas if they still occupied the sites, but prohibited the ownership of fixed property by companies in which one or more Asians had a controlling interest."⁷ These measures, attempts to segregate Indians and curb their economic viability, led to clashes between South African Representatives and Indian Representatives at Imperial Conferences. Dr Srinivasa Sastri (1921) and Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru (1923), representatives of the Indian Government demanded fair treatment for Indians but as General Smuts saw it, this was "a question of the white man's position in society, and in the last resort of his continuing presence in Southern Africa."⁸ Smuts regarded the granting of rights to Indians as the thin end of the wedge that would open the way to rights for the African majority.

The Asiatic Land and Trading Amendment Act of 1919 and other restrictive measures led to the amalgamation of the Natal, Transvaal and Cape congresses into the South African Indian Congress; Indians were no longer dealing with

⁴ TRH Davenport, *South Africa: A Modern History*, 4th edition, London, 1991, p.241

⁵ Davenport, p 241

⁶ Davenport, p 241

⁷ Davenport, p 241

⁸ Davenport, p 242

disparate governments and needed a national organisation to deal with a national government. The South African Indian Congress made appeals to the Union Government, The Indian National Congress and the British Government and prominent Indians (from India), notably Srinivasa Sastri, Tej Bahadur Sapru and Mrs Sarojini Naidu.

When the South African Party (SAP) under General Smuts, was defeated in the 1924 elections, the PACT government under JBM Hertzog came into power. During its term of office, the SAP had pushed for segregation and separate development but Hertzog's government wanted Indians out of the country altogether. It negotiated with Srinivasa Sastri, Sarojini Naidu (president of the Indian National Congress) and others who came over on fact-finding missions and round table discussions, from 27 December 1926 to 11 January 1927, between a deputation from India and the PACT Government, the Cape Town Agreement was drawn up. It recommended a scheme of subsidised repatriation that reflected the PACT Government's wishes and did little to alleviate the position of Indians. The Agreement also approved the appointment of an Indian Agent to mediate between the South African Indian community and the South African Government.

Between 1927 and 1948, a number of Indian Agents were appointed. Srinivasa Sastri, appointed in 1927, was the first. Then came Sir Kurma Reddi, Sir Syed Raza Ali, Sir Kunwar Maharaj Singh and Sir Rama Rau, all eminent, erudite leaders from India. The South African Indian community in general revered them all and was very proud to welcome them but young radical political activists repudiated them. These youthful members of the Congresses condemned these Agents for their ineffectiveness, their inability to address real issues and their readiness to compromise. As the young lions believed that their future was in their own hands, not in the hands of Indian Agents or collaborators, they began to advocate the strategy of non-violent, non-cooperation (*satyagraha*) to protest against the land and trade restrictions embodied in the Transvaal Asiatic Land Tenure Act of 1932, amended in 1934, 35, 36, 37, and replaced by the Asiatics (Transvaal Land and Trading) Acts of 1939 and 1941, the *Trading and Occupation Land Bill* (Pegging Act) 1943, and the *Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act* (Ghetto Act) of 1946.

Despite the many laws instituted from 1885 to confine and repress Indian endeavour, Indians had expanded their trade and ownership of land into areas not specifically designated for them because laws, especially under the colonies and republics, had not been strictly applied. For example, under the provisions of the Transvaal Company Act of 1909, they had been able to form limited companies and purchase land. They had taken advantage of loopholes; the appointment of nominees in whose names they could acquire property, and marriage to white and Malay women, who were allowed to own property. The latter development led

to laws against miscegenation and mixed marriages, which were probably more economic than racist measures.

The late 1930's and early forties was a period of internal struggle in the congresses and the young radicals eventually emerged victorious. In 1945, Dr Yusuf Dadoo took over the leadership of the Congress in the Transvaal and Dr G.M. Naicker became the leader in Natal. In 1946, after Smuts' government passed the Ghetto Act, the Congresses embarked on a massive passive resistance campaign and over 2000 men and women were imprisoned. Though the campaign did not achieve the desired goals, it helped to amalgamate people of all races in the struggle for human rights. In March 1947, the "Doctors' Pact" a "Joint Declaration of Co-operation" was signed by Dr Naicker of the NIC, Dr Dadoo of the TIC and Dr Xuma of the ANC.

Under Apartheid

In 1948, the Nationalist Government came into power and began to formalise the separate development policy that had been in the making since the time of Van Riebeeck. Their apartheid laws brought all oppressed people together in the struggle for freedom. In the 1950's enduring links were established through the Defiance Campaign of 1952, the Congress of the people in 1955, the Women's March in 1956 and the Treason Trial, 1956 – 1961 and the Indian community as a whole began to lose its myopic grasp of oppression in South Africa. In 1911, with the Colonial Born Indian Association, there had been an incipient understanding of a new identity. This grew stronger in the 1920's and 30's when young radical leaders began to take over the Congresses, but it was only in the 1950's that Indians, in general, came to an acceptance of themselves as South Africans.

It had taken ninety years to evolve to this point. At the beginning, Indians had been totally self-absorbed partly because they were immigrants but mostly because anti-Indian legislation had kept their focus firmly fixed on their own condition. Ironically, it was apartheid that gave them the freedom to break out of narrow cultural confines. Before 1948, legislative acts had not really taken on a national character and were still, for the most part, enactments for separate states and separate groups. This had kept oppressed communities in distinct compartments and each had focused on its own problems. With the advent of formal apartheid, legislation cut across provincial barriers and made people aware that new, unequivocal statements of separate development, among them the Population Registration Act, The *Group Areas Act* and The Separate Amenities Act, affected them all.

And they became South Africans.

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This book is about real people. Like the Zimbabweans, who cross our borders in the thousands every day, they came to this country to escape conditions of poverty in their own land. Here they found refuge and opportunity and established themselves in new identities.

South Africa's history abounds with stories of pioneering spirits who helped to build this country; among them, Hollanders who set up a trading post at the Cape, Huguenots, missionaries, slaves and indentured labourers and the African people on our borders and in the north of the continent.

As a land of opportunity, South Africa is not unique, but because its promise of freedom and opportunity were compromised by colonialism and apartheid, the tremendous struggle to establish democracy in the land, has made it a symbol of hope for a better life.

The stories of the dozen or more people in this book are stories of hope and survival of pioneers in a new country.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When Muthal Naidoo retired from teaching, she turned to writing and has published *A Little Book of Tamil Religious Rituals, Jailbirds and Others* and a short story by her sister, Seetha Ray, entitled *Monkey Business*.

