

5 NATURAL ALLIES

While the new militancy in the ANC emanated from the growing cooperation between young African intellectuals and workers, Indians, coloureds and whites of all social backgrounds were also part of the political rejuvenation of the war years. The evolving forms of resistance in each of these communities were similar in the non-racial and cross-class associations they forged to counter the state's divide-and-rule tactics. Still, South Africa's race-specific oppression inevitably shaped distinct histories.

Initially imported from India in 1860 as indentured farm labour under the 'Natal Coolie Law', South Africa's Indians were the first oppressed group to mount an effective non-military challenge to the government. Mahatma Gandhi inspired Satyagraha — passive resistance to discriminatory legislation — during the 21 years he spent in South Africa (from 1893). This tradition was then overtaken by the accommodationist policies of the Indian business class, until the Second World War period spurred the radicalization of Indian resistance politics.

“Hitherto we had only a group of capitalists, mostly people who could afford, really, to follow the leaders of that particular group — men who talked to the government and compromised and got a few concessions at the mercy, really, of the Indian people's name, because they sold us every time they went to see [Prime Ministers] Smuts and Hertzog those days. It did not suit us at all because we followed their antics and their manoeuvring and we felt that something must be done. So we challenged the old guard.

We said that we have to challenge them, this is the only hope we have to form a new congress, a congress that is built on the principles of Mahatma Gandhi.

We had a very big meeting at Curries Fountain [Durban]. We got all our workers — workers we had because they had faith in us, that we were going to have a voice that is going to represent all sections of the community. We said if we do that now, then later we can get our Africans and the coloured people — but first let us put our house in order. We said, 'Are you going on the same path these people have led you, which has spelt ruin for all of us? Or are you going to now consider changing? The Group Areas³ means a complete destruction of everything that we have — not only for us, but for the Africans and for the coloured people — because we're all going to be shoved into some hell-and-gone place. So this is how we came into being in the Natal Indian Congress, representing all shades and all sections of the people. That was a first sign of awakening of the women. Women who had never ever been to a public meeting came to our meeting, because we told them what it meant for themselves and the future of their children. I talked to them in their own language, Tamil,³ and appealed to them that this is the movement that Gandhi has laid down for us. So they came in droves, left their children and they came — which was surprising, because these were women who never left their home before.

It was my duty to go along and canvass for the women because it could not be just a male-dominated organization. For a few years they wouldn't have me at all. I did not think like them and I did not behave like them. Perhaps I was little difficult, you know. I smoked a cigarette and wore short dresses and wore lipstick and drove a car, night or day, alone. And all that was not in keeping with the tradition of the Indian people. They were still in the Victorian Age of thinking, you see.

Were you aware that Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo were involved in the same kind of exercise of deposing the old guard in the ANC Youth League?

They were eliminating the old ones there and we were eliminating the old ones here. It was quite a nerve-racking job because wherever you went they said, 'You will probably want us to join forces with all sorts of people' — meaning Africans. And we had to sit and talk to them, explain to them. It meant hours of explaining to very old people whose views cannot be changed overnight. Talking to them in their own language helped a lot. Quite a lot of Indians said, 'Now you want us to marry the Africans, isn't that what it is?' I said, 'No, I don't think they want to marry you. We are living in one country — is this your country? Do you want to live here?' And I said, 'How are you going to live? In a little pocket, or are you wanting to live nicely, in a friendly way with Africans?' Then they said, 'Yes, but how? Because they won't trust us.'

I said, 'You can look at the papers every day, you can see how the whites hate us — they want us to leave. But the Africans do not say that at all. This is our country. If we are going to live here at all, we also have to play our part. A lot of those Africans are also exploited by those Indian people: they don't pay them decent wages, they don't give them decent homes. The Africans are also human. I work with them and I know what they go through. So it is for you people, for every one of you, to try to foster this friendship amongst them.' ”

DR KESAVELOO GOONARUTHNUM NAIDOO (widely known as Dr Goonam),⁴ one of the young militants involved in challenging the old guard of the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) in the early 1940s

And we then developed a strategy for passive resistance, began to prepare for it, plan for it, and in 1946 we embarked on a campaign of passive resistance - I was fully involved in that, and in fact Dr. Naicker and myself were the two people who were given the longest sentences as the quote ringleaders - he was the president and I was the general secretary -

But of course the longest sentences in the context of those times



EACH INDENTURED WORKER ARRIVING IN SOUTH AFRICA BY SHIP FROM INDIA WAS IDENTIFIED BY NUMBER.
(SOURCE: UNIVERSITY OF DURBAN WESTVILLE ARCHIVES)

The style of these young, new leaders differed radically from those they ousted: the era of meek petitions to authority was over.



GANDHI FOUNDED THE NATAL INDIAN CONGRESS TO FIGHT ANTI-INDIAN LAWS IN 1894. HE IS PICTURED HERE WITH THE STAFF OF HIS LAW FIRM.
(SOURCE: KILLIE-CAMPBELL AFRICANA LIBRARY)

“ After we were elected, one of the first things we did was to ask the government to receive a deputation of the Indian Congress. Field Marshal Smuts was then prime minister and he agreed, and a very big delegation went up in November 1945.⁵

The interview lasted barely half an hour. Smuts heard our representations and the memorandum we presented to him, and he said, 'Gentlemen, there is nothing for us to discuss. You have brought a political manifesto to me and you can't expect me to talk to you about it.' That convinced me that we were living in two different worlds, and I, personally, was at that time convinced that there didn't seem to be any possibility of peaceful evolution in our country.

We warned Smuts that if he was not prepared to talk to us we would have no choice but to go back and mobilize our people into mass action, and we did precisely that. We now met similar left elements in the Cape Province and in the Transvaal, and we then developed a strategy for passive resistance, and in 1946 we embarked on the campaign.

That campaign went on from '46 to '47. We extended it and led a series of groups of people from Natal into the Transvaal, refusing to take permits to cross from the one province to the other. Some 2,000 of us spent a substantial period in prison in 1947 and '48. Then the Nationalist Party came to power and that involved a rethinking and a realignment of strategy altogether. This brought us now into very much closer contact with the African National Congress.”

MOOROOGIAH DHANAPATHY (M.D.) NAIDOO, elected secretary of the NIC after the radicals won elections for a new executive in 1945

...well, would say that in the majority of cases where Indians who joined different organisations, ... South Africans - ... it must be very clear that although the Indians workers - ... the indentured labourers came to our country from India by force, but the overwhelming majority of the Indians are part and parcel of the South African society, and the majority of us do not look towards India - we look at India as any other country, but at the same time there is the special affinity because our forefathers originated from India.

The mobilizing success of the passive resistance campaign ensured the dominance of the young radicals in Indian politics, and allowed them to pursue cooperation with the ANC in the late 1940s.

The bold Congress policy of resistance has had effects far wider than among the Indians. A profound impression has been made among the other non-European sections, particularly the Africans. They have seen a community with a population vastly inferior in numbers to theirs and with much less justification for struggle than themselves refuse to accept the government terms. They have seen this small community humiliate the seemingly invincible power of the South African rulers. And they have drawn the necessary conclusions.

It is noteworthy how much more militant the African people have become during the year, as evidenced by the anti-pass conference at Johannesburg last year, the African miners' strike involving over 100,000 workers, the 'passive resistance' of the Natives Representative Council which adjourned after the miners' strike and to date has refused to meet, the Bloemfontein emergency conference,⁶ the burning of the passes in Cape Town, and the militancy displayed by the shanty-town movement in Johannesburg and Durban.⁷

The Indian people have now learnt the fallacy of sectional and isolationist principles. By their experience in the resistance struggle they have learnt the necessity of allies, and that their natural allies are the other oppressed non-European groups, together with the progressive Europeans.

The Africans, too, have learnt from the passive resistance struggle that the Indian people are their friends, and despite their smallness as a community can be very valuable allies. For years the Africans have regarded the Indians with suspicion. Their doubts were bred from the government's divide-and rule policy, and by the sectional attitude of the old Indian leadership. But when the passive resistance campaign began, they quickly realized that a success for the campaign would benefit them immensely in their own fight, and from the beginning it had their full sympathy.

PASSIVE RESISTANCE COUNCIL REPORT, 13 June 1946 – 13 May 1947 from the NIC Agenda Book

Justice is not Indian and neither is freedom Indian. We want all people to be free. The young people in the ANC support the struggle of the Indians.

H. L. E. DHLOMO, African poet and ANC Youth League regional convener, speaking at a mass meeting held before a march through the streets of Durban to protest the restriction of Indian property rights, 1946



A PASSIVE RESISTANCE CAMPAIGN MEETING AT DURBAN'S RED SQUARE IN 1946.
(PHOTOGRAPHER: UNKNOWN. SOURCE: UWC – ROBBEN ISLAND MUSEUM MAYIBUYE ARCHIVES)

R.D. Ja, well it is not difficult to access that but my own assessment it was, ever since I knew from my own entry into the work situation, even from that time, in those days we used to call it the colour bar system was very very heavy against

The transformation of South African Indian politics from isolationist to activist cannot only be attributed to the policies of the leadership. This trend paralleled the maturation of the Indian working class from rural labourers to urban wage-earners, which in turn led to the growth of trade unions. Thus workers, intellectuals, merchants and professionals all helped to shape the new policies of the Indian Congress.

“I left the factory to join the Passive Resistance. Like thousands in those days, we left work and went to defy and to court imprisonment. Prior to 1944, the Indian Congresses in South Africa were led by leaders who did not want to have any cooperation between Indians and Africans or coloureds. The new leadership called upon all the democratic forces to work together, that is, for the closest cooperation with the African people, because we feel that the majority in our country are the Africans — if they're not liberated, then I don't think the others will be liberated. So we believe that the main content of our revolution is the liberation of the African people, and the Indian Congress worked for that.

And what was the motivation for you to get involved in passive resistance? Was it Indian-oriented in any way, or was it purely political?

The overwhelming majority of the Indians are part and parcel of South African society and the majority of us do not look towards India. Of course, there is the special affinity because our forefathers hailed from India. And then, of course, India, as you know, was one of the first countries to take up the whole question of racial discrimination at the United Nations way back in 1946, and in fact it was during the passive resistance campaign that this question was raised at the UN, to highlight not only the plight of Indians, but the whole question of oppression.”

KESVAL 'KAY' MOONSAMY, a trade unionist who joined the militant new NIC

Cooperation between Indians and Africans was symbolized by the Doctors' Pact signed in 1947 between ANC President Dr A. B. Xuma and the leaders of the Transvaal and Natal Indian Congresses, Dr Yusuf Dadoo and Dr G. M. Naicker. Less than two years later the pact faced its most serious test, when fighting between Indians and Africans broke out in Durban.

“It was on a Friday afternoon, I remember, in the Victoria Street area, in one of the Indian cafes: a little African boy stole a cake, you know — just took a cake — and the man actually hit him with a bottle on his head! And the rumour went around that the boy's neck was cut off and they placed it in a mosque, and as a result of this the riot broke out. I was in Durban with Congress then and I was in the Riots Relief Committee. I lived in Mayville, the area that was affected most.

How do you assess the origins and background of those clashes?

Well, in those days we used to call it the 'colour bar' system, and it was very, very heavy against the Indian businessman and the Indian working class. At one stage I remember the ruling class even said that we should pack up the Indians and send them back to India. They had an immigration scheme which provided for the state to finance you to go to India.

I attribute the 1949 riots to the policy of the government. The anti-Indian agitation that was going on, year in and year out, had been soaked into the black man, pointing out to him that these are the people that are taking your jobs, these are the people opening businesses and shops and depriving you. The word 'coolie' was a very common utterance. It wasn't a black people's vendetta against the Indian people — I blame it on Nationalist policy. State propaganda was largely responsible for giving birth to this riot.”

R.D. NAIDU, trade unionist and NIC and CPSA activist who witnessed first-hand the clashes of 1949

The Bantus consider the presence of Asiatics amongst them as a menace to their interests and advocate for complete segregation. The Bantus strongly resent and deplore: commercial domination by Asiatics in areas proclaimed Bantu by law; financial destitution as a result of blackmarket, unfair transactions, together with gambling snares and dens; evils arising from Asiatics' liquor sales; resentment-stirring exhibition of sophisticated supremacy and seduction of Bantu women by Asiatics. Consequently the Supreme Council earnestly appeals to Asiatics for an abrupt halt to the above practices in order to avoid their attendant repercussions.

What is the Salvation of the Black Man? We leave it to presumptuous fools in their asylum of dreams to dream of our liberation being gained through Asiatic or Communistic leadership. Let us rather assiduously organize for the National Advancement and the local self-government of the Bantu Race, in which we will have the assistance of all right-thinking men, even those in high positions. Let us become our own shopkeepers in areas locally administered by our chosen representatives and so build up the Bantu Race by positive action.

Pamphlet issued in 1950 by the **SUPREME COUNCIL OF THE FEDERATION OF BANTU ORGANIZATIONS**, an obscure group formed to oppose the joint political action of Africans, coloureds, whites and Indians, with a particular anti-Asiatic' focus⁹

Now the position in short is this: The two abovementioned race groups discriminate amongst themselves as people, then against each other as belonging to different racial groups, jointly discriminate against the Bantu. What is most strange and ludicrous is that when the Europeans, who are superior to them in turn, flick the Coloured off from themselves as they would a speck of dust from the lapels of their coats, then the Indians and Coloured now call upon the noxious weeds, the Bantu, to help them fight against

Indian-African cooperation weathered the racist storm: the solidarity forged in the 1940s provided a platform for continued non-racial unity between the two communities throughout the 1950s.



SOME INDIAN INDENTURED LABOURERS ROSE FROM FARM WORKER TO STREET VENDOR AND THEN TO SHOPKEEPER. THE TRADING STORE WAS A POINT OF CONTACT BETWEEN THE WHITE-CONTROLLED INDUSTRIAL ECONOMY AND BLACK CONSUMERS; AS A RESULT, THE INDIAN SHOPKEEPER WAS OFTEN THE FOCUS OF POPULAR RESENTMENT. (PHOTOGRAPHER: OMAR BADSHA)

NOTES:

¹A British Crown Colony from 1843, the province of Natal suffered from a critical labour shortage because the Zulus resisted work on European farms, hence the move to import 'coolie' labour.

²The Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act of 1946 — known as the Ghetto Act — prohibited Indians from buying land and occupying property except in certain 'exempted areas'. It was this legislation that gave rise to the passive resistance campaign. The Group Areas Act of 1950 designated separate urban residential areas for each race group, and also gave rise to great resistance.

³The largest single language group among Indians in South Africa originated in the Tamil-speaking provinces of India; the second-largest group is Hindispeaking, and most others speak Gujarati, Telegu and Urdu. In terms of religious background, the large majority are Hindu and most of the rest Moslem, with a small minority of Christians, plus Buddhists and Parsees.

⁴Although Gail M. Gerhart and Thomas Karis, *From Protest to Challenge Political Profiles*, Volume 4, Hoover Press, 1977, identify Goonam as having the first name of Kasavello, she maintained that it is 'my father's name, not mine'. She remained steadfastly cagey about her full name, claiming that she was always known simply as 'Dr Goonam', refusing to disclose any first or middle name, and denying the widely held view that her real name is Goonam Naidoo. When pressed as to how she was known before she became a medical doctor, when she was a small girl, she answered, 'Small Girl, that's what they called me!' She was equally circumspect about her age; it is estimated that she was born in 1905.

⁵This was to be the last meeting between members of the Congress movement and a leader of the South African regime until the 1989 meeting over tea between Nelson Mandela and then-President P. W. Botha.

⁶An 'Emergency Conference of All Africans' was convened to debate the question of continued ANC participation in the Natives' Representative Council; Africans were exhorted to boycott future elections to this council.

⁷The mass evictions of black people from white farms and the overcrowding in the reserves led to severe housing shortages in the 1940s, as people converged on the towns in search of a means of livelihood. They formed organized communities of squatters, often led by popular messianic figures, who resisted all attempts by the state to move them by simply picking up their shacks and setting them up in other empty fields.

⁸A probe into the group by the SAIRR in 1950 uncovered allegations that the Council was sponsored by members of the right-wing Afrikaner Broederbond, with the express aims of counteracting ANC influence and promoting anti-Indian feelings among Africans. The SAIRR also found out that the Council had schemed with tsotsi (thug) elements to 'bring the leaders of Congress into conflict with the authorities by committing atrocities during any strikes and boycotts which the former may organize'; and had also 'incited tsotsis to force Indian Business men from African areas by burning their shops during strikes'. Suspicions that this pro-separate development body was state-supported were compounded by its use of apartheid terminology such as 'Bantu' and 'Asiatic'. On one specific occasion, before a Congress call for a strike in June 1950, the Council was reported to have received assistance from the government's Railway Police in distributing leaflets.