

Paper presented at -

Conference on Women and Gender in Southern Africa, Univ. of Natal
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FEB 1991.

'Sammy' and 'Mary' go to gaol: Indian women and South African politics in the 1940s

A woman should never be independent. Her father has authority over her in childhood, her husband has authority over her in youth, and in her old age her son has authority over her. (Laws of Manu, Tharpar, 1963:473)

Popular images of Indian women of the sub-continent and of Indian populations in the diaspora generally, have at their core a certain constancy: the passive figure. The docile, servile coolie plantation worker, the cautious, obsequious, yet cunning trader, and their docile, subordinate, domesticated women counterparts. Racist, contentious or fallacious as these images may be, they retain a certain currency in western discourse, and in common sense notions of the self, and the collective within the Indian communities too. The Gandhian ethics of self-sacrifice, chastity, and humility have been coupled with the classic symbols of the oppression of Indian women - widow sacrifice, child marriages and back-breaking domesticity. Perhaps the key to understanding and unpacking these images and their constancy is the denial of history and time which they represent.

This study concerns the participation of Indian women in South African politics. It will focus on the events and participants in the Passive Resistance campaign of 1946-48 that was launched by the Indian congresses in Natal (NIC) and the Transvaal (TIC). More generally it is situated in the context of Natal's Indian population. The campaign was a consequence of the breakdown of negotiations between the Smuts government and the South African Indian Congress (SAIC) over the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act, the so-called Ghetto Act. The importance of the campaign, for present purposes, is threefold. Firstly, it was the largest mobilisation of Indian men and women in a political campaign since Gandhi's campaign of 1913. The Passive Resistance campaign was also the last exclusively Indian mobilisation before the organisations were subsumed by multi-racial alliance politics. Secondly, in addition to mobilising large numbers of women from various class, ethnic and religious constituencies in the Indian population, it brought a small group of women leaders in Indian politics to the fore. Thirdly, the campaign took place in the context

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of the Indian independence struggle in which the emancipation of women was a major theme. The visible impact of that struggle on South African Indian politics therefore makes the campaign an opportune moment for an analysis of gender and politics in the Indian population.

In methodological terms this study has one major purpose—further exploration of the use of oral histories. The unbanning of political organizations in South Africa has created a precious space in which previously forbidden memories, ideas, and struggles are now beginning to emerge. The life histories of the women presented here are a small part of that recuperation process which needs to go much further.

The study of women in South African history, though now well established, often confronts problems of evidence. More recently scholars have also begun to look at problems of representation which this paper engages. In a positive sense, this a part of the challenge of writing committed social history with feminist concerns in mind. This story of the campaign is told through the political life histories of three Indian women who participated in the campaign: Fatima Seedat, Dr. Kasavello Goonam and Dr. Zeinap Asvat. The biographical sketches have been compiled primarily from oral history interviews and are therefore predictably subjective, incomplete and have to be evaluated within the problematics of the method. Despite being public figures, they have rarely been written about, nor have they written much themselves. As representatives of 'Indian women' in the campaign, and of women in that period, they can only speak within certain boundaries. The vast majority of women in the campaign returned in the years after to the seclusion and anonymity of private life and less politicised areas of activity.

Seedat, Goonam and Asvat were chosen for particular reasons. They are in part representative of a number of different political histories, backgrounds, and identities amongst Indian women. Fatima Seedat came to Natal from Cape Town carrying experience of populist trade unionism, ideas of non-racialism and Communist Party politics. Dr. Goonam had a much longer political involvement that reflects the chronology and development of radicalism in Durban. She was also the first Indian woman to enter the leadership fold and became synonymous with the character of the young radicals in the NIC. Zeinap Asvat, from the Transvaal, had in her family a legacy of political commitment that dated to Gandhi's passive resistance campaign. A student at the time of the campaign in 1946, she too established a role for women in leadership, and in popular politics. All three women came from differing language communities. Though their origins around the country differed, they were all active in Natal during the campaign. Despite bannings and

exile their commitment to liberation struggles over the years has not diminished.

A number of theoretical problems arise from this investigation, not least of which are those stemming from the nexus of race, class and gender. The conclusions that follow are tentative given the absence of evidence which might make them more concrete. The following issues invite consideration.

The laws of Manu and common sense notions of Indian women are profoundly ideological constructions aimed at both representing and yet denying representation to Indian women. The laws of Manu are the basis of Hindu law. Common sense here can be interpreted as the naturalised basis of patriarchal power (Tharpar, 1963:473). What place has the ideological device of 'passivity' in the study of Indian women and what does it tell us of the construction of gender? Gender, a historically based and socially constructed system, was invoked when women in this era talked of and acted in the name of womanhood: what cultural knowledge informs these identities, where are they drawn from and how are they operative? The idea of 'passivity' amongst Indian women potentially served a number of interests in India and the diaspora- the institutions of orthodox Hinduism, colonial rulers, colonial social reformers and patriarchy in general. More recently in a penetrating critique of the politics of academic discourse, Chandra Mohanty has identified the ways in which western feminist discourses perpetuate the notion of passivity (Mohanty, 1988:61).

'Passivity' was a correlate of private life, the natural domain of women and that in which they were exhorted to excell. 'Passivity' also indicated the boundaries of social life, boundaries which were gendered. These boundaries, backed by the repressive power of institutions and custom kept women's lives privatised. Among these institutions was the joint family. Furthermore, the boundaries made entry into public life a transgressive, potentially hazardous exercise for women. It requires noting at this point that their Indian identity, and the 'Indianness' of their gender, is very much part of a larger order of historical gender hierarchies in South African society.

Bearing in mind the context of a political campaign, it is possible to see the conditions under which some women entered the public sphere, their motivations for doing so and the extent to which their participation affected the course of events and ideas. Finally, how do we describe their actions and motivations? To summarise a complex of questions: do they conform to prevailing conceptions of

feminist consciousness? Are those necessary judgements to make and on what criteria should they be based?

None of these issues is definitively resolved but the lives of these three women illustrate them all in varying and significant ways.

Indian women have been active in South African politics since the Gandhian passive resistance campaign of 1913. A number of women played crucial roles in organising resistance, recruiting and serving prison sentences. Among them were the noted Mrs. P.K. Naidoo, Valliamah and Mrs. Veeramah Naidoo. However in the period after Gandhi's departure, the decline in militancy of Indian political organizations also meant the absence of women. Men have always been involved in politics, though their numbers, interests, and identities varied over time.

Politics and political action was issue based and mobilising took place around major campaigns, not as an on going activity. The membership of these organizations was therefore always in flux. Large crowds may have appeared at mass meetings but could not be taken for an organized, self consciousness membership. The organizations were never mass based and made no particular appeal to women. Quite simply they were not a viable constituency. Women went into other areas of activity, most visibly in charity and social welfare work. Principal among these in Natal were the Friends of the Sick Association and the Natal Indian Child Welfare Society, the latter of which was strongly identified with the work of Gadija Christopher, the wife of a leading political figure. One other form of women's organization which pre-dates and co-existed with that of political activity would be the organizations of what might be called 'female solidarity.' An example of this could be the Gujarati mahila mandal, a grouping of women typically concerned with education or welfare issues. Equivalents of this form probably existed in the other Hindu communities and in the Muslim communities. Quasi-religious and cultural organizations consisting mostly of men were common place in the 1930s. It was not until the later 1930s that any change occurred in this pattern. Few Indian women worked outside their homes or in wage labour. It was only the post war period that they entered wage work in significant numbers. Even in the 1950s Hilda Kuper, in an ethnographic study of Natal Indians, saw the Hindu wife as 'subservient to her husband but not inferior.'(Kuper, 1960:117) The wife 'leads by withdrawing, rules submitting and above all, creates by receiving.' Ideal Indian women were chaste, humble, loyal and submissive. No matter how poor the family, a wife selling her labour on the open market was a cause of shame. Presumably 'good' women did not work outside the house. If driven by poverty they were pitied, if driven by ambition they were exceptions. Kuper's study is marked by two

faults. Firstly, of excluding time and change and secondly, by the tendency to conflate normative ideas with actual practices. Nevertheless, it shows the continuity of these ideas and the logic which supported them.

Interpreting the movement of women into activities like charity and welfare work presents an interesting set of issues. On the one hand the movement of women from the seclusion of family, household and domesticity into any form of publicly constituted organization was in itself an important step. There they met other women, attended meetings, formulated policy, took decisions, were accountable to public scrutiny and gained experience of working in public life. They made major contributions in terms of time, effort and resources. There was no place here for passivity and seclusion.

In another perspective, women in these activities could be seen as a moving into a safe, acceptable space. These organizations and their concerns, welfare, children and morality, were acceptable issues for women to be concerned with. They were in effect an extension of the household, the private sphere and the traditionally inscribed roles of women. Ideologies of domesticity were reconstituted in a public setting. Working in charity did not pose a particular threat to male privilege, domination or ideas of what women were allowed to do in public. Neither did it lead to women being mobilised to demand greater freedom or decision making power in their own lives. Charity and welfare work did not have as their purpose the examination of women's subordination or strategies for emancipation. In the final analysis, it required a break into the domain of male decision making, power, and representation, to bring women into social life as a constituency. The Passive Resistance campaign did precisely that. However, what is less obvious is the extent to which women recognised themselves as a political constituency and continued to be engaged.

The quiescence in Indian women's political activity in the inter-war years in South Africa was in sharp contrast to the profile Indian women in India began to adopt in various struggles. The relevance of this contrast is in the local impact of information on these struggles received in South Africa. Local newspapers devoted much attention to the Indian cause and the sense of belonging to the 'motherland' was heightened as the nationalist movement grew in stature. This sense of identification did not diminish until the politics of citizenship changed in the 1960s. It reached a peak during the Passive Resistance campaign when India took up the cause of South African Indians at the United Nations, whilst local activists too basked in the bold new patronage they received from the newly independent nation.

Within the many signs and symbols of the new Indian nationalism, a new Indian woman was also being constructed. This symbol had as a historical legacy, the struggles of a host of women activists. From the early nineteenth century onwards a number of Indian social reformers, both male and female championed issues like women's education and suffrage whilst attacking child marriages and widow sacrifice. Among them were women like Sarojini Naidu, Dorothy Jinarjadasa, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, and Kalpana Dutt. These women represented a wide spectrum of ideological positions and talents. They included revolutionary nationalists, conservatives, and communists. By the 1940s the modern Chinese and Soviet socialist woman were also influential ideals in nationalist ideology. This modernist vision was however tempered by the Gandhian spirit of the new India based on self-sacrifice and humility. Nevertheless by the 1940s a visible group of Indian women had articulated major demands in terms of their citizenship and were making greater gains both economically and politically. Their progress was readily reported in the South African Indian media. Nehru urged women to join the independence struggle and recognised the dual obstacles which imperialism and male domination constituted. (Jayawardena, p.97) He sent a personal message of support to Zeinap Asvat during her imprisonment. Zeinap's male colleagues in leadership, in their eagerness to imitate the high ideals of the Indian struggle were therefore to an extent compelled to recognise women as a constituency.

Perhaps the best known woman activist in India to South African audiences was Sarojini Naidu who visited here in 1925. In 1914 she joined Gandhi and became a devoted follower. Prior to that she had a considerable reputation as a poet and speaker. From as early as 1917, though a conservative on some issues, Naidu campaigned for women's rights. In 1920 Naidu campaigned across India for the non-cooperation movement. In 1926 she became the first woman president of the Indian National Congress. In the upsurge of nationalist activity in the 1930s she worked with Gandhi on the Salt March of 1930, and at the Round Table Conference in London in 1931. The salt satyagraha involved 80 000 protestors, of whom 17,000 were women. In women's politics she was active in the All-India Women's Conference. In 1942 Naidu and others were arrested during the Quit India campaign. She died soon after independence 1949 after a brief period as governor of a state (Jayawardena, 1986:100).

The act which sparked off the Passive Resistance campaign effectively restricted Indian land purchases to their existing limits. Further purchases of land in 'controlled' areas, that is outside existing Indian ghettos, was prohibited without special exemption. The state also placed

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other restrictions on occupation of land already owned by Indians. As a palliative Indians were granted representation in the Senate and Assembly for the first time. This communal franchise gave them the right to elect white representatives. The act was rejected by the TIC and the NIC which then decided to embark on protest campaigns. The campaign mobilised two thousand resisters, of whom three hundred were women. In terms of forcing the state to any changes, the campaign was a failure. In symbolic terms however it was far more successful. If it was only a fleeting opportunity it did nevertheless allow women to mobilise, gain experience in political action, rise to leadership and establish a wider basis and legitimacy for their presence in the public domain. The dynamics of these processes are reflected in the discussion that follows.

Remembering the Campaign

Fatima Seedat was born in Cape Town in 1922 into an Urdu speaking Muslim family. She now lives in Durban and is the proud grandmother to a large family. Her passionate interest in politics is undiminished. Years of waiting have ended in the release from prison of many of her closest comrades.

Her father, originally from India, was a trader and her mother a housewife. In a family of nine children, she was the twin sister of Rahima, who was known after she married as Rahima Moosa. Both sisters were educated up to standard eight. Rahima was the first to enter politics through her job with the Food and Canning Workers Union. Fatima too worked in the food and canning industry after school but only for a brief period. Working was not motivated by necessity but by her father's concern that his daughters understand 'the value of money' in their later lives. Her income was about twelve shillings a month at that time.

Both the sisters had varying involvements with the Young Communist League and the Communist Party early on. Their parents were clearly supportive of such activity. They came of age in a political milieu heavily influenced by prominent members of the Party, among them Ray Alexander and Jack Simons. The influence led naturally to an interest in politics, attendance at meetings, and then working on the electoral campaigns of various Communist candidates for local government. Sunday was the day for meetings at the Parade. Their allegiance to the Party's position was defined by their being at odds with the 'Trotskyites.' Despite being very involved in its activities Fatima was not a member. In 1945 Fatima did eventually join the CPSA formally. Communism, communist ideals and the Soviet Union had a particular appeal in her youth.

The ideals of total equality and an end to race and class privilege made the greatest impact on her. Soviet ideas of womanhood in this era and popularised by the Party also began to gain currency. They valorised motherhood and child bearing as personified in the image of the 'national mother.' These Stalinist ideals were certain to play a part in Fatima's conceptions of her own identity. For one thing she was proud to have nine children. The Party was by no means the only source of these ideas, since they made up the common sense conceptions of what women's roles in society were. Until the late 1950s women's organizations continued to stress the role of mothers and the symbol of motherhood, further entrenching the basis of gender in the ideological and institutional base of the family (FEDSAW papers, letter to TIC, 16th Oct, 1959).

Fatima and her sister were part of a cohort of young Indian and Coloured women in Cape Town that were making their reputations as activists. Among them was Cissie Gool, the daughter of Dr. Abdurahman of the APO, who was a major influence in the Non-European United Front. The NEUF was founded in Cape Town in 1939 with the aim of creating a cross racial alliance and representing a wide spectrum of political allegiances. Branches were also established in Natal, Durban in particular, where it attracted the support of the emerging younger radicals. In Cape Town the Non-European Unity Movement was another major influence on their milieu, though in Fatima's case the relationship to the NEUM was an adversarial one. This was based on an analysis of their politics and what she considered appropriate strategies of political action, '...they weren't with the people in general, with the masses. They were more armchair politicians than real people who go to the forefront, sacrifice, go to jail, things like that.'

In 1942 on a trip to Durban she met her later husband to be, Dawood Seedat, a young, very committed communist activist and unionist. Dawood was among the founders of the India League, a nationalist grouping based in Durban and the Liberal Study Group, a gathering of young students and activists that had been started in the 1930s. Politically the group was heterogenous and many of them were eventually to find their way into the leadership of the Natal Indian Congress and local unions. The Study Group's interest in the looming crisis in India made them ideal hosts to the young Indira Nehru who visited Durban briefly during the war. Speaking at a large reception at a local cinema she too urged the formation of a Non-European Front.

At the time of Dawood and Fatima's meeting he was banned as a result of his anti-war activism. Their meeting was an interesting one in that it gave some indication of the codes of conduct governing the behaviour of young Muslim women in public. Fatima remembers their departure from Durban by the

presence of numbers of Muslim women who came veiled to the railway station to bid her farewell. Her father had telegraphed to their hosts in Durban to make sure that they wore purdah if they went out at night. Fatima and her sisters refused, arguing that would not be the case in Cape Town. In Durban however, their reputations were at stake. The practices of purdah and veiling have to be looked at carefully to avoid universalising them as signs of passivity and conservatism. Using the issue of the chador in Iran, Mohanty has argued that despite being seen as a return to conservatism, the veil was in fact an oppositional symbol to begin with (Mohanty, 1988:75).

In 1945 Fatima married Dawood Seedat and moved to Durban. Negotiations between the Smuts government and the new Indian leadership were coming to a head. By June of 1946 when the crisis came and the Passive Resistance campaign was launched, Fatima was pregnant with her first baby. To her it seemed imperative at the time to have her baby in gaol while resisting. She had spent her time recruiting, campaigning and collecting contributions for the NIC across the city, this was the fulfillment of her efforts. She was dissuaded for a while from resisting. June 13th, Hartal Day, was marked by a march of 15 000 men and women through the streets of Durban. (cite: Guardian June 13&20, 1946) Shops and schools were closed, hawkers ceased trading and only four farmers out of five hundred sent their produce to market.

In the same week 1 000 Indian women demonstrators, led by the Communist Party were stopped on a march by the police. Two thousand of them were boycotting a government food depot in the Mayville area of the city in opposition to the distribution system and the lack of supplies. The Mayville branch of the party was asked for assistance and agreed to lead a march to the Food Controllers Office. In the following week the Communist Party organised a major demonstration against black marketing in Durban. Four thousand demonstrators gathered in the Market Square, with Indian women in the majority. Two Indian women also addressed the meeting which took place. These occasions drew comment for the scale on which women were mobilised and the specific presence of Indian women.

Fatima was lucky to have the support of her in-laws who allowed her to be away from her usual responsibilities of household work and child care. She was not wealthy or financially independent and therefore could not exercise the privileges of class as someone like her counterpart Dr. Goonam could. Her in-laws' support of Dawood's political life was extended to her. When her daughter was four months old she purposely stopped breast feeding and prepared to go to gaol as a resistor. For her this was a necessary sacrifice. The gaol was Durban Central where she was

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sentenced to hard labour. At her trial in December 1946, Fatima like many other resisters made a statement, "I as a woman am inspired by the brave deeds of my sisters in India, China, Indonesia, Burma, Egypt, Palestine and the exploits women guerillas of Europe and Russia, am proud to contribute my mite (sic) to the universal cause of freedom and democracy (Searchlight, December 13, 1946, p.7)." Her defence invoked the strength of internationalism and the moral superiority of the struggles of women in anti-imperialist, anti-colonial struggles. For both men and women in the Passive Resistance campaign these currents in politics were a vital source of pride, motivation and legitimacy. The alternative press kept them well informed and helped to foster a sense of common cause. In 1947 the Indonesian war of independence and the war in Indo-China were high on the agenda (Passive Resister, August 14, 1947). A meeting of Africans, Indians and Coloureds on the steps of the Johannesburg City Hall condemned the Dutch attacks in Indonesia. Indian independence loomed large. In South Africa, Indian activists identified with this grand anti-imperial drama as though they were also fighting a regional sub-imperialism under Smuts (Meer, UDW, 1021/130).

Like other women resisters Fatima too remembered the gaol for the eight hours a day of scrubbing walls, floors and the prison yard, and washing the clothes of male convicts. Her hands bled and her knees became inflamed from the work. Since hers was a first offence her sentence of a month was reduced to three weeks. It was still a ridiculous penalty for sitting on a white bench at Berea station where she was arrested. For her prison was undoubtedly a transformative experience. 'Only then you are in gaol, when you have really sacrificed for your people, then you really know what freedom is. To read freedom in a book that or in a newspaper, that's nothing. It doesn't affect you, you don't get that feeling of freedom, you read freedom but you have not experienced freedom.' Her husband was shocked at first at her decision to court arrest but nevertheless supported it. In gaol the rituals of personal hygiene, bathing and menstruation became major concerns for the women. The denial of their privacy and the subjection of their bodies to public scrutiny were sources of anger and resistance.

The Indian women resisters were commonly referred to by warders as 'Marys' and the men as 'Sammys', racial taunts typical of the era. Though the prison authorities were clearly set on victimising them as a group, the women resisters were committed to supporting one another. Once out of gaol Fatima returned to campaigning, collecting and recruiting for the NIC. Fatima continued as she says to do the 'dirty work' for the NIC yet this did not detract from her support of its leadership which she considered truly representative of its various constituencies. She was equally convinced of the support men provided to their

wives, sister and daughters who courted arrest during the campaign. Her commitment to the campaign was not as an issue for women specifically but for men and women.

Once the CPISA had been banned she became a listed person. Then in 1952 she was arrested again during the Defiance Campaign and imprisoned. By this time Fatima was wholly committed to the multi-racial alliance politics being forged between the ANC and the SAIC. Soon after she was invited as a representative at the inaugural conference of the FSAW, along with Rahima. The Seedat home became a rendezvous for activists from all over the country. They were both banned in 1964, Fatima's husband was a treason trialist and she a co-conspirator. Despite being banned for five years she was delighted to have another child. The bannings curtailed their political lives radically and her husband's death in the 1970s meant a further distancing from political life.

Dr. Kasavello Goonam was born in 1906 and is now eighty four. She returned to South Africa in 1990 after 13 years in exile.

The early Goonam family was based in the Durban North area of the city which at the time was almost rural. Her father grew betel leaves and fresh produce. Unlike market gardeners her father was in effect something of a 'bourgeois farmer' who sold his produce through various businesses in Grey Street, the hub of the Indian commercial area. He was originally from the Indian city of Tanjore, a Tamil by descent. Her mother also of Tamil background and born in Mauritius maintained her own business. Goonam attributes much of her drive and success to her mothers influence. One small but visible sign of the family's status and her mother's independence was that her mother drove her own car, undoubtedly a rarity amongst Indian women at the time.

There were seven children in the family. She was educated at St. Aidans Mission School in Durban, little more than a tin shanty at the time. Primary education for Indian children up to standard six was possible but secondary education was barely in existence. A girl seeking preparation for matric was up against even greater odds. In 1931 when the Indian Girls High School first opened in Durban there were 45 students. The thirst for secondary education and the decline of prejudice against educating women were reflected in the hundredfold increase in students over twenty years (Leader, March 7, 1952). Her mother had also been educated at the mission school and then continued to educate herself through informal means at home. This informal education consisting of political and social commentary came from the Indian print media in the vernacular. Her mother's appetite for literature included popularised Shakespeare and Indian

myth and folklore. The influence spread to her children who were aware of contemporary developments like Gandhi's return to India and the emergence of Sarojini Naidu, and of their Indian heritage. The language medium of the household was Tamil. Though formal education was in English at the time, children often spent half their day at a vernacular school. In 1925 Sarojini Naidu made a considerable impact when visiting South Africa which Goonam too remembers. She was a rare symbol of modernity, as an educated, cultivated and worldly woman.

In 1928 Goonam left Durban for Britain to prepare for matriculation and university, one of the very first Indian women to do so from South Africa and certainly the first from Natal. She was by then determined to continue her education strengthened by her mothers encouragement. Unusually for this era she was not pressured by her parents into an arranged marriage. At one stage in their youth her father had asked all the children what they'd like to pursue as careers. Goonam chose law. Discovering Portia in the Merchant of Venice prompted that choice. However at the age of 22 she sailed for Edinburgh for a career in medicine. Edinburgh at the time was established as a centre to which students from the colonies, particularly Southern and Central African, were travelling to for medical education. The majority of them were male, though Goonam had for support three female post graduate students from Pakistan. Monty Naicker and Yusuf Dadoo, two of the most important Indian political figures in later years, were her colleagues. From early on Dadoo became involved in British trade union activity and politics. Naicker was not at that stage involved in politics but they were undoubtedly exposed to the currents of radical politics at the time. Indian nationalist politics in exile, which Goonam encountered, was gaining ground with Gandhi's campaigns.

In 1936 Goonam returned to South Africa having qualified as a medical doctor. She was soon confronted with the politics of segregation when applying to work in various hospitals who refused her permission. She was the first Indian woman medical practitioner in Natal when there only just a handful of Indian men qualified in medicine. She came back to the responsibilities of providing for her family since her father had returned to India in her absence.

After the life of a student in Edinburgh, Durban was an intellectual and social vacuum. As a university educated Indian woman she had few peers and the provincial ethos of the city offered even fewer opportunities. Though very eligible as a marriage partner, there were few men to equal her status. It was then that she began to encounter and engage an emerging group of mainly white young intellectuals and activists. On her return voyage she had collected names of possible contacts. She had stopped briefly in Cape Town

and met Cissy Gool and her husband. After an introduction to the Left Book Club in Durban she met the youthful new activists in Indian politics and trade unionism. They gathered periodically to discuss the latest Gollancz publications and to hear presentations of topical interest. Indian women were active in other organizations in the 1930s, but they were largely reformist or apolitical in character. An Indian Women's Reading and Educational circle was started in 1936 and by the early forties was known to be primarily concerned with feeding needy children (SAIRR General Docs Nos.3033-3066, Doc.3036B). The Indian Women's Association was also active from the early thirties, again concerned with women in welfare work. Another, the Indian Women's Club, made clothes for needy charities.

Workwise, Goonam's abilities in obstetrics and gynaecology were in much demand since many women were pleased to have a female doctor attend to them. Poorer Indian women came first to ask for her services, the wealthier staying with their white doctors. African women also became part of her practice at various clinics around the city. She practiced at clinics and around the city in a newly formed urban environment that was as yet still heavily influenced by superstition, religion and folk ideas of medicine and health. Poverty characterised much of the population in these areas. With her foreign training and emancipated style she was regarded at first with some suspicion, but later as a symbol of progress. Returning and local university graduates were often profiled in the local press to present them to the community.

The new Indian trade unions were emerging in the same period and her support for them grew as a result of working in conditions where poverty was clearly a major factor. Her attention was also directed to the education of Indian girls who were still few in number in secondary schools. She campaigned amongst parents and in public for the education of girls which many thought a counterproductive luxury or a potential source of trouble. In addition she campaigned for Indian women to enter nursing. In that instance too, ideas of what was suitable activity for women outside the home kept women away. The norm of girls being readied for marriage around the age of sixteen still prevailed. Child marriages were not a feature of South African Indian communities but there were instances of immigrant wives who were betrothed in childhood. Levels of education for girls was not a correlate of smaller family resources. Wealthier families were often even more reluctant to educate their daughters.

In political terms the early 40s saw challenges emerging to the dominance of the old guard in the NIC leadership. Goonam characterised them as pursuing 'cap in hand' style politics, a politics of accommodation and elitism. Anti-

imperial and anti-fascist and nationalist ideas held sway in the young intelligentsia in Durban. Goonam's mentor in politics for a time was Cissie Gool who came to Durban to extend the basis of the NEUF. Goonam was a willing recruit. The two of them began an organising drive. Gool's talents as an organiser and speaker in a populist radical mould were already well known. They toured the provincial towns of Natal urging the formation of a new movement and trying to create the basis of a new politics. The presence of two women as speakers assured them of a more curious audience. The response in numbers was favourable but their ideas found more resistance. Multi-racialism and cross racial politics as an ideal, in terms of political practice and theory, had yet to take hold in these areas. This was an initiative much in advance of the 'doctors pact' between the Indian and African congresses later in the 1940s. It was nevertheless a brave gesture in a new direction. The base for the NEUF in Durban at the time was the Liberal Study Group(LSG). Indian women were in a minority in the Group which did however include in its ranks a number of white women activists with whom Goonam was closely associated. The white women activists were in the main committed socialists allied to either the Communist Party or the trade unions. Among them were Fay King Goldie, Vera Alberts, Sarah Rubin, Pauline Podberry, Sarah Carneson and Jacqueline Lax. Some of them later married Indian activists within the organization.

Goldie, a noted socialist and writer who had visited the Soviet Union presided over the Study Group for a time. Goonam became the best known Indian woman member. In 1942 the women constituted a Women's Liberal Group (Meer, UDW, 1021/87). Though some of its officers are known, its activities and duration are not. Goonam lectured at the inaugural meeting. Their concerns covered the need for secondary education for women, the role of women in the community and the greater need for unity amongst Non-European women. There were attempts at drawing in younger students and those interested in the debates of the LSG (Meer, UDW, 1021/89).

On another occasion Indian women came to the fore, this time in direct response to the situation in India. In August 1942 a meeting was convened by 13 women to protest against the arrest of Indian nationalists (Meer, UDW, 1021/89). Goonam and Marie Naicker, the wife of Dr. G. M. Naicker addressed the meeting. They were concerned particularly with the arrest of Kasturba Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, Vijayalaxmi Pandit and Mira Behn. Interestingly the meeting was conducted in Hindi, Gujarati and Tamil, thus reflecting the extent to which the use of English as the medium of politics was very much a sign of modernity, education and a new form of political discourse. That discourse in turn described and reflected the emergence of a new political community.

Women, having less access to education in English and being largely home based, operated in the vernacular. By the early 1940s Goonam was also part of the Anti-Segregation Council and allied with an insurgent 'nationalist bloc' in politics.

Another figure emerges in the early 1940s though not with any clarity (Meer, UDW, 1021/72 ,1021/103). A writer under the name Hawa Ahmed began to address women's issues through the newsletter of the NEUF and lectured to the LSG. She was infact Halima Nagdee, who gained a considerable reputation as a writer and critic. Attracting attention as an outspoken woman writer took relatively little effort in the small and closed Indian population of Natal and the Transvaal.

The CPSA was an important influence in the politics of the young intelligentsia and Goonam too was attracted by the Party. On her return to Durban she began attending party meetings frequently but was dissuaded from joining the Party, by the Party itself, for tactical reasons. She did nevertheless make appearances with the Party as in the 1946 International Women's Day. (Walker, 1982:111) Though LSG was in a sense a proving ground for these women activists it did not give rise to anything like a programmatic and ongoing concern with women's rights. Of them Goonam gained the strongest reputation as an advocate of women's concerns in the years that followed.

With the change of leadership in the NIC in 1945, Goonam was elected to the committee as vice-president in 1946. She was the only woman member until two others were elected during the Passive Resistance campaign. Her election to the position was not on the basis of her being representative of women's interests in the organization or being elected by women. She was by far too much of an exception as an Indian woman. She was of a very small educated elite, unmarried, childless, worked in an explicitly public context and was financially self-supporting. As Walker has argued, in Goonam's case she was in strong position to reject and overcome traditionally assigned women's roles.

Her influence on the NIC was nevertheless well recognised as were her drive and commitment. The new leadership predictably met with some resistance on their rural organizing drives. Goonam had to prove herself under these conditions. By March 1946 Goonam and other activists were addressing women's meetings which analysed the Ghetto Bill and notified them of a plan of action in which women would have to figure out their role. She called on women to break from their domestic burdens, assume their rightful positions alongside their menfolk and to fight for the futures of their children. In these appeals womanhood was equated with citizenship, motherhood, and the role of women in their

families (Leader, March 30, 1946). Along with Suryakala Patel from the Transvaal, she toured the Natal midlands recruiting during the campaign. On one occasion, in early 1947, her leadership and that of the NIC foundered when they advocated a boycott of the Royal Family's visit to South Africa. The anti-imperialist rhetoric of the leadership had not taken root with the membership. Royalist patriotism triumphed and Goonam was routed at a public meeting (Leader, February 22, 1947).

During the Passive Resistance Campaign Goonam was imprisoned for two months of hard labour and then subsequently another three. Cissie Gool, Goonam's early mentor also volunteered in the first stages of the campaign. She was sentenced in August (Indian Views, August 1946). By the end of 1946 Gool was back in Cape Town trying to recruit more volunteers and mobilise against the Act. Interestingly, she made one such appeal at a meeting of the Cape Malay Association at which Malays were celebrating the anniversary of the emancipation of slaves (Leader, December 7, 1946). Gool argued that even if the Passive Resistance campaign failed, it would be a valuable education in political methods for Non-Europeans. She saw it as a break with the politics of compromise, deputations and committees which the old guard had relied on. This was a campaign based on a new political philosophy of action, confrontation and new constituencies. Passive Resistance, like earlier political campaigns had at its core the rights of citizenship and the identity of the citizen. However, the difference in 1946 was that the discourse of citizenship was being shaped and acted upon by women in political struggle (Indian Views, August 7th, 1946). Motherhood and womanhood were being mobilised as political, not just personal identities.

In 1946 a Women's Action Committee was formed within the Passive Resistance Council. The Committee's major concern was to be the collection of funds for the campaign (Meer, UDW, 1021/126). Ms. Rathamoney Padayachee was elected as an NIC committee member and as secretary of the Womens' Action Committee, which was part of the Passive Resistance Council (Meer, UDW, 1021/23). Janaki Naidoo and Dr. Ansuyah Singh made up the group of four women to take up executive leadership positions in the NIC. Ms. Naidoo was elected in October 1946. A relative of Goonam's, she was also from the same south Indian city and had been previously involved in the All India Congress Women's Association in India (Searchlight, October 4, 1946).

In Pietermaritzburg, concurrently, a Progressive Women's Organization was formed. A packed hall of women heard praises for the women of India struggling for independence. The elected leadership called for greater education of women through classes by the Congress. On the same day however, on a different tack, Mrs. Kalideen, the vice-president of

the Women's Indian Club in Durban was urging more parents to enroll their daughters with the club. Tennis was the club's main attraction! In the Transvaal three women, for the first time in the history of the TIC, were elected to the executive committee. They were Zienap Asvat, Suryakala Patel, and Mrs. P.K. Naidoo (Indian Views, October 23, 1946). By November 1946, women had also been elected to the NIC branch committee in Newcastle (Searchlight, Nov. 29, 1946).

Though Indian nationalism, incorporating both Hindu and Muslim aspirations was the dominant ideological influence in this period, it was subject to divisions. A group of Muslim women forming the Muslim Ladies Society held a mass meeting in August 1946 and put forward a resolution on Muslim rights in India whilst claiming to represent the Muslim womanhood of Natal. In India itself, the All India Women's Conference was making strident calls for women's rights and emancipation (Leader, March 22nd, 1947).

The congresses were working to draw women into participation on whatever fronts they could. In 1947 the Passive Resister, the newsletter of the campaign identified the emancipation of women with passive resistance, using the example of Sarojini Naidu as an example. It claimed that Gandhian philosophy had to involve women. Non-violence as a political philosophy was being equated with the strength of Indian womanhood (Passive Resister Sept 25, 1947).

Satyagraha or passive resistance as a form of political action presents some interesting questions as to what forms of political action women adopt, and whether there is a gendered dimension to those strategies. In South Africa Gandhi had made it acceptable from the outset for women, who were traditionally denied public roles by prejudice and power, to engage in political action. Perhaps we should ask why this was so, and what was there about satyagraha that made it appropriate for women. In the same vein we could go on to ask whether satyagraha was the same experience for men as it was for women? This is not to deny the agency of women as participants of their volition, but to examine the way in which the space for political action was constructed. To draw women into public, particularly for politics required considerable justification. In an evocative memoir of her family history, Shusilla Nayer, an Indian woman who came of age during Gandhi's early campaigns in India, expressed the enormity of her mother's break from purdah to attend a public meeting. A woman of her caste and status would not be seen at a public meeting (Nayer, 1963:208).

In the Gandhian sense, passive resistance and non-violence were expressions of strength. They relied on the moral superiority of the subject, not the force of arms. The victims of domination would triumph by the denial of

violence, self sacrifice and suffering. These ideals fitted well with Gandhian and perhaps pre-existing Indian notions of women and womanhood. Feminist scholars looking at the nationalist movement have argued that Gandhi saw the ideals of satyagraha personified by women (Jayawardena, 1986:95). Their capacity to suffer was a virtue to be exalted and their natural inclination was towards non-violence. Their daily use of passive resistance was a basis on which to include them in a movement. Others have argued that Gandhi and the movement had a conservative effect on women (Trivedi, 1984:43). In turn Indian women took up satyagraha as appropriate, arguing that it was in fact more feminine than masculine. On another level this gendered conception of politics possibly leant greater credence to the British disdain for Indian men as feminised, mystically duped characters, so typical of the Orient. Ultimately, it provides indirect and misconstrued support for the myth of passivity.

In January 1948 the second phase of the Passive Resistance campaign began in which resisters went from Durban to Volksrust, there to enter the Transvaal illegally (Meer, UDW, 1021/133) In March Goonam led a batch of resisters into the Transvaal and was arrested. She was again sentenced to hard labour (Pass Resistor March 13, 1948). By early June the campaign had ended by decision of the Joint Passive Resistance Council (Meer, UDW, 1021/137) After the campaign the NIC went into a period of inactivity. The Defiance Campaign was the NIC's next major mobilising initiative. Once it had committed itself to an alliance with the ANC, the NIC began to lose its specifically Indian focus. Goonam continued working in politics but in the NIC the energy of the campaign had dissipated. In 1956 Goonam left for India to take up an appointment as assistant director of family planning in the Nehru government. On her return in 1960 she was subjected to the various forms of repression and intimidation that characterised the era. Like other activists she lived in fear. The NIC was among the first organizations to be revived after the long silence of the sixties. Its activity was fuelled by the energies of a new generation of activists, though the leadership remained unchanged in character initially. In 1976 after a tip off that she would be about to be arrested, Goonam left South Africa for a period of exile at the age of 70.

Dr. Zeinap Asvat now lives in London and works as a medical doctor. She left South Africa in 1970 as an exile after being banned in the 1960s.

The Asvat family's involvement in politics began with her father, E.M. Asvat who was a Gandhian passive resistor and president of the Transvaal Indian Congress. During the campaigns he had the distinction of being gaoled fourteen times. He was born in Gujarat village of Kafleta in India

and arrived in South Africa at the age of twenty. The village based identity of migrants like Asvat was important in that it determined the networks the family would be part of and the influence his children would carry in the Gujarati merchant community. Children would typically be asked who their father was and what village he came from. Amina, Zeinap's younger sister recalled this pattern when collecting funds in the 1950s for organizations. In later years leaders like Yusuf Dadoo could call upon the support of migrants from his family's ancestral home in Kolvad, India. Despite migration these identities survived and the community was structured by them. In turn politics was also determined by these structures of association (Cachalia, 1990).

E. Asvat soon established various family businesses in the Vereeniging area, being mainly a trader. He married in 1914 to Zeinap's mother who was locally born. The departure of Gandhi saw a decline in the position of the TIC. The effects of political life also took their toll on the family's fortunes. The family moved first to Newclare and then Fordsburg, both suburbs of Johannesburg with sizable Indian populations. Zeinap was born in 1925 and was the fifth child in a family of eleven children. She grew up in Newclare and was educated at the Eurafrikan Training Centre which was the only secondary school available for Indian, African and Coloured children. At sixteen she went to Fort Hare to begin the first part of her medical training. It was an important move into a new social world peopled by a youthful black intelligentsia. Politically she remembers it as relatively quiescent time. Nevertheless it was an induction into a network of peers that would grow in influence. In 1944 she began the next part of her training at the medical faculty at Wits (Searchlight, Sept. 20, 1946). By 1943 her father had died. Through him Zeinap had been introduced to meetings of the NEUF in her adolescence and the TIC. As part of the new influx of youth into the congresses she too began agitating for change in the organization. Yusuf Dadoo, on his return from abroad became a close family associate. Despite the falling fortunes of the Asvat family he encouraged and supported Zeinap financially to continue studying. He was a major influence on her initiation into politics. Dadoo's heady brand of radicalism and his fiery oratory attracted the youth and had strong resonances in the early political history of the congresses. For Zeinap's father too this was the rekindling of the radical tradition. While the older Asvat presided over meetings, Dadoo set about rejuvenating the TIC in the Transvaal. As early as 1939 Dadoo began formulating campaigns of Passive Resistance (Johnson, 1972:50).

By the early 1940s women were active in large numbers in the ranks of the TIC though none had yet been elected into leadership positions. Their votes had been used in 1943 to

break an attempt by Dadoo to divide the TIC. At a meeting at the Wemmer Grounds large number of Muslim women were brought out of purdah to cast their votes for the incumbent leaders. Writers to the press noted this breach of etiquette with alarm. Although a separate women's organization had not been formed within the congress's ranks, women later formed an informal grouping which would come into its own during the Passive Resistance campaign. When the Passive Resistance campaign was announced Zeinap was called upon to lead the first batch of 6 women resistors. Four of them crossed from the Transvaal into Natal illegally for the Hartal Day, June 13. Zeinap was chairman of the Indian Youth Volunteer Corps. The others included Mrs. Bhayat of the Transvaal Volunteer Corps, Amina Pahad and Zubeida Patel. Two other women from Durban joined them.

After a meeting at Red Square they moved to Gale Street to pitch their tents. On June 17 the camps were attacked by right wing whites (Leader, June 22, 1946). Asvat was injured. Soon afterwards she addressed the first major meeting of women on the campaign (Leader June 29, 1946). Eight hundred women met at a cinema in Durban. Dr. Goonam spoke, Mrs. K. Mayet spoke in Urdu and Mrs. Veeramah Naidoo, a veteran of the Gandhian Passive Resistance campaign spoke in Tamil. The women were informed of the newly established collection committees and the plans for the campaign. A meeting of women on this scale was a major achievement. It marked a significant moment in bringing them into public political action as a group.

Students too were being mobilised. The young Fatima Meer, a student at the Girls High School was threatened with expulsion. Her offence was participating in a women's meeting against the Ghetto Bill and organising a students protest meeting. Male and female students formed the Student's Passive Resistance Committee (Indian Views, July 24, 1946). The students were successful in collecting L1000 for the campaign part of which was raised through a concert. Asvat remembered their presence and support at the camp site at Gale Street (Leader June 22, 1946). By July of 1946, 275 resistors were already in prison.

Mrs. Veeramah Naidoo had spent three months in prison in the first Passive Resistance campaign of 1913. The participation of women like Mrs. Naidoo who died in 1946 had considerable symbolic weight. It was a thread of continuity with the Gandhian legacy. Their participation was a legitimising gesture for the young leadership of the 1946 campaign. Furthermore, their status as older and respected women enabled other women to cross into public life more readily. They added a stamp of public approval to political action by women. Her daughter-in-law Mrs. Amah Naidoo also volunteered as a resistor in 1946 and participated in

organising for the FSAW in the 1950s. Amah's husband Roy, had been sent to India at fifteen and educated by Gandhi. Amah Naidoo was newly married with young children during the '46 campaign. She had to arrange for their care whilst she went to prison. As part of her responsibilities in the household, she remembers feeding huge numbers of guests, the overflow of political meetings her husband organised. There was no convenient care for the children when she was organising, collecting, recruiting and attending meetings- the children went with her (Naidoo, 1991).

This was probably the case for many women. The division of labour meant her burden was simply expanded to include politics, not reorganised to shift greater responsibility to her husband. This increased burden and her success at coping with it are remembered with pride, as a sacrifice, yet they are also the very constraints under which women were immobilised and kept out of public life. Poverty and the balance of survival also had the same effect. Now in her eighties Amah Naidoo is still active in the TIC. One other example illustrates the spectrum of women drawn into the campaign. Salachie Khan, a resistor gave up her factory job as a machinist earning L3.6s a week for the campaign. She organised the recruitment of resisters, house to house and factory collections. She put her daughter into her sister's care during her imprisonment. Her sister contributed by collecting money, leafletting and addressing envelopes. Other women followed their example (Guardian July 18, 1946).

Asvat was in her third year at medical school when she volunteered for the campaign. Her participation, the injury and imprisonment garnered larger numbers of volunteers for the campaign amongst men and women. When sentenced in July 1946, she was singled out as an organiser and given three months of hard labour instead of the twenty day sentences given to other resisters. She was transferred from Durban to Pietermaritzburg where Goonam and herself were kept in solitary confinement. She continually challenged the prison authorities on the abuse they meted out to prisoners. In an effort to break their morale, the authorities forced the resisters to scrub floors twice a day. With their medical experience Goonam and Asvat tended to the prisoners medical problems. The local Indian community in Pietermaritzburg gave them support and fed them on occasion. The prison sentences were a trial which they felt they had to endure and overcome. Asvat remembered her father's example and the struggles taking place in India at the very same time. Once released in September 1946 she returned to the Transvaal but could not return to university immediately. Election to the executive of the TIC gave her larger responsibilities. Two other women, Suryakala Patel and Mrs. P K. Naido, another veteran of the Gandhian campaigns, were also elected to executive positions. For

Zeinap the election meant representing women as a constituency. They met at one another's homes, heard grievances, offered advice and continued to organise. As an educated young woman who was firmly placed in the public arena she had considerable authority. Younger women wanting to continue their educations sought her support and she in turn lobbied their parents and vouched for the students. Organising women had its own dynamics. Weddings, funerals and other religious or festive occasions were opportune moments. Asvat remembers canvassing support at these occasions where women traditionally gathered. These gatherings were the major public appearances for most women who otherwise spent little time away from their homes or families. In Durban her concern had been to bring different groups of women into the campaign. Muslim women were a relatively smaller presence in Natal politics, in comparison to the South Indians and Hindu women generally. In comparison to the Transvaal, Asvat saw Natal as more politically conservative. Class and religious/ethnic divisions within the Indian population were more pronounced to her. The perception of politics in the Muslim community was of a pastime of the underclasses. The Tamils and Telegus, seemed to have a greater investment in politics and social change. In their ranks were the emerging petty bourgeois and professional classes of teachers, doctors and lawyers.)

Asvat qualified as medical doctor in 1951. In the fifties it was her younger sister Amina that continued the family's involvement in politics, through FEDSAW and the Women's Progressive Union, a small group she founded. After qualifying Asvat practiced in Johannesburg for a few years. During this time she was married briefly and divorced. In 1959 she married again. By the late fifties many of her contemporaries in the TIC were subject to banning orders. Her own involvement in politics too declined sharply. Despite this lower profile she was also banned beginning in 1963, until she left for London in 1970.

The most compelling question, yet the most difficult to answer, after reviewing the high moments of Indian womens' mobilisation in the period 1946-48 is: why and where did they disappear to afterwards? There is no adequate answer for their absence except perhaps that organisers and organizations were unsuccessful in remobilising them. Their absence leads one to ask what if any impact did the Passive Resistance campaign have on their political and private lives. In the final analysis, did it challenge, unhinge or perhaps even change the gender hierarchy which previously kept them out of politics and public life. Amina Cachalia, an activist who came of age in the fifties offered one possible answer. Even if these women of the forties returned to the seclusion of home and family, they would at least let their daughters break those bounds in the years to

come. That the women of the forties made great sacrifices and a major impact on politics is undeniable. So too is the fact that they established an important legacy for Indian women in politics in later years, and a contribution to the struggles of all South African women. This tradition of resistance is every bit as important in the contemporary mobilisation of women.

They were however, unable to sustain the impulse towards greater changes. To a degree the advances made in the brief interlude of the forties were out of step with the material and structural features of their lives. It was only when these structures began to change that their emancipation found a surer footing. It required changes in the organization of gender within their families, paid work outside the home, more job opportunities, higher levels of education and freedom from large corporate units like the extended family. Women going to prison, participating in public discourse and campaigning definitely made an impact on men. It established the gendered dimensions of politics. What is less tangible and harder to gauge is whether it made a sufficient impact to change gender roles and ideologies in the immediate aftermath of the campaign. A cursory appraisal would indicate no. Turning motherhood from a personal identity into a political symbol of mobilisation was effective but also limiting.

Perhaps these contradictions ultimately have something to do with 'passivity' and the persistence of that image. Satyagraha for women in effect valorised their vulnerability and subordination to male and colonial power. As in the denouement of a classic nationalist drama, women were exhorted to overturn the public architecture of colonial power, whilst leaving its foundations of male power in their heavily guarded private lives untouched.

January 1991

*Passive resistance = feminism
Des. 1991 = Women's
Movement of Africa*

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I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Champa Goolab who provided access to her sources and for comments on this paper.

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