

“Docile” Indian Women Protest – We shall Resist: Passive Resistance in South Africa 1946-1948

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ABSTRACT This paper provides a gendered perspective of the 1946-1948 passive resistance movement in South Africa. It analyses the role Indian women played in the movement and addresses three issues: Firstly, it examines the socio-economic and political conditions of the 1930s and 1940s and ways in which it aided in the politicization of Indian women. The economic crisis during this period seriously affected working class women and provided a basis for political protest. It argues that political awareness, to a very large extent, is inculcated via a process of socialization. This is clearly evident in the political profiles of women in leadership positions in the passive resistance campaign. Secondly, it challenges the myth of the “docile” and “passive” Indian women, and argues that women’s political participation was based on their own determination and not prescribed by men. The degree of women’s activism and the brave accounts of their courage and valor, bears testimony to this fact. Thirdly, it assesses to what extent did political participation challenge gender hierarchy? Did political activism aid women’s liberation? This paper hopes to provide a feminist interjection to the historiography of the 1946-1948 passive resistance campaign in South Africa.

I. INTRODUCTION

The portrayal of Indian women as “docile” and “passive” were “popular images of the sub-continent and of Indian populations in the diaspora (Chetty 1991). These “images” must be understood in the context of gender constructions and gender relations in Indian society. Women were highly revered both in the Quran and the holy Sanskrit writings particularly as mothers, but her relationship with her spouse was one of subordination. In the laws of Manu which formed the basis of Hindu laws in the ancient period, it stated: ‘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’ (Chetty 1991). Thus a dutiful wife was one who practiced “pativrata”, one who worshipped her husband ‘regardless of his worth or character, as if he were a god’. These patriarchal attitudes characterized Indian families, but the nature of female subjugation and oppression varied on the basis of religion, class and caste in India. For example, the practice of purdah, (seclusion, wearing of the veil) and polygamy was common amongst wealthy Muslims. (Beall 1990). Sati, self-immolation of widows on the death of her husband’s pyre, was practiced among some

Hindu women, which conjured images of the “ideal woman”. By self-immolation, a Hindu woman not only displayed her “pativrata” but also her spirit of sacrifice and fidelity. A good wife, mother and daughter was one who accepted, but did not challenge, the patriarchal boundaries both within the public and private sphere and one who embodied the virtues of chastity, moral courage, suffering and sacrifice.

These attitudes prevailed amongst Indian immigrants in the diaspora. Women were largely confined to the home and occupied a “particularly lowly status” (Wells 1991). During the first Satyagraha campaign of 1906-1908 in Natal, a movement that protested against a series of discriminatory legislation that restricted the economic, political and social freedom of Indians in South Africa, Indian women volunteered to actively participate. However, they were discouraged by male members of their community as “it would be derogatory to our manhood if we sacrificed our women in resisting a law, which was directed only against men”(Gandhi 1961). These gender prejudices of women’s roles and activities within the public and private spheres were deeply rooted. During the second Satyagraha campaign of 1913, Indian women, from varied religious sects and linguistic groups played a pivotal role in mobilizing support, defying

discriminatory laws and serving prison sentences. They protested against a ruling that nullified all non-Christian Indian marriages thereby challenging their status as wives and mothers. According to Wells, "because women were acting in defence of their religion and their domestic role in 1913, their participation in that campaign was condoned, even encouraged" (Wells 1991). By engaging in these activities women broke out of their traditional boundaries, and challenged the images of the "passive" and "docile" Indian women. However, despite women's sterling contribution to the movement, it did little to challenge the gender hierarchy in Indian society and sustain women's political engagement. There was no serious attempt by women to consolidate and extend their political activism in the post 1913 period (Wells 1991).

In the 1930s and 1940s Indian women, largely were still very tradition bound. Their primary role was that of a wife and mother. In most cases, any attempt to secure a higher education and challenge existing gender roles was met with resistance. Women's efforts at organization and management position outside the home were largely confined to cultural organizations and charitable work. Among them were the Friends of the Sick Association (FOSA) of which Dr Kesavaloo Goonam, an active member of the Natal Indian Congress NIC (and the first Indian woman to qualify as a medical doctor) and Gadija Christopher (wife of Advocate Albert Christopher) was actively involved. Other institutions and organizations that women were actively engaged were Child Care, Red Cross, Cripple Care, Race Relations, and the Benevolent Society. Communal cultural groups based on linguistic and religious affiliation, for example, the Gujarati Mahila Mandal (Women's association) was primary concerned with education and cultural issues. (Chetty 1991).

However, by the beginning of the 1940s, confronted by changing social and economic conditions, there appeared the first signs of political activity among a small, group of educated and political conscious individuals. Two organizations, the Left Book Club (LBC) and the Liberal Study Group (LSG) offered young intellectuals, men and women, a platform to discuss issues of topical interest and engage in political debate. Its members were predominantly trade unionists and communist party supporters (Chetty 1991).

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Contemporary feminist scholarship over the past three decades has espoused different theoretical paradigms and analytical tools in the way we conceptualize and understand women's political participation. Issues of class, race, ethnicity and gender has enabled us to understand not only women's varied experiences, but also the nature, content and form of their political resistance. (Alvarez 1990; Brink 1990; Guy 1990; Wells 1991; Craske 1999; Grundlingh 2002; Stanley 2006; van Heyningen 2007). Women's defined roles as, wives, mothers and daughters can be "confining and isolating in the sense that they do not allow women access to such resources for political activities" (Liao 1990). Moreover, women in some societies are further confined to specific roles by a social system that "still considers women as defacto....second class citizens" (Liao 1990). Thus women's political participation must be assessed in the context of both "situational and structural" explanations. Research has also shown that "social protest itself may significantly alter gender relations" (Maggard 1990) while others have emphasized its limitations, in challenging gender hierarchy. In other words, social protest may be used to achieve women's temporary political goal, but not "as an end in itself" (Liao 1990). This paper situates itself within the above theoretical framework. It argues that the economic and social conditions of the 1930s and 1940s provided a stimuli and platform for Indian women to become politically motivated. Both professional and working class women began to take an active interest in politics. Moreover, socialization played a pivotal role in creating gender political consciousness, which was clearly evident in the profiles of women in leadership positions. Secondly, it challenges the myth of the "docile" and "passive" Indian women by illuminating the form, content and consequences of women's protest. Women's political participation was based on their own determination and not prescribed by men. The degree of Indian women's activism and the brave accounts of their courage and valor, bears testimony to this fact. Lastly it argues that political participation did not challenge gender roles as there was no effort on the part of women in the post 1948 period to sustain the political momentum of the 1940s. This paper hopes to provide a feminist perspective to

the historiography of the 1946-1948 passive resistance campaign in South Africa.

III. IMPACT OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 had important economic, social and political implications for South Africa. It saw a shift in state support from mining and agriculture to manufacturing, which created boom conditions for the economy. Despite this, most workers in the industry, mainly African, men and women, in unskilled and semi skilled labor derived little benefits in the form of higher wages or cheaper consumer goods. The war had dramatically raised the cost of living, particularly on basic food items, and accentuated the poverty levels among the workers and peasants (Walker 1991; Nattrass 2005). The cost of staple foods rose by 91 per cent between 1939 and 1944. The price of basic foodstuffs more than trebled in comparison with prices in 1938 and 1948, rice from 2/7d to 7/9 per lb; tea, 25/7d to 50/7d per lb; eggs, 21/7d to 37/-d per doz and jam 5/5d to 17/3d per lb (Walker 1991).

The vast majority of Indians in Durban in the late 1930s and 1940s became part of the urban proletariat and were engaged primarily in commerce and industry. Very few Indian women worked outside their homes or in wage labor. Patriarchal attitudes toward women confined them primarily to the domestic sphere. For example, in the 1936 *Union Statistics* census of 'economically active' women over 15 years of age Indian women totaled only 3,710 or 7.3%, as compared to 33% of 'Coloured'¹ and 19.4% of white women. Moreover, Indian women engaged in wage employment were active primarily in the service (1,263) or agricultural (1,082) industries (Walker 1991). In the domestic economy women were mainly engaged in hawking and market gardening. They sold predominantly fresh fruit, vegetables and flowers. They were predominantly Tamil, Telegu and Hindi speaking Hindu women. Continuous rent increases on market stalls and restrictions on trading locations made it very difficult for them to survive economically. Many lived below the poverty line and could not sustain their families on their meager incomes. They were forced to supplement their livelihoods by engaging in domestic work and working as field-laborers. Some families occasionally used child labor to supplement their income (African

Chronicle 1908; Natal Advertiser 1929; Letter from Frank Acutt to Town Clerk 1921; Durban Mayor's Minutes 1936; Chief Constable to General Purposes Committee 1927; Chief Constable to City and Water Engineer 1948). The seriousness of this situation on Indian working class families can be understood in terms of the level of poverty noticeable among Indians during the war years, between 1939-1945. This undoubtedly had a negative impact on the community, especially women. Unemployment, shortage of housing and low wages was a feature of Indian life in Natal during this period. In 1948 a government body, the Social and Economic Planning Council published a report, highlighting the degree of urban poverty amongst the various race groups. A comparative assessment between the years 1943-1944, reveals that 70.6% of Indians, 38.2% of 'Coloureds', 24. 8% of Africans and 5.2% of white families were living below the poverty datum line (Walker 1991). Dr Goonam, a prominent activist in the campaign described the extent of poverty amongst the Indian community quite vividly in her autobiography, *Coolie Doctor*:

"During my home visits, I discovered the depth of Indian poverty. The staple diet was mealie rice, dholl, herbs, potatoes and pickles. Protein was sadly lacking, meat, fish and chicken being beyond their reach. I enjoyed the visits, but felt helpless against the poverty....." (Goonam 1991).

Thus fluctuating socio-economic conditions in South Africa in the 1930s and 1940s, seriously affected working class women of all racial groups. It challenged their family's survival and impinged on women's roles as wives and mothers. It undermined their roles as nurturers and family protectors. A large number of working class households were dependent on female bread winners, because of the high male unemployment. Given the centrality of women's roles as wives and mothers, it provided a basis, in many ways for political action. For example, during the war the Communist Party of South Africa, sought to mobilize women around food issues. In June 1946, one thousand Indian women demonstrators, led by the CPSA engaged in protest marches. According to Chetty, two thousand women "were boycotting a government food depot" in Mayville, in the city of Durban, in opposition to the distribution system and lack of supplies. They later joined the Mayville branch of the CPSA, who together lead a march to the Food Controllers

Office. This was followed by an organized demonstration against black marketing in Durban. Four thousand demonstrators, mainly Indian women gathered at the Market Square, in protest (Chetty 1991).

In fact the CPSA had a significant impact on the politicization of women during this period. In the 1940s the party was gaining support because of its pro-war stand in an attempt to fight fascism and defend the Soviet Union. This was welcomed and "in this new climate they enjoyed some degree of tolerance from the government" (Raman 2005). Women of all racial groups, albeit small in number, saw the party as a vehicle for addressing the social and economic evils of society and supporting women's emancipation.

IV. TRADE UNIONS

Trade union activity also served as a politicizing agent on Indian women. By the 1940s a small percentage of women, predominantly Hindi and Tamil speaking women entered wage labor. They were mainly employed in the clothing, textiles and food industries. The unions were important in that it offered an entry for political training. In the 1940s, "certain trade unions would play a very important part in nurturing and directing the course of the women's movement" (Walker 1991). Working class women were drawn into trade union activity because it gave them a platform to articulate common grievances. Union activity empowered women into the wider public sphere of meetings, speeches and organization. It was within this political environment that enabled women to occupy leadership positions (Chetty 1991; Walker 1991). For example sisters Rahima and Fatima Seedat entered politics through their jobs with the Food and Canning industry after school. In the early forties there was a major strike at the Durban Iron Falkirk Works. H. A. Naidoo² a Communist activist, and trade unionist, enlisted, the support of Dr Goonam. Together with certain members of the NIC, such as A. I. Kajee, they successfully mediated with management and extracted concessions for Indian workers. Dr Goonam actively supported the trade union movement. During trade union disputes, Goonam was appointed medical attendant to Indian striker's families, and clearly understood the plight of union workers (Chetty 1991; Goonam 1991).

In fact India's struggle for independence and

the courageous efforts of women in the movement had a huge impact on Indian women in South Africa. In August 1942, in support of the liberation struggle in India, a meeting was held in Durban, largely coordinated by Indian women. At this meeting, resolutions were passed protesting against the imprisonment of not only Indian nationalists but women too. Dr Goonam and Mrs Marie Naicker, wife of Dr Monty Naicker³ addressed the meeting. They were concerned particularly with the arrest of Kasturba Gandhi (wife of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi), Sarojnini Naidu, Vijayaluxmi Pandit and Mira Bhen. These women served as role models for activists such as Zainub Asvat, Dr Goonam and Zohra Bhayat (Chetty 1991).

V. IMPACT OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN INDIAN CONGRESS

The South African Indian Congress (SAIC) during the war years also paved the way for the entry of Indian women into politics. The Congress was the amalgamation of the three political Indian bodies, namely the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC), the Cape Indian Congress and the Natal Indian Congress (NIC). The NIC, the main political organ of the Indian community in Natal was, by the late 1930s, primarily controlled by the Indian elite, who was more representative of the commercial class than the working class. This group had accumulated real estate and trading privileges within the segregatory framework and their main concern was to protect those privileges. It was in this "claustrophobic" political environment, that the LSG was established (Chetty 1991 and Goonam 1991). The Group constituted of radical students, young lawyers, doctors and trade unionists. Many of its members were affiliated with the NIC, but were intensely critical of the leadership and were keen to reform the party (Goonam 1991). Indian women were in the minority in the Group but it also included a number of white women activists with whom Goonam was closely associated. The former were either trade unionists or members of the Communist party. Among them were Fay King Goldie, Vera Alberts, Sarah Rubin and Pauline Podberry (Chetty 1991). The LSG requires closer examination. It played a very vital role in shaping women's political consciousness and policies of those who took over the leadership of the NIC after 1945. The Group met periodically and was active in

organizing debates on topics of contemporary interest such as capitalism, imperialism etc. Goonam lectured at its inaugural meeting. The LSG also gave rise to bodies such as the Women's Liberal Group (WLG) and the Durban and District Women's League and the Women's Class (Chetty 1991). At the inaugural meeting of the WLG, Goonam raised issues concerning secondary education for women, the status of women in the community and the greater need for unity among women across racial lines. The inauguration of these women's bodies marked a new era of female participation in the Indian Congress. As the Second World War progressed the conditions of the Indian people worsened. Anti-Indianism also intensified (Chetty 1991). Faced with an acute land and housing shortage, some Indians, predominantly the wealthy Indian merchant, rented and purchased property in areas that had become traditionally white. The NIC became defensive and negotiated with the government a system of voluntary segregation. In other words, Indians would not purchase any further property or "penetrate" in white areas, in return the government would not enforce legislated residential segregation towards Indians. The radicals were incensed with the autocratic leadership of the Congress and the LSG formed the Anti-Segregation Council and fought the "old guard" (Goonam 1991). The struggle for leadership resulted in victory for the radicals, in both the Transvaal and Natal Congresses. However during the first election of the newly formed NIC, Dr Goonam took to the platform on numerous occasions. Dr Goonam recalls the atmosphere at some of these meetings:

Some meetings were boisterous, and opposition rowdy. At one meeting in Pietermaritzburg, I had the sense of a cool reception and the reception became freezing when I took the microphone. I was met with a jet of water, and was soon drenched to the skin (Goonam 1991).

There was a large presence of women at election rallies, but women did not exercise their voting rights as the NIC's constitution had denied that right to women. At the very first meeting of the new NIC executive an urgent amendment was made to the "archaic" constitution whereby women were given full membership on equal basis with men. Goonam recalls "I then paid my subscription fee of one shilling and went on a campaign to enlist women members to our Congress" (Goonam 1991). This significant

change opened the doors for women to engage in political activity. Thus the position of women within the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC) and the NIC was augmented. Dr Goonam was one of the leading women activists within the newly reformed NIC. By 1946, Goonam was elected vice-president. In October 1946 three women were elected to the TIC executive committee, the first time women had ever held senior posts. One of them was Zeinub Asvat, the other two were Mrs P.K. Naidoo and Mrs Suriakala Patel (Chetty 1991; Goonam 1991; Bhana 1997).

VI. PASSIVE RESISTANCE 1946-1948

The passive resistance movement of 1946-48 involved women from differing socio-economic, religious and linguistic groups. The women who assumed leadership roles – in most instances – were educated, wealthy, came from politically active families and were victims of racial and gender discrimination. They were in the main predominantly Gujarati speaking Hindus and Muslims. Sisters Fatima and Rahima Seedat, Zainub Asvat, Dr Goonam, and Manibhen Sita are just a few examples, which reflect how political roles are inculcated through the process of socialization. For example, Fatima and Rahima Seedat were born into an Urdu speaking Muslim family of Cape Town. Her father was a trader and her mother a housewife. Both sisters received formal education and their father encouraged them to seek employment (Chetty 1991; Naidoo 2003). Dr Goonam, was the first Indian women medical doctor in Durban. Dr Goonam's family were of Tamil descent, initially hailed from the Transvaal where her father established a business vending fruit. They later settled in Natal. Here he went into partnership with Mr A. Pillay and formed, R.K.A. Pillay and Company. They exported goods from India namely Indian groceries and ceremonial goods. Her mother also joined the business and was largely responsible for "taking charge of the accounting" (Goonam 1991). In her autobiography *Coolie Doctor* Goonam attributes much of her spirit and success to her mother's influence. Her mother's formative years were largely influenced by mission education, where she attended St Aiden's School. She completed her standard four, the highest standard an Indian girl could complete (Goonam 1991). She continued her education on an informal basis. Goonam recalls:

"But she was most influenced by Tamil literature and Tamil philosophy and she communicated that influence to us. Through her, we learnt to think beyond our surroundings for she transported us to ancient times in India, and introduced us to current thoughts in the world we lived in. She followed the suffrage movement and was secretary of the Indian Women's Association...She also took a lively interest in the lives of Indian patriots such as Gokale, Tilak and Sarojini Naidoo and was particularly inspired by Annie Besant" (Goonam 1991).

Nevertheless, Goonam with the help of private tutors completed her matric (grade 12) and went to Edinburg for a career in medicine (Chetty 1991; Goonam 1991; Naidoo 2003). After having qualified as a doctor, she returned to South Africa only to be confronted with the politics of racial segregation when applying to work in various hospitals, who refused her permission:

"During the first three years of my practice, I was busy but suffered tremendous disadvantages being Black.....I applied to the black hospital, King Edward VIII for a post. I thought my chances were good since I was working at the Clearing Station relieving the hospital. Young white doctors recently out of medical school were being appointed to work in the black hospitals, as well as being taken on as Interns at the white hospitals, My application was turned down. The official reply explained "the policy of the country is that non-European doctors could not be admitted to Government hospitals as white nurses would not be prepared to take orders from black doctors!" (Goonam 1991).

Goonam's political activity and consciousness also stemmed from her own family's experience of racial discrimination. During the outbreak of the second world war, the Durban City Council gave the family notice of its intention to expropriate the family home which was situated in Umgeni Hill, to make way for white housing. Goonam's mother made several pleas to the Council to no avail. Reverend Satchell of the St Aiden's Mission called a protest meeting against the expropriations. It was during this meeting that Goonam took to the platform and made her maiden speech. Thereafter she joined the neighborhood in a march from Grey Street to the city hall in protest. It was to no avail. The family home was eventually bulldozed. Goonam expressed her anger and heartache at what happened:

"We were robbed of our birthright, our happiness, our peace of mind, I felt I could take it no longer. I had not realized the full scope of calamities that could overtake a people simply on account of their blackness" (Goonam 1991).

Sisters Amina Cachalia and Zeinub Asvat were also prominent activists in the passive resistance movement. Zeinub was a member of the Indian Youth Congress and during her senior primary years was introduced to communist ideals and philosophy by her teacher, Mervyn Thandry, who was a member of the CPSA. Zeinub was in medical school at the time of her involvement, a third year student at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Her father was E.I. Aswat a merchant, and a close colleague of Gandhi. He was imprisoned 14 times during the first satyagraha struggle in South Africa. He was chairman of the Transvaal British Indian Association (forerunner to the Transvaal Indian Congress) and affectionately called "Chairman Asvat", and active in protest politics. Her father had spent many hours with his children teaching them about Gandhi and passive resistance. She accompanied him to many political meetings and became fully informed and conversant with the political situation in the country (Reddy Collection 1988; Chetty 1991). Another activist Manibhen Sita was the daughter of Nana Sita, who was a very active member of the Transvaal Indian Congress. He became the Secretary of its Pretoria branch. Radical elements within the TIC in the 1930s, including Nana, was highly critical of the organizations compromise leadership. Subsequently on the 4 June 1939 the TIC meeting became violent and some radical members were attacked. Manibhen was "only thirteen at the time overheard her father's account of the dreadful eventsand that awakened her to the problems of the Indian community." She subsequently took a keen interest in the political situation, read widely and became a committed activist. During the passive resistance campaign of 1946-48, together with fellow activist Mrs Thayanayagie Pillay, they organized a group of women volunteers. The volunteers constituted of housewives, factory and domestic workers. They also established an Indian Women's Support League, which not only raised funds for the struggle but also raised political awareness amongst the Indian community. Manibhen was imprisoned twice during the campaign (Indian Opinion 1947; Meer and Reddy 1996; Naidoo n.d.; Sita 2006).

The act which sparked off the Passive Resistance movement was the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act of 1946. This measure was applicable in the Transvaal and Natal. The Act consisted of two parts, dealing with land tenure and political rights. The first part of the act created two areas: "Controlled and Uncontrolled". In the former, Indians were restricted from making land purchases. In the Uncontrolled areas Indians were free to occupy and purchase land. These areas, in any event were predominantly Indian. Because of these provisions the Bill was dubbed the "Ghetto Act". The Act was rejected by the NIC and TIC and they mobilized support and embarked on passive resistance (Pahad 1972; Meer and Reddy 1996; Hiralal 2000).

Indian women engaged in several forms of resistance. This involved defying legislation, on inter-provincial movement which restricted Indians traveling between the provinces without permits, occupation of municipal lands, by-laws on trading and hawking without licenses. The aim of the campaign was to engage in passive resistance without the use of force and violence. Participation was on a voluntary basis (Justice Department 1941). Approximately 2000 people participated (directly and indirectly) in the campaign, about 300 were women. The nature of women's occupation varied. A closer examination of the statistical report produced by the NIC on the occupational status of 1,744 resisters between 13 June 1946 to 13 May 1947, gives some insight into the economic status of the women resisters: 233 were housewives, 13 dressmakers, 28 college students (boys and girls), 20 hawkers, 11 hairdressers, 16 machinists, 2 medical students, and 1 nurse. In Natal, majority of the women resisters were predominantly Tamil and Telegu – speaking Hindus, mainly descendants of indentured laborers from South India. Their ages varied between 18 and 35. Predominantly Indian suburbs and towns such as Clairwood, Merebank, Isipingo, Seaview, Bellair, Tongaat, Stanger, and Ladysmith were key areas for mobilization and support. In the Transvaal, the Indian population was comparatively small and composed primarily of wealthy Muslim merchants. Thus the base of women's support came primarily from the educated, wealthy and politically active families. They were predominantly Gujarati-speaking Hindus and Muslims. Among the notable women were Miss Zainub Ebrahim Asvat, Mrs Amina

Pahad, Miss Zohra Bhayat, Mrs Zubeida Patel, Miss Z.Badat, Mrs R.Jinn and Miss Manibhen Sita.

The main resistance sites in Natal were Durban and Pietermaritzburg. Women were at the forefront of the struggle. Dr Goonam, together with Suriakala Patel, and other members of the NIC traveled extensively throughout the Natal Midlands to canvass support for the movement and encouraged women to participate. She addressed platforms, citing the brave deeds of women in India and their role in the freedom struggle, the suffrage movement in Britain and closer home the African women's protest in the Industrial Council of Workers (ICU) under the leadership of Clements Kadalie (The Leader 1985; The Leader 1990; Goonam 1991). Appealing to the women she said:

Britain is an example where women sacrificed their hearth and home, giving their services for the war. Women in India are in the vanguard of the freedom struggle and their achievements have been remarkable. Nearer home our African women took a militant stand in the ICU (Industrial Council of Workers)The time has come for our women to throw in our lot with our men to save our homes and families" (Goonam 1991).

In 1946 a Women's Action Committee was established. The Committee's primary aim was to raise funds and recruit volunteers. Mrs Rathamoney Padyachee, a Tamil speaking Hindu was elected as secretary of the Committee. Janaki Naidoo (a relative of Goonam) and Dr Ansuaya Singh, both Hindus, from Natal, together with Padyachee and Goonam were the only four women to take up executive positions in the NIC. Naidoo was elected in October 1946 and was previously involved in the All India Congress Women's Association (Chetty 1991). Nevertheless, the Committee organized fairs, dances, banquets, and beauty contests to raise funds. However, primary donations came largely from the merchants and professionals. It was "an altogetherIndian campaign, financially and ideologically" (Goonam 1991). Local religious and cultural and women's organizations, also supported the movement. Committee branches were also set up in various Indian neighborhoods to raise funds. In June 1947, the Bellair Women's Action Committee, organized a bazaar which collected and sold goods to the public. A sum of \$175 was collected during the fair. (Meer and Reddy 1996). Women resisters also distributed

passive resistance leaflets and literature to help educate and inform the community about the course of events and to recruit new volunteers (Indian Opinion 1947; Bhana 1997; Naidoo 2003; Poovalingam 2003; Moodley 2003; Pather 2003). Festive and religious occasions were also opportune moments to canvass support. Moreover, the likes of Asvat and Goonam, young vibrant and enthusiastic activists, served as a role model to young women with similar aspirations.

In addition, women volunteers like Asvat, Pather, Bhayat and Goonam regularly addressed women's meetings throughout Natal and the Transvaal. Speeches were made in Hindi, Gujarati, Tamil, Urdu and Telegu, since the vast majority were non-English speakers and fluent only in the vernacular languages. The first laws broken were the inter-provincial restrictions between Natal and the Transvaal when six women boarded the fast mail train in June 1946 and arrived in Durban without permits. They were Mrs Meenatchie Sigamoney Nayagar, treasurer of the Indian Women's Service, Pretoria; Miss Zohra Bhayat (housewife); Miss Zainab Asvat, a twenty-one year medical student who suspended her studies to actively participate in the movement, she was also chairman of the Indian Youth volunteer Corps of Johannesburg; Mrs Amina Pahad (housewife), Johannesburg; Miss Zubeida Patel (housewife) and Mrs Chella Pillay also of Johannesburg. All were members of the Transvaal Indian Volunteer Corps, Women's Branch.

The Transvaal women were also among the first group of women to defy the "Ghetto Act". Seventeen resisters comprising of six women, four Gujarati speaking Muslims and two Tamilians defied the "Ghetto Act". Among them were Asvat, Patel, Pahad, Bhayat, Mrs Lutchmee Govender (housewife) and Mrs Veerama Pather. Pather was a grandmother, sixty years old, who had participated with Gandhi in the 1913 resistance movement. Of the six, four were housewives. Women took up residence in tents which were pitched on a piece of municipal land at the intersection of Umbilo Road and Gale street in Durban, about forty minutes walking distance from the city center. A huge banner was also raised which read "*We shall Resist*". Not long thereafter the resisters were asked to leave but refused and were subsequently arrested. The imprisonment of the first batch of volunteers was followed by a second, lead by Monty D. Naidoo, member of the

NIC executive. However, the group comprising of 11 men and nine women, were attacked by approximately 100 white youths who tried to remove the tents. Three women, Asvat, Pahad and Pather sustained injury during the attack. When Reverend Michael Scott, who courted imprisonment, came to join the resisters, unruly white youths began to use violence. Miss Asvat, stood with Scott and was badly beaten. Scott was very upset at the incident, but Asvat said: "Forgive them father...Its not their fault, they don't know what they are doing." Scott was surprised and commented "that her religion had taught her more than the attackers had found in the story of the Crucifixion" (Meer and Reddy 1996).

After the raid, Dr Monty Naicker, chairman of the NIC, concerned about the safety of the women resisters asked them to leave. But the women were defiant (Keevy 1946; Singh 1946; Rooyen 1946; Indian Opinion 1946; Indian Opinion 1948; Mickdal 1947; Meer and Reddy 1996; Goonam 1991). Asvat reporting to the Passive Resistance Council on the attack stated:

"We are in it now and we shall face it to the bitter end, no matter what happens. You have heard of what has happened, but this makes us all the more determined to carry on, and we shall carry on. If sacrifice we must, then sacrifice we shall, no matter what happens" (Meer and Reddy 1996).

A closer examination of the speeches made by Asvat, Goonam, Bhayat, and interviews conducted with participants, indicate that women felt justified in their actions and were committed to the struggle. Given the varied socio-economic status of women resisters, the nature of impact on families differed. Of the 300 women who participated, 233 were housewives, juggling roles between a mother, wife and activist. Fatima Seedat in 1945 married Dawood Seedat, a communist and trade unionist. She was pregnant with her first child at the start of the campaign. Fatima was fortunate to have the support of her in-laws who allowed her the space for her political activity (Chetty 1991). Her daughter was still an infant, when she courted arrest. For many working class women, the absence of familial and financial support made their position a difficult one. For example, Salachie Khan, gave up her factory job as a machinist, earning £3 6s, to serve as a volunteer, for the campaign. She had one daughter whom she entrusted to her sister during her activities and imprisonment. For many working

class women there was no convenient care for their children when they were campaigning (Chetty 1991; Naidoo 2003, Moodley 2003; Pather 2003).

VII. WOMEN IN PRISON

Between 13 June 1946 to 13 May 1947, a total of 1 710 individuals, of whom 279 were women, served jail sentences, some as many as four times (Bhana 1997). The largest number of resisters, 1,175, were between the ages of 20-25 years. Women were imprisoned in Durban and Pietermaritzburg. Women were given the choice of imprisonment or payment of fines, all chose the former. Conditions in prison were deplorable. Goonam and Asvat regularly challenged the prison authorities on the verbal and physical abuse meted out to women prisoners. Women were stripped and searched and made to walk naked in the courtyard. Women had to contend with poor sanitary facilities. They were provided with a small latrine bucket with no lid or sanitary paper. Goonam recalls her deplorable prison experience:

"We emptied the buckets in the lavatories. I saw the prisoners wash the same buckets, fill them with water and wash themselves, rinsing their mouths and washing their faces...I looked with horror...(Goonam 1991).

In addition, there was no cleanliness in the preparation of the meals and the crockery used to serve food was always dirty (Indian Opinion 1946; Meer 1947; Meer 1948; Naicker and Dadoo 1948; Goonam 1991). Despite these conditions, prison sentences were a trial these women felt they had to endure and overcome.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In sum, this paper demonstrates that female political roles are inculcated both through a process of socialization and external influences. The socio-economic and political conditions in South Africa in the 1930s and 1940s affected women from different strata of society: factory workers, petty hawkers, domestic servants housewives and professional women. Working class women were struggling to survive economically while professional women took upon leadership roles to challenge the oppressive system of discrimination. Together, Indian women irrespective of class, religion and caste fought

on their own political terms, they were not coerced or forced into the struggle, instead it was based on their own determination. Thus it challenges the myth or representations of the "docile" and "passive" Indian women. Women protested vociferously, challenged legislation, courted imprisonment and sacrificed familial relations. They fought outside the confines of their traditional roles as wives, mothers and daughters. However, it failed to challenge gender roles, and perhaps, therein lies the complexities of women's political activism.

NOTES

- 1 In South African society, particularly in the apartheid days, the term Coloured (also known as *Bruinmense*, *Kleurlinge* or *Bruin Afrikaners* in Afrikaans) refers to an ethnic group of people who possess sub-Saharan African ancestry, but were not considered Black enough under the laws of South Africa.
- 2 H.A. Naidoo (1915-1971), politically active from the age of fifteen. Was among the individuals who constituted the post 1945 NIC leadership. Was a member of the CPSA serving on the central committee between 1943-1951. He was active in organizing Indians and Africans into trade unions.
- 3 Dr Monty Naicker was chairman of the NIC in 1946.
- 4 The Natal Indian Congress was established by Mohandas Gandhi in 1894 during his stay in South Africa.

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