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Ismail Vadi, *Thambi Naidoo and Family: Struggle for a non-racial democracy in South Africa*. Publisher: Ahmed Kathrada Foundation, Johannesburg 2021. 262 pages. ISBN 978-0-620-92411-5.

**Reviewed by:** Goolam Vahed, Department of History, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Speaking at the memorial service of anti-apartheid activist Dr. Chota Motala on 11 June 2005, African National Congress (ANC) icon Ahmed Kathrada lamented that ‘since we came out of prison, we have buried many, many comrades. The sad thing is that while we celebrate their lives, we are not doing anything to remember their legacy. Open any book today and look for their names and what they have done. You won't find it. And that is the duty of academics, historians - to research, to record, and publish the lives of these great people.’

The scholarship on political activists has expanded considerably since Ahmed Kathrada's appeal. However, there is a tendency to valorise a ‘heroic masculinity’ while underplaying the political work of women and the thousands of ordinary activists who made great sacrifices to end white rule (Unterhalter 2000, 159). This is not unusual since biographies, in general, have tended to perpetuate the ‘great-man theories of history’ or at least focus on ‘subjects worthy of biographies’ (Lepore 2001, 151) and tend to be hero-worshipping and teleological (Hyslop 2010, 109). This biography of an activist family makes an essential contribution in recovering the involvement of not so “ordinary” people in the anti-apartheid struggle. Given the concern expressed by Ahmed Kathrada, it is apposite that the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation should have published *Thambi Naidoo and Family*.

Cometh a research project, cometh the person. Ismail Vadi was ideally suited for this mammoth undertaking with both academic and political pedigree. He holds a Masters's degree in History from the University of the Witwatersrand and has taught History and English at the secondary school level. In the 1980s, he was an activist in the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC) and the United Democratic Front (UDF), a founder member of the Lenasia Youth League and the Progressive Teachers' League, national vice-president

of the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU), and in the early 1990s he lectured in the Education Department at Wits University.

As the ANC turned from liberation movement to governing political party, Vadi made his presence felt in post-apartheid politics. He served as an ANC Member of Parliament (National Assembly) and as Member of the Executive Council (MEC) for Roads and Transport in Gauteng in the post-apartheid period. Vadi has the advantage of an insider's perspective as he was an activist who lived through some of the activities and events covered in this study and has authored several works on the anti-apartheid struggle: *The Congress of the People and the Freedom Charter Campaign* (1995); *Images of ANC Politics in Lenasia* (2004); *The Congress of the People and Freedom Charter - A People's History* (2015); and the edited work *Struggle, Exile, and Love - Prose and Poems by Afzal Moolla* (2020).

Vadi draws upon a wide range of archival material and oral history in writing *Thambi Naidoo and Family*. He chronicles the story of four generations of activism of the 'Congress Naidoos' of Johannesburg, as they were popularly known. The family's roots in South Africa date to Thambi Naidoo, who arrived in Kimberley from Mauritius in 1875 and moved to the Transvaal in 1886, where the economy was beginning to expand due to the mineral discoveries. Naidoo's arrival coincided with the implementation of legislation in the Transvaal to keep Indians out of the colony. Mahatma Gandhi, who came to Natal in 1893, was to play a significant role in challenging racist legislation in the Transvaal and South Africa more generally. Aside from his various memorials, Gandhi is best known for the Satyagraha campaign he led in the Transvaal and the massive strike of 1913. During these campaigns, Thambi Naidoo stood alongside him, serving time in prison and being the catalyst for the mass uprising of 1913 in Natal. In an inspired move, accompanied by his wife Veerammal, who was imprisoned for her role, Naidoo went to the mines in Northern Natal to implore workers to join the strike, which forced the state into a compromise.

Naidoo was also a founding member of the Tamil Benefit Society and the Transvaal British Indian Association (TBIA), a forerunner of the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC), and was president of the TIC. When Gandhi established Tolstoy Farm in Johannesburg to house former prisoners and their families, Thambi Naidoo settled there. When Gandhi was returning to India, Thambi Naidoo sent his sons to live with Gandhi, initially at poet Rabindranath Tagore's ashram Shantikiketan, and then at Sabarmati Ashram where they trained as Satyagrahis. They would return to play an active role against white minority rule in South Africa. Gandhi described Thambi Naidoo in his 1929 work *Satyagraha in South Africa* as 'lion-like, adding

that ‘none was more ready than he to sacrifice his all for the sake of the community... the name of Thambi Naidoo must ever remain as one of the front ranks in the history of Satyagraha in South Africa.’

Thambi Naidoo’s son Naransamy ‘Roy’ was a trade unionist, and his wife Manonmani or ‘Ama,’ as she was popularly known, was imprisoned during the 1946 passive resistance campaign and the 1952 Defiance Campaign and participated in the iconic women’s march of 1956. Their daughter Shantie was imprisoned alongside Winnie Mandela and forced into exile, and continued in London to be part of the movement to defeat the racist system. Son Indres joined the ANC underground movement, Umkhonto we Sizwe, and was imprisoned for ten years on Robben Island for sabotage. He was to write the harrowing *Island in Chains* that chronicled his years of imprisonment. Unbroken, he came out of the hellhole of the Island and served the ANC in exile in Mozambique and Germany. In one of those great stories of pain and redemption, of struggle and vindication, Indres joined the frontbenches as an MP in democratic South Africa. Roy and Ama’s other son, Prema, was imprisoned for extended periods in the 1980s and served the government in various capacities in the post-apartheid period. Roy’s sister Thailema was imprisoned in 1946 and 1952, participated in the Women’s march of 1956, and was arrested again in the 1980s for her activism against the Tricameral parliamentary elections.

In underscoring the contribution of the women in the family, Vadi is building upon some recent work that underscores women’s intellectual, emotional and organisational contribution to the struggle in South Africa. Zubeida Jaffer, for example, has helped to reclaim women’s roles in anti-apartheid activism and leadership through her biographies of two powerful women, Ayesha Dawood, a treason trialist in 1956, and Charlotte Maxeke, an activist at the turn of the twentieth century, who was the first Black woman to graduate from an American university\*. Such reclamation is vital at a time when women are facing extraordinary levels of violence in South Africa.

Vadi takes us on a journey through the lives of this family as it suffers under the whip hand of apartheid vindictiveness and vengeance. The contribution of the extended Naidoo family to South African politics, social welfare, civic life, education, trade unions, sporting organisations, and the government is to tell the story of the liberation movement in South Africa. They were involved in organisations such as the Indian Women’s Service League; the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW); the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU); the South African Democratic Teachers’ Union; the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation; the Lenasia Women’s

Congress; and the Lenasia Students' Congress. Forced out of the country of their birth, they refused to give up on the struggle to defeat the apartheid state. Those of the Naidoo family who went into exile participated in the broader Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) and the International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa in the United Kingdom; taught at the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College (SOMAFSCO) in Tanzania, or worked in the ANC underground in Mozambique.

While not shying away from personal wounds, Vadi stitches a powerful narrative that spans the generational lens through the long twentieth century. One gets a sense of a relay race over multiple hurdles as the baton of activism is taken up through the generations. When Thambi Naidoo first joined with Gandhi, the finish line seemed impossible. When Ama picked up the baton, her son Indres was snatched away. Nevertheless, somehow Shantie found the flame, Indres kept it burning, and suddenly the white line of apartheid was broken. All along the way, there were many of the Naidoos that kept hope alive. Vadi, with superb skill, draws them all into history as the marathon race spans a century of sacrifice and commitment.

The Naidoos of Doornfontein helped shape the social, economic, political landscape of the Transvaal and South Africa more generally during segregation and apartheid. The post-apartheid generation has continued to serve the fledgling nation in various fields, including government. Like their forebears, they remain critical voices. As Vadi puts it:

What is refreshing and instructive is that the third and fourth generations of the Naidoos have maintained a sense of critical consciousness. They are alive to the sins of incumbency evident in their party of choice, the ruling African National Congress. They are not afraid to criticise their organisation and question its leadership. Theirs is not a blind loyalty of the party faithful. If there is an element of despondency about the direction that the ANC is taking, they are prepared to speak out. In this they walk along the footprints of the indomitable Thambi and Veeramal Naidoo, and the doughty Naransamy and Ama Naidoo.

This is an incredible story told with a pen that is both sensitive and reflective. Now more than ever, we need to evoke the spirit of the Naidoos of non-sexism, anti-racism, and democracy into the practice of our daily lives.

**Notes:**

\* See *Beauty of the Heart: The Life and Times of Charlotte Mannya Maxeke* and *Love in the Time of Treason: The Life Story of Ayesha Dawood* by Zubeida Jaffer. Cape Town: ZJ Books, 2016, and Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2003, respectively.

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