

PARMANANTHAN “PREMA” AND KAMALA NAIDOO (Dr Ismail Vadi)

Extract from Ismail Vadi, *Thambi Naidoo and Family: Struggle for a Non-racial Democracy in South Africa, (2021)*

Parmananthan “Prema” Naidoo never went into exile. He remained in South Africa and carries a long and impressive activist resumé. He has retired from formal politics and enjoys being with his grandchildren. He is an avid reader and is a frequent cinema goer. He listens to classical and protest music and keeps fit by walking and going to the gym regularly.



Prema was active in the ANC and SACP underground and the revived TIC and the UDF. He was instrumental in setting up the Human Rights Committee in the 1970s and was active in the non-racial sports movement through the Transvaal Council on Sport (TRACOS). He was an Assistant Secretary of the Transvaal Anti-SAIC Committee and a member of the Executive Committee

the TIC. He also represented the TIC at the first Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) in 1991, which marked the beginning of the negotiations for a democratic South Africa.¹ He was imprisoned for one year in 1982 for assisting an ANC member and escaped prisoner, Steven Lee, to skip the country. He was detained during the State of Emergency in 1985.



In the post-apartheid period, Prema served as the Chairperson of the Southern Metropolitan Local Council between 1995-2000; a Member of the Mayoral Committee on Health and Environment, and the ANC Chief Whip in the City of Johannesburg until his retirement in 2016. He was a leading ANC member in Lenasia until he moved to Winchester Hills, south of Johannesburg. Prema remains active in the ANC 101 Stalwarts and Veterans' Committee and the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation.²

Writing for the *Awaaz* magazine on the Naidoo family, Rashid Seedat, a comrade and friend of Prema, states:

Prema's story is both ordinary and exceptional. It is an ordinary tale of growing up, getting married, raising children, developing friendships, supporting his family and experiencing community life. But it is exceptional in that he devoted every moment of his spare time in the service of the struggle and was subjected to inhuman torture, detention, imprisonment and harassment by the apartheid state. After the demise of apartheid, he rolled up his

¹ Naidoo, K, *Krish: Struggle Lawyer*, (Johannesburg, Krish Naidoo, 2019), pp.17 and 217.

² Vadi, I, *Images of ANC Politics in Lenasia*, p.6.

sleeves and committed himself to the building of a non-racial, democratic South Africa.³

Prema, the youngest son of Ama and Naransamy Naidoo, was born in Doornfontein on 30 May 1945. He was first arrested as a teenager on the charge of trespassing railway property while distributing leaflets of SACTU. He was found guilty, cautioned and discharged because he was under the age of sixteen. Reflecting on his childhood, he states:

I was born into a family that was involved in the political struggle in this country. My grandfather was an associate of Gandhi. My father went to India and lived with Gandhi for many years. So, politics was our life. It was our home. My parents took all of us to demonstrations, public meetings, from a young age. So, we lived politics. At a young age I assisted in giving our leaflets. I was arrested when I was 14 for giving out South African Congress of Trade Union leaflets outside the Doornfontein station. I was charged for trespassing on railway property and was given a suspended sentence.⁴

Prema attended the Gold Street Indian Primary School in Doornfontein and the Pretoria Boys Indian High School until Std 6. He was then admitted to the “Congress School”, where he completed his Junior Certificate.⁵ Prema vividly remembers the night of Indres’ arrest:

I was not involved in *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, but my brother was recruited. We did not know at that stage that he was a member of MK. All we knew was that on 16 December 1961 there were bombs that went off. We read about it in the newspaper the next day. Obviously, we were excited that our struggle is now taking a new kind of beginning, of armed struggle. MK had issued a leaflet to say this is an act of sabotage. We also know that they went to great lengths to say that no life must be taken. So, I followed that period very closely. Soon after that lots of people were arrested and some of them were quite close to us. My brother was arrested. I can remember that day very clearly. My Mom always had a habit of not sleeping until the last one of us is home. He came home, he had

³ Seedat, R, “Profile - Prema Naidoo on his 75th Birthday, 30 May 2020”. Also see *Awaaz*, 2009.

⁴ Naidoo, P, Interview with Liliesleaf Trust, Johannesburg, 20 October 2016.

⁵ Naidoo, P, Telephonic interview with Vadi, I, 4 July 2020.

his own key, and he called out to my Mom and said, “I’ve been arrested”. My Mom came out and he was in a bad way because he was shot by Swanepoel. We all woke up. I remember this big guy with a torch, shining his torch over me and saying in Afrikaans, “Wake up, wake up, coolie.”⁶

Prema married Kamala Pillay on 6 July 1969. She was born to Dhorasamy Pillay and Munnimah Govender on 7 July 1940 in Hlobane, a coal mining town in Northern Natal. She was one of ten siblings and comes from a working-class family with her father being a coal miner. At the age of six her mother passed away and her father re-married. She did not have the best of relationships with her stepmother and grew up at the homes of her brothers. She schooled at a primary school in Hlobane and completed her Junior Certificate at the Dundee High School. She registered for a nursing course at the King Edward VIII Hospital, which she did not complete. She then worked as a temporary teacher in Stanger, where she lived with two of her brothers. Kamala subsequently worked at a clothing factory in Durban. She moved to Johannesburg in 1967 in search of better employment prospects and rented accommodation at the Naidoo family home in Rockey Street. It was not long thereafter that she and Prema fell in love and they got married. They have two sons, Kuben and Myan. Reflecting on her interest in politics and her development as an activist, Kamala states:

Although I grew up as a coal miner’s daughter and life was a tremendous struggle, I was largely apolitical. My political education coincided with me meeting Prema and the Naidoo family. I have been politically active ever since I met Prema but my priority was to make a stable home for my kids and my husband. I am proud of the fact that both my kids are successful citizens of South Africa in their own right. I volunteered for work in the HRC, where Prema was active. In 1978-79, I was active in the Action to Stop Evictions (ACTSTOP) and helped organise the Johnny Clegg concert to raise funds for the organisation. My most active years politically was when we moved to Lenasia in 1979. I was an activist in the TIC and UDF and when Prema and Kuben were detained I worked with the Detainees Parents’ Support Committee. In the 1980s, together with Rehana Adam and other women, we established the Lenasia Women’s Congress to mobilise women in the area and fight against crime and the abuse of women. We

⁶ Naidoo, P, Interview with Liliesleaf Trust, 20 October 2016.

affiliated to the UDF. I also worked in the Extension 11 Residents' Association, where we were living, taking up issues of housing, the environment and people's problems with the City Council. When the ANC was unbanned, I joined the ANC-Lenasia Branch and ANCWL in the area. Since 1994, I've been an election volunteer for the ANC in all its election campaigns in Lenasia. Now, I am retired and still working hard looking after my husband and four grandchildren. I have two daughters-in-law, Aarti Shah and Mayuri Bhowan, and four wonderful grandchildren, Kimaya, Saahil, Kiara and Kiaan.⁷

Prema was first employed in a clothing store nominally run by the Modi family, with the property being rented by Issy Heyman, a member of the Communist Party. The store was closed by the police and most its employees were arrested. Then he worked as a welder at Saunders Engineering, where he was afforded an opportunity to register with a trade school in Boksburg to learn welding and steel cutting. In the late 1960s, he joined Arlec Engineering run by Arthur Berman, a sympathiser of the Communist Party. Prema states:

I did not have any qualifications. It was difficult to get a job. I decided to become a tradesman. There was someone who was prepared to take me as a welder. Arthur Berman was another comrade who had a factory in Booysens, an old man who used to be a member of the Communist Party. I worked for him as a welder. I learnt on the job. I never had any formal training. I became a good welder and stayed in the trade for many years. When I was arrested and went to prison, he continued to pay me and to give my salary to Kamala. And when I was in hiding for months during the state of emergency, they continued to pay me. I mean not many people could do that.⁸

From the late 1960s, when all political activity seemed to have been suppressed by massive repression and state terror, Prema was active as a low-key member in the TIYC and later in TRACOS, a non-racial provincial sports federation that supported the international boycott of apartheid sports spearheaded by the South African Council of Sport (SACOS). SACOS was founded in 1973. When Bram Fischer died of cancer in 1975, Prema ensured that Congress activists were mobilised to attend the funeral of this outstanding revolutionary.

⁷ Naidoo, M, "Biographical Note on Kamala Naidoo", 13 July 2020.

⁸ Seedat, R, "Profile - Prema Naidoo on his 75th Birthday, 30 May 2020". Also see *Awaaz*, 2009.

When Bram Fischer became ill, because we were in touch with the family, we knew. He had cancer and Bram was released to his brother's house in Bloemfontein. When he died, we organised two kombis. We were about 20 odd people and went to the funeral. Obviously, we were nervous. It was very repressive times, but we went to Bloemfontein. Years later when I was arrested, they said to me, "Well, you attended Bram Fischer's funeral." Bram's funeral went from the church and the security police were there in full force. They photographed everybody. This was in quite a repressive time and the church could accommodate about 100 or 150 people and there must have been about 200 police there - plainclothes security policemen. Years later they accused me of being the leader of the Communist Party, which was nonsense. I wasn't.⁹

In 1970 Ahmed Timol had returned to South Africa after being recruited into the SACP and ANC underground in London and having gone for training at the International Lenin School with Thabo Mbeki. Within a short time, he had established an underground machinery to print and distribute ANC and SACP propaganda material, particularly targeting the Indian community. Involved in his work was Salim Essop, a Wits medical student, Indhrasen "Indres" Moodley, a pharmacy lecturer at Salisbury Island in Natal, and Mohamed "Moe" Essack. Timol used the facilities of a Secretarial College of a friend, Amina Desai, to do his underground work. Timol and Essop were arrested on 22 October 1971 at a late-night police roadblock near Newlands for being in possession of pamphlets of the ANC and SACP. Both were severely tortured by the security police at John Vorster Square police station. Timol was killed on 27 October 1971 in detention. His funeral two days later was attended by thousands of people across the religious and racial divide. It turned into a major political demonstration through the streets of Roodepoort.¹⁰

A year after the death of Timol, Prema, together with Sheila Weinberg, Mohamed Timol and Helen Joseph, established the Ahmed Timol Memorial Committee to commemorate his death. A memorial meeting planned at a soccer field in Vrededorp was promptly banned. It was moved at short notice to Wits University and attended by over a thousand anti-apartheid activists. Ahmed Timol's brother, Mohammed explains:

Ahmed's death in detention became a rallying point for a lot of

⁹ Naidoo, P, Interview with Liliesleaf Trust, 20 October 2016.

¹⁰ See Cajee, I, *Timol: A Quest for Justice*, (Johannesburg, STE Publishers, 2005).

people. Here was a young schoolteacher who went abroad, who received training, and who came and worked in the underground and survived for two years. He lived a very normal life, but he was involved in the underground. Only after his arrest and subsequent death that it became known that he was an underground activist of the SACP and the ANC. So, his death in detention and his life in the underground became an inspiration to a lot of people. At the time there was very little activity, political resistance taking place, particularly among the comrades of the Congress Movement. Yes, we had SASO, we had the Black Consciousness Movement, but nothing from the Congress movement. So, we decided that on the second anniversary of Ahmed's death, we will commemorate his life and all those who were killed in detention. We would call for the release of all political prisoners and for the unbanning of the political organisations. We organised a public meeting at the Fietas Grounds, but it was banned. As the last resort we met with the Wits SRC, with Glenn Moss. They agreed to hold the meeting there. One of the speakers was Sonny Leon from the Coloured Labour Party; he was quite progressive. Rookeya Saloojee, the wife of TIC activist "Babla" Saloojee, who also was killed in detention, spoke at the event. The significance was that this was led by comrades of the Congress movement. Indres then encouraged us, "Look, we need to organise a committee." Indres was really our inspiration as well as Reggie, Shirish and others. They were in the background and giving us political advice, we were in the forefront. We then formed the Human Rights Committee. It was a very innocuous name when I really think about it. We should have called it Human Rights Congress.¹¹

In September 1974, after the release from prison of Indres, the Ahmed Timol Memorial Committee was transformed into a more durable structure called the Human Rights Committee (HRC), which focussed attention on the plight of political prisoners and their families. In its magazine, *Human Rights Bulletin*, the HRC stated that it stood for advancing the people's struggle for freedom; majority rule; a free society with no discrimination in colour, class, belief or sex; the unconditional release of political prisoners; the return of political exiles to help build a new and free society; the abolition of detention without trial, and the freeing of detainees.¹² Serving on the Executive Committee of the HRC were Mohamed Timol (Chairperson), Sheila Weinberg

¹¹ Timol, M, Interview with Liliesleaf Trust, 23 March 2017.

¹² Human Rights Committee, "Statement of Policy", *Human Rights Bulletin*, February 1976.

(Secretary), Saeeda Vally, Prema Naidoo, Samson Ndou, Helen Joseph, Caroline Wellman, Toine Eggenhuisen and Aboobaker Ismail. It also was supported by Murthie and Peter Wellman, a journalist. In the few years of its existence until 1977, by which time its members were banned, went into exile, arrested or deported, the HRC served to revive Congress-aligned political activity in the country. It published a quarterly magazine, *Human Rights Bulletin*, which was distributed nationally and internationally, and which was routinely banned. The HRC itself was banned after publishing a bulletin that contained the Freedom Charter.¹³

Prema reflected on the significance of the work of the HRC and its political impact in the early 1970s:

From 1963 our whole life centred around support work among (political) families. The ANC was already a banned organisation, but the comrades, the few of us kept together, supported each other. Then we formed, together with Sheila Weinberg, Samson Ndou and others, an organisation called the Human Rights Committee. Primarily the HRC started taking care of families of political prisoners, especially the young ones. End of the year we used to have a Christmas party for them. We came out with a newsletter called the *Human Rights Bulletin*. Every bulletin that came out was banned. In fact, the then Minister of Justice once said in parliament, this HRC is just a bunch of people, but they create an impression that they're a huge organisation. And we did. We created a huge impression. We were just about 10 of us, but we managed to reach people throughout the country through our bulletins.¹⁴

Prema elaborates on other aspects of his political work after the release of Indres, when repression and police harassment of the Naidoo family was quite intense:

We were under constant surveillance. We used to be raided regularly, at least once a month. But we were careful. We never kept banned literature at home. We used to be careful when we talked over the telephone. We weren't involved in underground work as such, but a guy would come and say, "Listen, I came on a (ANC) mission. I want transport to take me to the border." Indres

¹³ Vally, S, "Comments on draft Naidoo Manuscript", 5 October 2020.

¹⁴ Naidoo, P, Interview with Liliesleaf Trust, 20 October 2016.

and I would arrange the transport. There were ‘smugglings’ from Robben Island to London. Then we would look for somebody who was not political, who was trustworthy and who was going to London to take the message. So, throughout the period we would do that kind of work.¹⁵

Prema recounts the impact of 16 June 1976 student uprising. Without warning he and other ANC underground operatives had to smuggle student leaders out of the country for their personal safety, or as they wished to join the liberation movement in exile. In addition, he helped Mohammed Timol, Salim Essop and Indres to leave the country illegally. In this he was assisted by Hament Waghmarie and Mohamed “Chacha” Hafejee. Prema states:

Then came June 1976 uprisings in Soweto. I would never forget the day. I met with a journalist, Margaret Smith, who early in the day told me that there is talk amongst journalists there’s going to be a demonstration in Soweto. I said, “No, I hadn’t heard anything.” And little did we realise that that demonstration took place on the 16th of June, and it was huge. It was quite massive. And a comrade of ours who lived in Soweto, Joe Gqabi, came and said there’s a number of people who are on the run and we need to get them out of the country. Together with comrades we managed to get people out of the country, quite a lot of people mainly via Botswana but one or two through Swaziland as well. Our big contacts were in Swaziland.¹⁶

Prema was elected the Assistant Secretary of the Transvaal Anti-SAIC Committee (TASC), which in 1981 led a successful boycott of elections for the South African Indian Council, a puppet body set up by the apartheid government. Later that year, he was detained during a nationwide swoop on activists among whom were Siza Njikelana, Jabu Ngwenya, Barbara Hogan and Dr Neil Aggett, who died in detention.

Prema and Shirish played a support role in the escape of ANC activists, Stephen Lee, Timothy Jenkins and Alexandre Moumbaris. The three had managed to escape in 1979 from Pretoria Central Prison. Prema and Shirish were accused of finding a place to hide for Stephen Lee after his escape. Prema was detained in November 1981 and subjected to torture. Eventually,

¹⁵ Naidoo, P, Interview with South African Democracy Education Trust, *South Africans Telling their Stories*.

¹⁶ Naidoo, P, Transcript of interview with Liliesleaf Trust, Johannesburg, 20 October 2016.

he and Shirish were charged and sentenced on 1 April 1982 to three years' imprisonment (two years suspended) for harbouring an escaped convict. When sentence was passed, Kamala told the press she was proud of her husband. Prema was detained again when the apartheid regime declared a State of Emergency in 1985. Prema recollects:

I became a political activist in the TIC, took part in community activities and civic organisations in Lenasia. I was a founding member of the HRC. When Stephen Lee, Alexandre Moumbaris and Timothy Jenkins escaped from Pretoria Central, Stephen came on the night of his escape to comrade Shirish Nanabhai. Shirish brought him to me. We harboured Stephen and got him out of the country. I was arrested in 1982, quite a good few years after that. They tortured me for seven days and seven nights. And they beat me all the time and during that period I don't know, I have difficulty to explain what happened to me, but I started talking in my sleep. On the seventh day of my interrogation, I told them about this escape that I was involved in. I could not stop myself. I was convicted, and I served a year's sentence for that. I was not involved in the escape itself. All I did was to harbour him with Shirish Nanabhai and took him out of the country. Through the years I've arranged for many people to leave the country, people like Mohammed Timol, Indres and Salim Essop. In a way I became an expert in getting people out of the country. Then I got involved in the UDF. I went to the Cradock funeral. On my way back from the funeral, a State of Emergency was declared. I was detained and held for about eight months. After the state of emergency, I continued my activities. When another state of emergency was declared in 1986, I managed to evade the police. I had to leave home and I lived away from home until the emergency was lifted after about another eight months.¹⁷

In his evidence on 21 July 1997 to a special hearing of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) on Prisons, Prema said:

I was arrested for the first time in my house in Lenasia at 5am on 27 November 1981. I was in perfect health physically and mentally. The security police did not tell me where they were taking me. All they said was, "Pack your bag." I was taken to John Vorster Square

¹⁷ Naidoo, P, Interview with Liliesleaf Trust, 20 October 2016.

for questioning. I was in solitary for three months and during that period I was badly tortured, and my health was severely damaged. I lost the hearing of my left ear; until today I still wear a hearing aid as I lost 75 percent of my hearing in my ear. When I was beaten on my right ear, my ear rang. I've still got a buzzing sound in my ear since then. Within hours of my being detained a Major Abrie grabbed me and smacked me, he beat me up, banged my head on the desk and he said to me that I must give him the names of people who belonged to the Internal Reconstruction and Development Department of the ANC, or I would die. I told him I had nothing to do with that department. He made me sit in the corner for a few hours and he then took me to the cell. I was left in my cell the Saturday and Sunday and on Monday morning my interrogation began. They handcuffed my wrist to my ankle, and I was told to remain like that. I was asked questions such as who were members of IRDD? The person who handcuffed me, my wrist to my ankle, was Warrant Officer Smith. He then placed a plastic bag over my head and proceeded to question me and each time I gave the same answer he punched and kicked me. At lunch time the bag and handcuffs were removed, and I was given soup and bread. Immediately after lunch the handcuffs were put back onto my wrist and ankle and the questioning and punching started again. After about two hours the cuffs were removed, and Warrant Officer Smith made me squat and do push-up exercises on the floor. This routine followed the next day. That afternoon late a policeman by the name of Prins came into the room and without saying anything, my wrist was still handcuffed to my ankle, he pushed me down onto the floor and put his foot on the cuffs which dug into my ankle and with a little piece of stick which had a key on it, he beat me onto the soles of my feet. This continued for some time. After that the cuffs were removed and I was asked to hold a chair above my head kneeling and the questioning continued. This kind of interrogation continued for the next two days at John Vorster Square. The next morning, I was taken to Vereeniging Police Station. At Vereeniging Police Station, I was interrogated continually for six days and six nights in teams. On the sixth day of my interrogation, I began to fall asleep on my feet and I had a dream. I began to talk about my involvement in harbouring and assisting in the escape from the country of Steven Lee. I began to talk. It was probably the worst period of my life because I had broken and I had given names, I really felt ashamed that I had done that. There were two electric

wires that were sticking out of the ceiling, and I was thinking how to get there because of what I'd thought I'd done. I'd given names of comrades who trusted and worked with me, but those wires were too high. I was then left in the cell for a few days. One morning I was taken from my cell, and I was chained, leg irons and handcuffed and taken to John Vorster Square. They took me to the tenth floor, they took me to a room and there must have been about ten security policemen in the room, I was still handcuffed and chained. They then brought my wife into the room, they were abusive to my wife and to me and they told my wife if she said anything other than personal matters, they would detain her and lock her up. That meeting lasted for about five minutes. It was the first time that I'd seen a family member. They then took me back to Vereeniging Police Station. I was sentenced to eighteen months for harbouring and assisting in the leaving of the country of Stephen Lee.¹⁸

In her book, *Death of an Idealist: In Search of Neil Aggett*, Beverley Naidoo presents a disturbing and painful account of the inquest into the death in detention of Dr Neil Aggett. Prema testified at the inquest at which he gave “horrifying details of a sustained period of torture in November (1981) when he was kept awake for almost a week, with only a few hours of sleep. He had been made to exercise intensively; given electric shocks; beaten, punched and kicked; forced to stand for long periods and to kneel until the skin on his knee broke; kept naked; and threatened with death.” Consequently, he had woken up finding himself confessing to something about which he had not even been questioned.¹⁹ The state rejected Prema's testimony on the grounds that both Shirish Nanabhai and himself were “two aggrieved political prisoners who had been convicted of helping another political prisoner”.²⁰ That the official Aggett inquest was a sham was exposed during the re-opened inquest into the death of Timol, which found that Timol was murdered during his interrogation at John Vorster Square.

Prema was a Councillor in the City of Johannesburg since the first local government elections of 1996 until his retirement from formal politics in 2016. During this period, he served as a Mayor of the Southern Metropolitan Local Council, a Member of the Mayoral Committee for Health and Environment, and as Chief Whip of the ANC in Council. He ended his political career with

¹⁸ Naidoo, P, “Statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Special Hearings – Prisons”, 21 July 1997.

¹⁹ Naidoo, B, *Death of an Idealist: In Search of Neil Aggett*, (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2012), p.374.

²⁰ Naidoo, B, *ibid*, p.402.

integrity and honesty, befitting the esteemed legacy of the Naidoo family. Prema remains politically active as an ordinary ANC member and serves on the Board of the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation. His courage and conviction have never waned - he is an active participant in the ANC 101 Stalwarts and Veterans' Committee, formed by senior ANC figures to challenge corruption in government, particularly during the presidency of Jacob Zuma and to pressurise the ANC government to act against the capture of the state by vested, private business interests. In this campaign he, together with Kamala, Dominic, Shanthie and Ramnie, participated in public demonstrations outside the home of the three Gupta brothers allegedly implicated in state capture, which is now the subject of the Zondo Commission. The ANC Stalwarts and Veterans' Committee has played a significant role arranging a series of meetings with the leadership of the ANC; holding a National Consultative Conference; releasing media statements to highlight issues relating to corruption, factionalism in the ANC and calling on former President Zuma to step down as President of the ANC and of the country.