

## *Appiah Saravanan Chetty (1929–2000)*

A.S. Chetty was born in Pietermaritzburg on 3 April 1929, the second of five children of Appiah and Vellimah Chetty, whose parents had been brought to Natal as indentured labourers.

The 1950s and early 1960s threw up an astonishingly large number of youths into the arena of political ferment generated by the rise to power of the Nationalist Party in 1948. A.S. Chetty (in retrospect, not surprisingly) was a prime example. He and a multitude of others made their commitment to the struggle against the colour-bar in all its forms, especially apartheid. By the end of 1950, he had joined the Pietermaritzburg

Branch of the NIC. He was already on the executive of the Branch and soon to become Pietermaritzburg NIC's Joint Secretary with EM Haffajee. 'A.S.' (as we shall refer to him now onwards) also became an active member of a 'multiracial' study group based at 433 Boom Street, Pietermaritzburg which had been looking at the impact of the colour-bar on non-white people and its social and economic consequences in the long term. A.S. immersed himself into the busy routine of public work, discharging his NIC duties late at night to reduce the chances of an encounter with the 'Special Branch'. Social protest had already become an integral part of his life. During the next few years he tenuously held on to a couple of jobs but he had already earned the label of political agitator and constant harassment by the regime's security personnel.

By 1953 the monumental task of gathering demands from every stratum of the population for submission to the Congress of the People had begun under the flag of the Natal Midlands Region of the Congress of the People, co-chaired by A. Gumede and Dr Motala. A.S. was in his element as the activists scoured the city and towns, periurban and rural areas. It was a unique experience. Systematically thousands of households were consulted, their hardships recorded, their ideas and needs noted. A.S. and his comrades revelled in the task and, eventually, in being present at the memorable, historic conference (at Kliptown) of the Congress of the People. Thousands of representatives from around South Africa had come together. The Freedom Charter was adopted giving direction to the struggle. For A.S. it had been the most inspiring event in his life.

The government, however, responded to the work of the activists by banning of detaining them. Banning orders were imposed by the Minister of Justice with stringent restrictions. Such banning orders were served on A.S. in 1973 for a period of five years, again in 1981 to cover a period of 2 years and a third in 1988 to last a further twenty months. He also endured several periods of detention and imprisonment. During the state of emergency he was detained at Burger Street Jail, Pietermaritzburg from March 1960 for a period of 98 days. He was again detained at Burger Street Jail for a month in May–June 1980. From prison in Pietermaritzburg he was transferred to Modder Bee prison in Benoni. It is pertinent to note that the transfer to Benoni was done at night in a motor vehicle during mid June. Remained in custody at Modder Bee prison until 25 August 1980 where he fell ill and was admitted to Boksburg Hospital where it was discovered that he was suffering from coronary heart disease and diabetes. On 12 June 1986 detained at New Prison, Pietermaritzburg, and remanded in custody for over three months.

These experiences made of him a perpetually committed activist in matters not only political but also cultural and social in so far as they adversely affected people, irrespective of race or creed. Even an abbreviated account of his association with a wide range of organisations will demonstrate the breadth of his interests. Between 1971 and 1990 he revived the NIC and was Chairperson of the Pietermaritzburg Branch and an executive member of the Natal NIC. In 1994 he received a Special Award from NIC for outstanding long service.

In 1983 he was Chairperson of the Pietermaritzburg chapter of the United Democratic Front, and, in this capacity, participated in the activities of the Mass Democratic Movement during the 1980s. In 1990 he joined the ANC. He participated in initiating the establishment of the ANC interim body for Coloured and Indian areas and the informal settlements in northern part of Pietermaritzburg. In 1991 he became Chairperson of

the Northern Areas Branch which emerged as Northdale Branch and which he continued to chair until his death.

He was an active campaigner in the first democratic elections and in the local government elections of 1997. In 1997 he became a councillor in the Pietermaritzburg-Msunduzi Transitional Local Council, and from 1998 until his death he was Deputy Mayor.

During 1986 A.S. obtained the only formal employment that was to offer both security and job satisfaction. Already a member of the Pietermaritzburg Indian Child and Family Welfare Society, in March 1986 he was appointed Acting Secretary and soon rose to position of Secretary. In 1994 he was made Head of Administration of the Society and continued to hold this position even after amalgamation into a single non-racial society in Pietermaritzburg. He continued in the post until 1996. In 1999 he was made a Trustee of the Pietermaritzburg Child Welfare Society.

During his tenure of office with Child Welfare Society a number of projects were initiated by him outside of his formal duties. These were concerned with education of children and sought to ameliorate situations like education in the open or under tents and health care of children from poor background. These involved fund raising projects etc., all of which he attended to with much vigour and a good deal of success.

There were a host of other commitments at social, cultural and religious levels. He was a member of the Pietermaritzburg Community Chest, an Executive member of the Pietermaritzburg Gandhi Memorial Committee, Vice-President of the Pietermaritzburg Combined Residents and Ratepayers Association, Patron of the Midlands Hindu Society, and a member of the Greys and Northdale Hospital Boards.

Also, for many years an active member of Kalaivani Orchestra as a vocalist, he was a talented singer who in his earlier years inspired people with freedom songs composed in Hindi language by the late Dr Omar Hashim.

In 1957 A.S. Chetty married Saras Padyachee. Fortunately for him, Saras was the daughter of an ardent struggle person. She was a qualified teacher who was to become for A.S. a pillar of strength over the years. She was to assume the role of breadwinner off and on. She mothered three children and increasingly joined in the political work after her husband's politics had ensured for her redundancy in the work place.

Dogged by serious illness for many years, how did he survive the rigours of the freedom struggle and community work? Those long associated with him would say it is credible only with the knowledge that he was endowed with a placid temperament, a sense of humour, a quality of optimism which made him happy and content to deal with issues of the present, never worrying about the unpredictable future.

He is survived by his wife Saras, a son Vijay, associated with a computer company in Australia, and two daughters, Kammy, a medical doctor with postgraduate qualifications serving in the Ministry of Health, and Jessie, for several years in practice as an advocate in the legal profession.

D.M.M. MOTALA