

# *Obituaries*

## *Ismael Meer (1918–2000)*

Born in Waschbank on 5 September 1918, Ismael Meer was a stalwart freedom fighter, trade unionist, educationist, politician and historian. He left school early because of financial constraints, and worked in a shop before completing his schooling at Sastri College in Durban. While still a scholar, he became politically active in the non-European United Front, and worked with the late Abdur Rehman to forge national links. He then attended Natal University in Durban, where he completed his BA degree. While on campus he was president of the students' body and contributed to the student magazine, *Dome*. His article on the struggle for freedom in India led to that issue of the magazine being banned.

He actively organised teachers into the Natal Teachers' Trade Union in 1940 and administered the deduction from teachers' salaries for the building of schools. Fellow trade unionists were H.A. Naidoo who organised the sugar workers, and George Ponnen, George Singh and Billy Nair, who organised factory workers. He helped establish the Congress High School that provided tuition after school hours for students who were unable to gain admission to the only high school of that time, Sastri College. Active amongst the corps of volunteers were dedicated educationists such as B.A. Naidoo, Cyril Narsoo, George Thumbadoo and Vasie Nair. Meer's concern for and recognition of the importance of education led him to form the Natal Grantees Association that raised funds from the community to build schools on a partnership basis with the Natal Provincial Administration. He recognised the irony when the community recently balked at paying school fees under a democratic government but raised funds to build schools under a fascist government.

With Cassim Amra, he was part of the hospitality committee to host the visit of the future prime minister of India, Indira Gandhi, in 1946. This was part of the recognised relationship between the Congress Alliance in South Africa and the Indian National Congress in India, a relationship which obtains even today.

He went on to the University of Witwatersrand to study law, as 'non-white' students were not admitted to the law faculty at the University of Natal to study for the LIB degree. While a student in the then Transvaal, he joined the Communist Party of South Africa and was impressed by its record of non-racialism and intellectual debate. His political activism brought him into contact with Nelson Mandela and J.N. Singh who were fellow students in the law faculty. He became involved in the Transvaal Indian Congress and worked with Yusuf Dadoo to consolidate the influence of the working class oriented nationalist bloc. He gave up his studies and worked full-time on the Passive Resistance movement of 1946. He called for the temporary suspension of the cam-

paign for the duration of the historic mineworkers' strike which brought to the fore issues of non-racialism and working class solidarity. He was imprisoned for his participation in the campaign. He also edited the *Passive Resister* for the duration of the campaign and contributed to various other national publications.

Meer worked closely with the leadership of the ANC in the Transvaal, especially with A.B. Xuma, and focussed on issues of unity across racial divides. This work culminated in the Doctors' Pact signed between Drs Xuma, Dadoo and Naicker in 1947. In 1948 he was expelled from the Transvaal and sent back to Natal after being imprisoned for his participation in defying the 'Ghetto Act'.

Upon his arrival in Natal he commenced work with the Natal Indian Congress and was elected vice president. To foster closer cooperation between the Indian congresses, the South African Indian Congress was launched and he was elected to the executive committee. During the 1949 riots, in a period of heightened animosity between the African and Indian communities, he worked closely with Chief Albert Luthuli to promote peaceful co-existence and calm as a necessary pre-condition for non-racial unity against the common oppressor. Together they visited the trouble spots in Durban and addressed the community in English and Zulu, in which he was proficient.

He established his legal practice in Verulam in 1951. During the Defiance Campaign of 1952 he served on the Joint Executive Committee of the ANC and NIC and actively mobilised for participation in the defiance of unjust laws. He was once again imprisoned and banned from writing or being quoted. This banning was revoked only in 1990. During this period of his being 'listed', he continued to write under a pseudonym.

He was a member of the Greyville Branch of the NIC and served as political education officer, and was responsible for the training of the political cadreship. Many current leaders blossomed under his mentorship and tutelage.

He was charged together with 154 others for treason in a trial that lasted 6 years and where all were acquitted. He was again detained during the national state of emergency in 1960. He continued to give advice and exercised his considerable political skills in the mass democratic movement during the period of the banning of the ANC. On the unbanning of the ANC he was elected chairperson of the Durban West Areas branch. In 1994 he was elected to the KZN Provincial Legislature and served on the education, finance and public accounts portfolio committees.

As an historian he was extremely concerned about the distortions that were being taught in schools and universities and he established the Liberation History Foundation which organised regular lectures on events that were being slowly forgotten or had not been recorded.

He leaves his wife of 49 years, Fatima Meer, and two daughters, Shamim and Shenaaz.