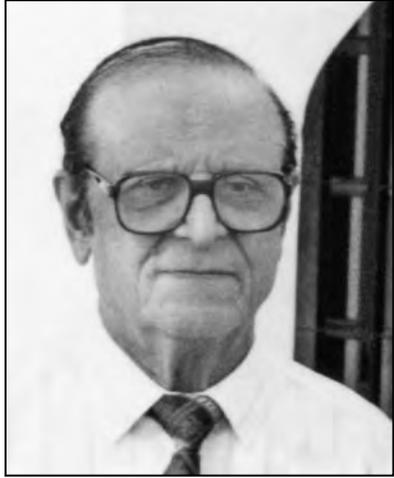


Mahomed Moosa (Chota) Motala (1921–2005)

Dr Mahomed Moosa Motala has an arterial road named after him in Pietermaritzburg, the capital city of KwaZulu-Natal. It does not bear his full name nor does it carry the honorific, doctor. It is simply known as Chota Motala Road. 'Chota' means 'small' in Urdu, as in younger brother or uncle, and this was how Motala was affectionately known by his family, friends and political activists.

There was a lengthy debate in the City Council's Street Re-naming Committee on what version of his name to use. The simple, unadorned 'Chota Motala' won the day. Motala was one of those rare individuals with no pretensions who truly could be called a 'man of the people.' He did not capitalise on his status as a medical doctor, nor as a veteran of the political struggle. Even



Dr Chota Motala

when he became democratic South Africa's first Ambassador to Morocco, he told journalist Susan Segar that what he missed most about Pietermaritzburg was its people.

Motala was 83 years old when he died, after a long illness, at his Mountain Rise home on Friday, 20 May 2005. Born in Dundee on 14 June 1921, he matriculated at Sastri College in Durban in 1938. He studied medicine in India, after stowing away on a ship at the age of 18 to get there. Motala returned to South Africa in 1948 and immediately became involved in politics. He told Segar, 'It was inevitable. There could never have been another option. I arrived from India, fresh from the struggle to end British rule. I had been loosely involved as a student activist in the Indian National Congress. It was just never a case of now I'm a doctor, I'm going to buy a smart car and a beautiful house.'

He quoted Indian statesman Pandit Nehru, whom he heard in an address to students, tell them that their struggle lay with the majority community, 'that there is no freedom unless we join the struggle. So our house became a meeting place for all race groups interested in fighting apartheid. We were not just running a family but a house which was a base for the Congress movement.'

The house was in Boom Street and Motala, the second black doctor to set up a practice in Pietermaritzburg had his rooms in Retief Street. He was soon joined by his partners Dr Vasu Chetty and Dr Omar Essack who he said ran the show whenever he was busy on activist work or when he was on trial. The longest was the famous 1956 treason trial in Johannesburg where Motala was one of the 156 accused. He was first locked up in the Fort Prison with other treason trialists, including Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu who became firm friends. During the duration of the trial, he lived with various activists in Johannesburg and travelled once a month to Pietermaritzburg in his small Volkswagen, loaded with other trialists from Natal. The charges against him were dropped in 1959. He returned to his practice and continued to care for patients in the surrounding coloured, Indian and African townships. He once said it was the

shocking conditions under which his patients lived that both galvanised and sustained his political activity.

Motala revived the Pietermaritzburg branch of the Natal Indian Congress and was elected chairperson in 1953. With other Indian Congress members he began forging close ties with the local branch of the ANC. He was elected joint chairperson with Archie Gumede to lead the campaign to collect the views of people of the Natal Midlands on what should be included in the Freedom Charter. In June 1955 he spoke on behalf of Chief Albert Luthuli at the farewell function for the Durban delegates going to Klip-town where the Freedom Charter was drafted. Motala once described Luthuli as a very important mentor in his life.

The year after his release from the treason trial, Motala was charged with incitement for his role in the strike by local leatherworkers. He was also detained during the 1960 State of Emergency and was banned from 1963 to 1968. During this time and through the seventies he continued being involved in community activities and quietly mentored young activists. By the eighties with the revival of the Natal Indian Congress and the United Democratic Front (UDF) he became politically active again, often being seen at the front of political marches and speaking from podiums during the various campaigns for community rights. He was detained again briefly during the 1986 State of Emergency.

When the ANC was unbanned in 1990 he was elected chairperson of his branch. He told Segar he missed pulling on his old jersey and attending ANC meetings at night. Motala declined nomination to serve as an MP but could not refuse when his old friend Mandela asked him to become ambassador to Morocco. Mandela was a frequent visitor to Motala's Boom Street residence and had had lunch there shortly before he was arrested in Howick in 1962.

Motala was tireless in his service to the community; he never gave up on his medical practice. Younger political activists Yusuf Bhamjee and Yunus Carrim who are now both national parliamentarians, recall his treating scores of victims of political violence. They say that, during the Seven Day War of 1990, it is estimated that he and his partners treated over 2 000 victims of violence.

In 1997 the Pietermaritzburg Municipality awarded Motala civic honours for improving the quality of life for the sick and the poor in the city and for his role in community affairs and the liberation struggle. The citation of his activities seemed endless including his role in many campaigns from the Freedom Charter, the Potato Boycott, the Group Areas Act, opposition to the Bantu Education Act and the Tri-cameral System. He was also a member of the Indian Centenary Trust and the Gandhi Memorial Committee. Together with Dasrath Bundhoo, he was instrumental in arranging for a statue of Mahatma Gandhi to be erected in the Pietermaritzburg city centre.

Of all the tributes paid to Motala on his death, some of the most moving came from young activists, who enjoyed interacting with him. In their tribute Bhamjee and Carrim wrote: 'Comrade Motala was talkative, lively, engaging. He had a very inquiring mind and was quite young at heart. He was a keen bridge player and an ardent cricket follower. Crucially his contribution cannot be understood without recognising the value of his utterly wonderful wife, Rabia or Auntie Chotie as she is popularly known. Dignified, sociable, perceptive, interested, hers is a story to be told. Their children Shireen and Irshad also contribute valuably to the transformation in their own ways.'

Bhamjee and Carrim go on to say that it is not just an individual who has passed on, but a unique generation is disappearing. ‘Just as this country will never have another Nelson Mandela, Pietermaritzburg will never have another Chota Motala.’

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SOURCES:

Susan Segar. 1997. Interview in Rabat, Morocco. Published in *The Natal Witness*, 1 December 1997.

Yusuf Bhamjee & Yunus Carrim. 2005. Memorial Brochure: *Dr Chota Motala: Elder Statesman*.