

Fatima Meer (1928–2010)

As a political leader, academic, publisher, writer, human rights activist and Gandhian, Fatima Meer's name resonated with the liberation struggle. She was one of South Africa's most distinguished 20th-century leaders.

During a lifelong campaign for the rights of the underclass, Meer was a prolific writer, publishing more than 40 books on social issues affecting South Africans.

It is little wonder that she had

been acknowledged both locally and internationally with numerous awards in recognition of her anti-apartheid work.

Meer was no ordinary woman. Her long and illustrious life was based on the principle of 'justice with justice' and would be a hard act to follow under any circumstances.

We acknowledged this amazing personality at a state funeral because it was the only possible tribute that we could give her as we bade her farewell.

On my numerous visits to her home I discovered myriad interesting facets to her personality as a mother, sister, friend, confidante and elder and as a concerned social and political activist. Each side added coherence

A woman of integrity, humility and kindness and great philosophical depth, she had the capacity to embrace all around her, yet maintained her core of beliefs as an anchor to her political might. She was critical, but never judgmental.

Meer was born on August 12 1928, in Durban, to a white Afrikaner mother, Rachel Farrel, and an Indian father, Moosa Meer. Her father was born in Surat in Gujerat and came from a small Sunni Bhora community. He initially worked as a shop assistant in his uncle's business and later was the editor and publisher of *Indian Views*, a weekly Gujerati newspaper, from 1914 to 1965.

She had eight siblings. Their upbringing was not ordinary, and certainly unlike that of most contemporary Muslims. Her mother was an orphan of Jewish and Portuguese descent, but she converted to Islam and took the name Amina.

'I was born in a three-parent family,' she would say proudly. 'My mother was



Fatima Meer

an orphan by the name of Rachel and my father, who was already married, took a keen interest in helping Rachel and her brother, Lionel, as much as he could. Soon a romantic relationship developed and he took her home as his second wife. I was the firstborn child of five children. My father already had four children from his first wife. The amazing thing about our lives was that we never differentiated between the mothers or the children.

'We lived in a "kudumoo" which meant a closely-knit community of relatives. It was a household that reflected a strong Gujerati, Indian, Muslim cultural ethos against the background of a first-generation immigrant family struggling to survive in a racist society.'

From a young age Meer started doing odd jobs for the production of the family newspaper. She learnt the power of the written and spoken word and over the years she developed a good command of the English language that helped her career as an

academic, writer and human rights and political activist. In the 1940s it was unusual for young Indian Muslim women to be sent to university and even more so before marriage, but Meer was fortunate to have been allowed to do so.

She completed her schooling at Durban Indian Girls' High School and subsequently attended Wits University and later the University of Natal, where she completed a master's degree in sociology.

'I had a cousin by the name of Ismail Meer, who was very influential in guiding my education. He was a student of law with Nelson Mandela at Wits University in the 1930s and was dating Ruth First at the time. He persuaded my family to send me to Wits to study for a degree in social sciences. Upon hearing that I was fraternising with white students when I went around giving out anti-apartheid posters with members of the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM), my parents suggested that I return to continue my studies at the University of Natal where special classes were being offered to so-called "non-Europeans".'

Ismail Meer soon returned to serve his articles in Durban under Ashwin Chowdrie. On several occasions he would come to escort her home after her lectures in the late afternoon.

She humorously recounts the highlights of their relationship when he took her to the beach in a borrowed car, bought her a milkshake and doughnut and produced a ring with the smallest diamond in the world. They married in 1950 and had three beautiful children, who were fed on the milk of the struggle.

On account of her background, her

political life started early. In 1944, when she was 16 years old, she helped raise £1 000 for famine relief in Bengal. In 1946 she joined the passive resistance campaign while still a student at Durban Indian Girls' High and established the Student Passive Resistance Committee to support the campaign.

This propelled her into the public eye. She was invited to speak at some of the mass rallies and shared the platform with prominent anti-apartheid leaders Dr Yussuf Dadoo and Dr Monty Naicker. Though petite, Meer became a powerful public figure.

Shortly after the 1949 riots, while leaders were still numb with shock, Fatima threw herself into community work to improve race relations between Indians and Africans in Durban.

She helped Indian and African women under the banner of the Durban and District Women's League and became the secretary of the League with Bertha Mkhize (president of the ANC Women's League) as the chairperson. This was the first women's organisation with joint Indian and African membership.

The race riots were one of the turning points for Meer, and she spent the better part of her life working tirelessly to improve race relations, and promoting justice, reconciliation and non-violent action.

Her activism was further sparked when she led the historic women's march on the Union Buildings on August 9, 1956 against the unfair pass laws for black women.

Meer was first 'banned' in 1952. The notorious banning orders effectively imprisoned people in their own homes by limiting their access to friends, relatives or the general public and

curtailing all educational, political or social activities. After the Sharpeville massacre in March 1960, the South African government declared a state of emergency and detained large numbers of people without trial.

Meer's husband was one of the Natal leaders arrested and held at Durban Central Police Station. She organised weekly vigils outside the prison, and played a central role in gathering families in the community to provide food and support for the prisoners and their families. The group was arrested for demonstrating outside the prison and for organising a march to the mayor's office. They were released shortly after their arrest.

Together with Sushila Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi's daughter-in-law, Meer was also involved in organising a week-long vigil at the Gandhi Settlement in Phoenix, which brought together Africans and Indians in prayer and fasting.

During the 1970s she was again banned as the leading anti-apartheid voice in the country and later detained without trial for trying to organise a political rally with Steve Biko.

At this time – even though she faced strong opposition from her family and Indian Congress colleagues – she began to embrace the Black Consciousness ideology of the South African Students' Organisation (Saso) led by Biko. In this respect she was always a leader and not a follower. In 1975, for her outspoken public criticism of apartheid, Meer was served with another five-year banning order. On August 19 1976, Meer's son, Rashid, was detained in the wake of the 1976 student revolt.

Nine days later Meer was also detained, along with 11 other

women. Sections of her six-months detention without trial were in solitary confinement. She was in detention with her close friend, Winnie Mandela, and other members of the Black Women's Federation at Johannesburg's notorious Fort Prison.

Shortly after her release in December 1976 she survived an attempt on her life when her house was petrol-bombed. Undeterred by the attack, the Meer family still resided in a home with no high walls and minimal security. Their commitment showed in the way they chose to live their lives among and with people in a lower-income apartheid-designated Indian area.

Her children were also affected by her political involvement. Rashid went into exile. She didn't see him for more than a decade and later he died in a tragic road accident.

Despite the rigours of her political life, Meer did not give up on her professional career. In 1956 she became the first black woman to be appointed as a lecturer at a white South African university. She was on the staff of Natal University until 1988 and was the only banned person who was ever granted permission to teach at any educational institution.

She was an editor of at least 18 publications and also wrote more than 40 books on a wide variety of subjects. Among the many books Meer wrote, *Apprenticeship of a Mahatma* was made into a film by Shyam Benegal entitled *The Making of the Mahatma*, for which she wrote the screenplay. She also wrote *Higher than Hope*, the first authorised biography of Nelson Mandela, which was translated into 13 languages.

Some of the many awards given to

Obituaries

Meer throughout her life include: the Union of South African Journalists Award (1975), the Imam Abdullah Haroon Award for the Struggle Against Oppression and Racial Discrimination (1990) and the Vishwa Gurjari Award for Contribution to Human Rights

(1994), as well as The Ponnady Award from the Tamil Women's Progressive Movement (2008).

She was in the Top 100 Women Who Shook South Africa list in 1999 and was also voted 45th in the Top 100 Great South Africans in 2004.

DEVI RAJAB

(With acknowledgements to the *Sunday Independent*)

