

C.D. Moodley: Activist and community champion (1933–2018)

THE LAST of the five Elders of the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) in Pietermaritzburg, as they could be called, has now fallen. C.D. Moodley, or Uncle CD as he was known to the younger generation of activists, died after being ill for some time, on Saturday 18 August 2018.

He was part of a remarkable group of activist elders in the 1980s, which included A.S. Chetty, Chota Motala, Vasu Chetty and Sashi Moodley. Cutting their political teeth in the 1950s, they were bound together not just through political ties but many shared experiences and inevitable friendships.

They were quite different personalities with their different strengths and shortcomings, but they complemented each other very well and came together as quite a formidable group. While they had their differences, they often united especially in their relationship with the younger generation of activists. Partly, it was the usual intergenerational differences: they saw their role as counselling and taming the younger activists, whom they felt could be naïve or impractical or radical. The younger activists, whilst respecting them, felt that they could be out of touch, too conservative and not connected enough to the African townships.

While A.S. Chetty and Motala had strong views and could be quite assertive, Vasu Chetty and Sashi Moodley were soft. In the middle was C.D. Moodley, with his balanced, temperate, conciliatory manner. He was best known for his able leadership of the Pietermaritzburg Combined Ratepayers and Residents Association, which he

chaired. I served as secretary of the organisation and got to know him well. He had a very fair, give-and-take approach in his chairing and contributed much to ensuring consensus among a wide range of different constituencies within the association, some sympathetic to the ANC and others not. He was a very good chairperson, with exactly the right temperament for the organisation. We were very fortunate to have had him.

In 1989, C.D. Moodley led some 10 000 people in a march to oppose the disproportionately high property rates Indians and coloureds had to pay because of the Group Areas Act. A few years later the municipality conceded by providing rates rebates to homeowners in historically Indian and coloured areas.

Born on 30 June 1933 in Mount Edgecombe, Durairaj Siva Moodley was one of eight children. His father Chinsamy, worked at the Mount Edgecombe sugar mill and his mother, Parvathie, was a housewife. He came from a poor background and his social awareness started taking root when he became aware of the appalling conditions around him. However, it was when the family moved to Pietermaritzburg in the early 1950s that his political activism began. Moodley's early influences were his cousins, Bobby and Lutchmie Pillay, who were arrested in the 1940s defiance campaign. He became an active member of the NIC and participated in the Technical Debating Society, which had regular political discussions on a wide range of issues.

He was active in several political and community campaigns of the time. His



siblings remember him going out to distribute pamphlets, and doing house visits for the Defiance Campaigns of the 1950s. He was also actively involved in the Freedom Charter campaign. His brother Daya remembers that, expecting the police to turn up at their house, he had to hide C.D.'s political material in a basket with vegetables and take it to a relative's house. Another relative said that when Harry Gwala was on the run from the police in the 1950s he stayed at Moodley's aunt's house for a while. During the 1986 State of Emergency, C.D. Moodley was detained without trial and spent time at the Pietermaritzburg New Prison.

Moodley played a role in a wide range of campaigns and structures over the years and after his retirement he was active in the Pietermaritzburg Child Welfare Society and the Community Policing Forum.

He had a quiet, dignified presence and was measured, considered, restrained in his views. He was not impulsive in the way political activists with our passions often are. Although he could at times have strong views, he would not shy away from heated political arguments. I don't recall ever having seen him lose his temper. He was quite open-minded

and would be prepared to change his views given a convincing argument; not a characteristic of activists!

C.D. was widely read, followed the news keenly and was interested in broader global issues. Had he not left school early because of financial pressures, he may well have had the opportunity to find a career that more adequately fulfilled his potential.

Sadly, he lost his wife, Parvathie in the early 1980s and he was thus a single parent to his three children, Thilesh, Aneshrie and Navin. He showed no sign of his family stresses in the public domain and did not shrink from his political responsibilities. In recent years, C.D. Moodley was disillusioned. He would often ask me if things were going to change and when were we going to deal with corruption.

His strongest contribution was to the civic movement. The biggest tribute a younger generation of activists can pay him is to work at deepening our democracy, ensure service delivery, and fulfill the ideals of his generation. We owe it to him. But also to ourselves; and to our future.

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