

CHOTA MOTALA: A BIOGRAPHY OF POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN THE KWAZULU-NATAL MIDLANDS

by GOOLAM VAHED

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If you drive through Pietermaritzburg on the N3 highway you will inevitably pass under a large interchange with the sign Dr Chota Motala Road. Few people in Pietermaritzburg, and indeed South Africa, know of the man behind the name. This book sets the record straight. Written by Goolam Vahed, a professor of History at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, it tells the life story of Chota Motala. It begins with his upbringing in Natal, his work as a general practitioner in Pietermaritzburg, and his political activism against the National Party government until the advent of full democracy.

The author weaves the relevant history and politics of South Africa over the last half of the twentieth century into the story. This gives a very useful review of the beginning and ending of the National Party government in South Africa, given that much knowledge of this political activity was unavailable to the public due to censorship and propaganda at the time.

At times the book reads like a thriller. There is imprisonment, murder, arson, midnight police raids, abductions, a low-grade civil war and much ducking and diving by activists whose clandestine meetings and activities were continually being harassed by the security police. Yet this is a record of real life events that are now fading in the memories of those of us who were present at the time. The author has collected first-hand accounts from relatives, work col-

leagues, fellow activists and politicians, to provide a corroborative narrative of Motala's life and political activities.

Chota Motala's father Moosa, journeyed from Gujarat, India to the British Colony of Natal in 1898. He came as a passenger migrant and after many misadventures opened a dealership near Dundee where Motala was born in 1921. Motala was educated at Dundee Primary School and then at Sastri College in Durban before travelling to India to study medicine. This coincided with India's fight for independence from British rule, which influenced Motala's views on social justice. After qualifying from the Grant Medical School in Bombay, Motala returned to South Africa to pursue a dual career in medicine and politics. He opened a practice in Pietermaritzburg which in those days had a total population of 60 000.

There were several nascent political parties in South Africa in the 1950s and for many of us it is often difficult to follow the acronyms of ANC, PAC, CPSA, SAIC, NIC, TIC, APO and NEUM (three pages of abbreviations at the beginning of the volume help the reader to check on who represents whom). Most of these were racially defined political organisations, and Motala worked hard to build unity between them by crossing race, religious and class lines and through organising meetings to help build co-ordinated resistance to the government.

In December 1956 his political activities led to the security police raid-

ing Motala's Boom Street home and arresting him for treason. This was the first time that Motala was incarcerated, which only led him to intensify his activities. At this time, it appears that the relationship between racial groups in Pietermaritzburg was relatively good as it was considered a 'resistance' city. This was partly due to activists such as Motala who acted as 'bridge' people attempting to integrate organisations with the aim of building a non-racial democratic society. Vahed describes subsequent arrests in 1960 and 1986, and banning in 1963. He also weaves in anecdotal tales: as resistance was accelerated in the 1960s the Motala's house in Boom Street became a stop-over and meeting place for activists such as Nelson Mandela, Ahmed Kathrada and Walter Sisulu. Mandela, then known as the Black Pimpernel was on the run and visited them disguised as an old man. Motala's wife, Rabia, answered the door: thinking he was a patient she asked him to wait on the veranda while she called the doctor. Apparently Mandela was thrilled that his disguise worked so well.

During the late 1980s the complex internecine violence between the Inkatha Freedom Party, the UDF, ANC and other, 'third force' elements was fought mainly in townships and rural areas around Pietermaritzburg. Motala acted as an intermediary between the belligerent parties, and his Retief Street practice treated many victims of the violence.

The last two chapters of *Chota Motala* cover the rapid transition leading to the unbanning of the ANC, PAC and SACP as well as the release of Mandela

on 11 February 1990. Although Motala was not elected to parliament he was appointed as ambassador to Morocco. On returning to South Africa, despite failing health, he remained involved in teaching and medical work until his death at the age of 83 in 2005.

Medical doctors are normally a conservative group (myself included) and have, mostly, a sanguine distrustful attitude to politicians and are thus often reluctant to enter the robust world of government affairs. This may be partly due to the overwhelming numbers of patients and the workload of our everyday lives; however, this is really no excuse for not participating in greater national debates against injustice and corrupt governments. Pericles, the Greek statesman, once said that 'Just because you do not take an interest in politics doesn't mean politics won't take an interest in you'. It is therefore all the more remarkable that Chota Motala was able to devote his time and energy between his busy general practice and his extensive political activity. In this work one can feel his strong conviction and sense of justice.

I was not expecting to find this book an easy read, but the author has documented the complexities of the period in a coherent manner. The many photographs really make the characters and places come alive. With its extensive bibliography, references and annotations it will be useful to students of history as well as anyone interested in the political history of the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands in the last half of the twentieth century.

CHRIS ELLIS