

### Sinthumbi and Poppie

#### Following the Heart

□□□□□□ Sinthumbi's given name is Vartharajaloo. □ Clan custom requires that his first name be the same as his father's. □ So his full name should be Vernugopal (his father's first name) Vartharajaloo Naidoo. This is what he accepted and for most of his life was called VV Naidoo. Then when he had to reapply for his driver's licence in 1977, no record of a VV Naidoo could be found. He did not exist. □ W  
hen his father's file was located, he found that his name had been entered as Vartharajaloo Gopalsamy, not even Naidoo. Some careless immigration official had fused Vernugopal with Naransamy, his father's first and second names, to come up with Gopalsamy.

When he discovered this, Sinthumbi changed his name from VV Naidoo to VG Naidoo; he had no intention of giving up his surname. But the law knows neither VV Naidoo nor VG Naidoo, only V Gopalsamy whom nobody knows!

Born in the Asiatic Bazaar on August 13, 1915, Vernugopal Vartharajaloo Naidoo, better known as Sinthumbi, was the youngest of six children. His father, Vernugopal Naransamy Naidoo, who had left India for Mauritius to marry Vellimay Pillay, soon afterwards set sail for South Africa, landed in Durban and journeyed to Kimberley.

Like other Indian immigrants seeking their fortunes in South Africa, he followed the development of mining into the various provinces, but legal restrictions did not allow him to work at the diggings.

Then he and Vellimay left Kimberley for the Asiatic Bazaar in Pretoria where Vernugopal, like many others, turned to hawking fruit and vegetables. He drove his cart to the market every morning to stock up before setting off to sell his goods in Pretoria Town and its environs. It was on one of these rounds that he died under mysterious circumstances.

He left in the morning as usual but never came back. He was found lying across the railway line in Cullinan bludgeoned almost to death and would have disappeared without a trace, had the engineer of an approaching train not seen his body in time.

Vernugopal was taken to the Pretoria General Hospital in Potgieter Street where they set about trying to identify him.

His family, unaware of these happenings, would never have found him had it not been for an unusual coincidence. His second son, suffering from appendicitis, had been admitted to the same hospital earlier in the day. The young man had no idea who had been placed in the bed that was screened off next to him until he heard hospital officials read Vernugopal's name from a card that they found in his pocket.

He immediately informed them that the man was his father. That was how the family discovered that Vernugopal was in hospital. As he died without recovering consciousness, the mystery of his death was never solved. The family believed that someone envious of his success as a hawker had murdered him.

In the midst of their grief, they were dealt another blow when Appasamy Nayagar, the Tamil priest, refused to administer the last rites. He was angry with Vernugopal for having officiated at a funeral earlier in the month. "He doesn't need me.

Didn't he take the funeral of that low-caste laundryman a few weeks ago?"

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The priest, who was President of the Pretoria Tamil League, had forbidden its members from giving the laundryman a proper burial, but Vernugopal, believing that it was wrong to deny him the last rites, had officiated at his funeral. The League had fined Vernugopal two shillings and sixpence for disobeying the priest.

Vellimay angrily confronted the priest. "Are you holding a grudge against him for taking that funeral, even now when somebody has murdered him?" How could this priest be so cold? Her husband had been an executive member of the League.

"All the members of the Tamil League knew they mustn't take that man's funeral, but your husband thought he knew better."

Vellimay bristled. "What kind of priest are you? You call this doing God's work? My husband was murdered and you won't take his funeral. Is this what your religion teaches you?"

"I see. The whole family thinks it's too clever. Well, if you're so clever, why don't you take the funeral yourself?"

In that moment, Vellimay, whose pain was more than she could bear, turned her back on the priest right there and then and forever. Vernugopal was not cremated as Hindus usually are,

but was buried instead.

Vernugopal's murder, the first of three deaths that took place in quick succession, deprived the family of all its breadwinners in the short space of a few months. The two older boys died soon after their father: one as a result of a burst appendix, the other in the terrible influenza epidemic that hit the Transvaal at the end of the First World War. Vellimay with three young children, her younger daughter, Marmakka, and her two remaining sons, Perithumbi and Sinthumbi, had no means of support and became dependent on her son-in-law, GS Frank, who had moved in with them when he had married her eldest daughter, Subamma.

When a Mr Padayachee, a new immigrant from India, was looking for lodgings, Vellimay saw this as an opportunity to earn a small income and offered Mr Padayachee accommodation in her house. Mr Padayachee moved in, became a hawker and helped to support the family. Though he was kind and good, a surrogate father to the two little boys, after he had been with them for a while, an irreconcilable quarrel erupted between Subamma and her mother and Vellimay, clutching Sinthumbi's little hand, walked out with a small blanket under her arm. She had asked Marmakka, Perithumbi and Sinthumbi whether they wanted to stay with their sister or go with her. Marmakka chose to stay, but Sinthumbi and Perithumbi left with their mother. Mr Padayachee, whom the boys called Aiyah, also went with them. They moved to a little room in Tenth Street on property that Vellimay's eldest son had bought for sixty pounds some years before. As the ten foot square room had no facilities whatsoever, they had to go across the road to a neighbouring yard to use the bathroom and toilet. Although Aiyah provided for the family, Vellimay, who did not want to be totally dependent on him, began hawking vegetables and fruit from a little barrow that she pushed around adjoining areas in Pretoria town.

When Perithumbi and Sinthumbi were old enough, Vellimay sent them to Miss Ferguson's Coloured School, not the English School for Indians, which used the premises of the Tamil School, the property of the Tamil League with its President, Appasamy Nayagar. Vellimay could never forgive him for refusing to officiate at her husband's funeral and would have nothing to do with anything connected to him. So Sinthumbi and Perithumbi went to the Coloured school.

They weren't the only Indian children at Miss Ferguson's school; there were at least twenty others. At school, the boys developed a keen interest in sports. Miss Ferguson, who coached soccer, chose them to represent the school.

In these inter-school competitions, the seed was sown for their future involvement in sport.

But Vellimay's health was failing, so it wasn't easy for the boys. By the time Sinthumbi was ten years old, he and Perithumbi were helping their mother in the afternoons after school, pushing the cart or carrying dishes of fruit and vegetables to sell in town. Vellimay, who was ailing all the time, had no idea that she was suffering from cancer and the many operations, seven over a period of two years, didn't halt her steady decline. After the last operation, she was no longer strong enough to go on working so the boys left school to manage the hawking trade. Sinthumbi was thirteen when he began pushing the vegetable barrow.

Vellimay's illness had one important salutary effect: it led to reconciliation with her daughters, Subamma and Marmakka. GS Frank then built a house on Tenth Street next door to his mother-in-law's little room.

Though she now had the comfort of her daughters' care, Vellimay never improved. She became bed-ridden and died when Sinthumbi was fifteen.

After the funeral, Frank, who was the head chef at Turkstra's Koffiehuis, found Perithumbi employment as assistant-chef while Subamma approached MK Khoja, who agreed to employ Sinthumbi in his grocery shop. Being on Bloed Street, the boundary between the Cape Boys' Location and the Asiatic Bazaar, the shop was well placed to serve both the Coloured and the Indian communities.

And it was in MK Khoja's general dealership, that Sinthumbi met Poppie, the girl who was to become his wife.

“My wife went to an Anglican mission school, Good Shepherd School. She was born in General Smuts' house in Irene. The late Smuts told her mother, ‘I want you to baptise this child Irene,’ because Smuts' house was in Irene.’ Smuts also gave her the nickname Poppie (Dolly)

and that was what everyone called her. "General and Mrs Smuts, and my wife's grandfather and grandmother first lived in Sunnyside. Then Smuts bought the farm in Irene and they moved there."

Poppie's grandparents, the Siegers, worked for General Smuts. Mrs Sieger, a St Helena woman, as housekeeper, and Mr Sieger, a Coloured man whose father was German, as handyman. It was clear that Smuts expected their daughter, Nora, Poppie's mother, to take over as his housekeeper when her mother retired, but Nora, a feisty young woman, had other ideas. "This is not a job for me. I want an education. I will not be a slave for you. I will fight for my rights as a human being." She became a machinist in a factory in Johannesburg, held a position in the Garment Workers' Union and joined the Liberal Party. She married a German, Mr Peters, and Poppie was the first grandchild born at the farm in Irene.

As her involvement in political activities kept her on the move all over the country, Nora left her children in the care of her parents and Poppie was brought up by her grandparents. When she was ready for school, she went to live with a Mrs Fisher on Tenth Street in the Cape Location. The Good Shepherd School on Schubart Street that she was to attend, was within easy walking distance from there.

After she left school, she became a machinist in a factory and continued to live with Mrs Fisher. As MK Khoja's, on the corner of Bloed and Ninth Streets, was just up the road from Mrs Fisher's house, Poppie often shopped there. Once, before she and Sinthumbi began seeing each other, Subamma caught sight of Poppie as she was on her way to work. "Oh, what a pretty girl you are," she exclaimed, "I don't know which Indian boy you're going to catch."

Petite Poppie's white skin, curly brown hair, aquiline nose and big smile excited the teenage Indian boys who hung around the shop. One day when she walked in, one of Sinthumbi's friends called out, "Hello, beautiful, where do you come from?"

"Mind your own business," was the reply.

"Hey, you don't have to be so cheeky, we only want to be friends."

"Who said I want to be friends with you?" Poppie walked off leaving the boys fuming.

"Hey, Thumbi," one called to Sinthumbi, who was behind the counter, "you know that girl, she cheeked us an' all."

"Maybe you didn't speak to her right."

"No, we were just trying to make friends. She didn't have to talk to us like that."

"So what do you expect me to do?"

"Just talk to her, man. Tell her we want to be friends."

A few days later when Poppie came into the shop, Sinthumbi charged her a little extra for her goods to punish her for being rude to his friends. Then he said, "I want to see you." They made an arrangement to meet the following day at a secluded spot close to the Apies River. After work the next day, Sinthumbi made his way to the appointed place with his two friends.

"Hello," Sinthumbi greeted Poppie when she arrived. Then he turned to his friends. "Well, here you are. You say she cheeked you." When Poppie saw the two boys who had accosted her in the shop, she gave Sinthumbi a stiff look and walked away.

"Looks like she doesn't want to talk to you," Sinthumbi shouted over his shoulder as he ran after her.

"Hey, Poppie, wait for me."

She didn't. When he caught up with her, he walked beside her along Bloed Street, the street that divided the Coloured Location from the Indian Location.

"Look, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have ..." he began.

"No, you shouldn't. I came here to meet *you*, not a whole gang."

"I'm sorry. They wanted to talk to you and I thought ..."

"Well, you thought wrong."

They walked on in silence for a while.

"Did you really come just to see me?" he asked.

"I don't know why," she answered.

"Well, I wasn't sure."

At the corner of Bloed and Tenth Streets, where they would go off in different directions, she to the Coloured side of Tenth, he, to the Indian side, they lingered for a while.

He asked, "Can I see you again?"

&quot;You or the whole gang?&quot;

&quot;No, just me.&quot;

&quot;I'll think about it,&quot; she said as she strode off to Mrs Fisher's house.

They began to see each other regularly after that. They were careful not to make their interest in each other obvious. In those days parents didn't approve of boys and girls dating. And Poppie was a Coloured girl! Sinthumbi's sisters, Subamma and Marmakka, and his brother, Perithumbi, would hit the roof if they knew.

Soon afterwards, Subamma's husband, GS Frank, then in his tenth year at Turkstra's Koffiehuis, brought Sinthumbi on as a second assistant chef. Perithumbi, already working in that capacity, had been there for two years when Sinthumbi joined them.

In the early 1930s, Turkstra's Koffiehuis, on St Andries Street, now just Andries Street, between Church and Pretorius, was a flourishing restaurant in the city centre, catering to an elite clientele. It was popular with professionals, especially the legal fraternity, who crowded in at about eleven every morning. Turkstra's menu offered them a complete full-course meal consisting of hors d'oeuvres, soup, fish, entrées, the main course, sweets and coffee or tea for two shillings and sixpence.

Sinthumbi felt gratified to be working at such a prestigious place.

The chefs and their assistants started preparing breakfast at six in the morning. Perithumbi organised the ingredients for the meals that the chefs cooked while Sinthumbi made sandwiches and orange juice.

Mornings were the busiest times in the kitchen.

After they had cooked and served breakfast, they began immediately to prepare for lunch, which they served from eleven onwards.

Then twenty-two dishwashers stayed busy at the sinks while twenty-six white waiters ran back and forth between the kitchen and dining room. In the reception area, six white girls sold sweets and other over-the-counter items.

At three in the afternoon, when the lunch rush was over, the chefs and their assistants took a break.

They returned to work at half-past four for the last shift that ended at six-thirty.

The restaurant was closed on Sundays.

On weekdays, Sinthumbi met Poppie in town after lunch, and they strolled together through the city centre. Though they were very discreet, Subamma found out about their relationship and when she learnt of their meetings in town, she asked Frank to rearrange Sinthumbi's shifts.

As he could no longer meet Poppie during his break, he joined her on her Sunday visits to her grandmother.

Subamma, who felt that her brother was bringing disgrace on the family, didn't know how to get him to break it off with Poppie so she yelled at him for wasting money on these trips to Irene.

"You are spending so much money on that girl. How can you waste money like that? Do you think money grows on trees?"

"It's my money. I can do what I want with it."

"If Umma was alive, I don't know what she would say."

"You just leave Umma out of this."

" I don't know why you going around with a Bushman. You know you can't marry her. And which family will want you if you carry on like this?"

"She's not a Bushman. She's a white girl. Can't you see that?" Though they hurt him with their remarks, Sinthumbi was not going to be put off by his sisters and brother. He loved Poppie and that was that.

Then things changed at Turkstra's. Old Mr Turkstra died leaving the business to his sons, Bernard and Rintz, ambitious young men who wanted to turn Turkstra's into an even more exclusive restaurant. Rintz went on a tour of restaurants overseas, came back with new ideas and began to introduce changes. The first thing he did was to set out the menus in French. Frank pointed out that this would create problems but the young Turkstra ignored the chef. When the new menus were introduced, the waiters were constantly on the run to the kitchen to ask what the items on the menu were. Soon afterwards, the owners, who were planning to hire a German chef, gave Frank notice.

Frank explained to his brothers-in-law: "Listen boys, Mr Turkstra has hired a new chef. He doesn't need me anymore. So I will not be working here any longer. This does not affect you. You still have your jobs here."

"But how can they do this? After fourteen years of service! You built up this restaurant. People come here because of you." Sinthumbi was indignant.

"They are the owners. They can do what they like."

"Well, I don't think it's right. How can we stay on now? You were the one got us the jobs. I won't feel right to go on working here."

"We can't just give up our jobs, man." Perithumbi was nervous.

"We must. They can't treat Frank-Marmè (brother-in-law Frank) like this. When you leaving, Marmè?"

"End of the week."

"Then so are we," Sinthumbi spoke for himself and Perithumbi. "Look, we'll give them notice Friday. Then we finish Saturday. That's twenty-four hours."

"I don't know." Perithumbi wasn't happy to give up his job.

"You stay if you want but I won't. They replaced Frank-Marmè. Who says they won't replace us soon as we train two whites to take our place? I'm not staying."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Frank asked.

"Quite sure. Listen, we won't do the usual preparation for Monday. If we finish Saturday, then we finish. Monday is not our worry."

And they left. Sinthumbi didn't see why they should put themselves out for people who didn't appreciate their contribution to the business. In the years that followed, when Sinthumbi saw the restaurant going under, he felt convinced that when they fired his brother-in-law, the Turkstras brought bad fortune on themselves . He believed that their new staff was not

able to cope with the volume of work  
red in that kitchen. The Turkstras struggled for a while; then sold the restaurant, which changed hands a few more times before it finally closed. requi

After he left Turkstra's, Sinthumbi bought a lorry with a list of customers for a hundred pounds from one of the Chetty Brothers, who owned the Orient Bioscope, and took up hawking vegetables. He remained a hawker for the rest of his life but the business was just a means to a living. His real interests lay elsewhere - in sport.

While he and his brother were still at Turkstra's, someone at the restaurant had offered to sell them Charles Atlas's book on bodybuilding. They were very interested but couldn't afford it. The seller, seeing their enthusiasm, left the book with them in the hope that once they had studied it, they would buy it.

They, however, had a different plan: they took the manual, copied the whole of it by hand and returned it to the owner.

Then they began training. They had no idea that brother-in-law Frank, a tall well-built man, was a trained bodybuilder. When he saw the brothers exercising in the mornings and evenings, he took them in hand and turned these good-looking young Tamil boys into strong men with firm, muscular bodies.

Once they were proficient, they, in turn, helped him train a number of young boys.

Then Frank began arranging physical culture exhibitions for his troupe of thirty-two youngsters at the Empire and Royal Bioscopes, with Sinthumbi and Perithumbi, the star performers, whose prowess earned them renown as 'The Thumbi Brothers.'

All of Sinthumbi's feats demonstrated his phenomenal strength. In one, he picked up a ten-pound bag of sugar with his teeth. In another, he stood at one end of the stage opposite a line of boys, each one of whom took a running leap at him and kicked him in the stomach. In the next, the boys jumped onto his stomach from a chair mounted on a table.

Finally, he lay on his back, raised his body on his arms and legs and a wooden board was placed over his chest and abdomen. Perithumbi then put three bags of sand on this human platform and eight boys climbed up next to them. In this position, Sinthumbi supported a weight of over nine hundred pounds.

Seeing the tremendous potential in these two young men, Frank offered to train them in boxing. He worked out a schedule that included exercising, running and chopping wood and, in the boxing ring that he put up in his back yard, took them through their paces.

Sinthumbi was a natural; speed was his main asset and he always got the better of his brother.

As Frank wanted to find out just how good Sinthumbi was, he invited a professional boxer to a contest in the homemade boxing ring. Frank told Sinthumbi, "If you want to box, you have to learn to take a hiding."

When the fight began, Sinthumbi held back, didn't throw any punches just blocked the professional's jabs. But when he received a hard blow to his solar plexus and felt sharp pains, he became enraged, threw himself into the bout with the ferocity of a tiger and began hammering the pro unmercifully. Frank was forced to stop the fight. Though Sinthumbi's performance had exceeded his expectations, Frank felt that he still hadn't discovered the full extent of his brother-in-law's talent

and arranged another match with a tougher opponent, an African boxer, at whose hands a challenger had died.

When Sinthumbi heard who his opponent was, he appealed to his sister.

Subamma, who was lying ill in bed, sent for her husband. "Are you trying to kill my brother? Stop all this nonsense at once."

Frank dismissed her concern with a muttered, "You don't understand sport," and went on with his plan. He made several arrangements for the fight but Sinthumbi was always missing when the black boxer was due. One day, however, when he returned home from a soccer match, he found Frank and the boxer waiting for him. He was trapped. He put on his boxing gear, got into the ring with his opponent and began the bout defensively. As before, when he received a blow that incensed him, his instincts took over and he laid into the boxer with such ferocity that the man called off the fight. He too was impressed by Sinthumbi's remarkable speed. Despite his obvious talent and Frank's urging, Sinthumbi never took up boxing professionally. He was interested in it only for self-defence.

Sinthumbi preferred field sports: soccer, cricket, tennis and rugby. By far the most popular sport in the Asiatic Bazaar was soccer; people were fanatical about the game and the teams. In the twenties and thirties, there were four main teams: Pretorians, Cambridge, Swaraj and Pirates, competing at the Razor's Edge, the sports field on Boom Street. The Thumbi Brothers were valued players of the Pretorians Football Club with Perithumbi at centre-half and Sinthumbi, centre forward and later defence.

As there were no coaches, all the teams trained themselves and, to improve their tactics on the field, went often to watch white soccer matches at the Caledonian ground where they picked up pointers by focusing on players who played in the same positions as themselves.

Competition amongst the four teams was fierce. Teams that couldn't take a beating became violent and often attacked the referee when they were losing. Whenever Cambridge, the most aggressive team, lost, there was a bloody battle after the game. Fighting would begin in the grounds, continue outside and all the way to players' homes where there were knockdown drag-out fights in the street. Bobai, Sinthumbi's second son, recalls one incident when he was still a little boy. "The match finished at five. Around six o'clock, the taxi drivers came." The Mooloos, sponsors of Cambridge FC, were bus and taxi owners. Their drivers and conductors, known as the Mooloo Gang, were always sent to deal with enemies, in this case, the Pretorians. "The taxi drivers got hold of my father, held him down on the street and kicked him. I just saw blood and I screamed." There was nothing much the little boy or his father could do against this mob. Despite such incidents, the Thumbi Brothers continued to stand up to the gangs and to earn the respect of the community. Because of the violence,

Sinthumbi did not allow Poppie to come to the soccer matches in the location. So she never saw him play.

Sinthumbi had married Poppie in 1936, after the death of his sister, Subamma. Though he was a man who adhered strictly to Tamil customs and traditions, nothing about his marriage to Poppie was conventional. One day, he simply said to her, "Let's get married. We can go to court and have a civil ceremony."

"But what about your sister and brother?"

He knew that Marmakka and Perithumbi would never approve. "This is my life. I know what I want. If they don't like it, that's too bad."

Soon afterwards, they presented themselves before a magistrate who took one look at Sinthumbi and shook his head. "You can't marry this woman. You won't get permission from me for this."

Sinthumbi was stunned. He hadn't expected any problems at court. From remarks being made around them in Afrikaans, he and Poppie realised that the magistrate was not prepared to marry a white woman to an Indian man. When they went back a second time, after a lengthy debate, they managed to persuade the magistrate that Poppie, though registered white, was actually Coloured. Nevertheless, he insisted that they put up the banns at court and wait three weeks. Sinthumbi's family had no idea of what was happening and as banns were not a part of their culture, there were no objections. On the day of the wedding, Sinthumbi brought his friend Ambalavanan to witness the marriage.

Everything went smoothly until the magistrate asked for the ring. Sinthumbi looked around in embarrassment. In his eagerness to be married, he had not thought about the requirements of the ceremony. Poppie gave him the ring she was wearing and after they had been pronounced man and wife, the magistrate asked for two witnesses.

As Sinthumbi could produce only one, the clerk of the court signed as the second witness.

Now they were married but had nowhere to stay.

Traditionally, a son brought his wife to stay in his parents' home. Sinthumbi, who was still with Marmakka and Perithumbi, was hoping to persuade them to open their home to Poppie. In the meantime, he settled her in a room and kitchen on the corner of Bloed and Cowie Streets. When Marmakka and Perithumbi discovered that he was married, there was a huge fight and he walked out. The unit on Bloed and

Cowie became home and their boys, Raymond and Bobai, were born there.

When Raymond was a toddler, their landlady who didn't want children in her yard, gave them notice.

Nagoo Padayachy, who lived down the street on the stand next to the Tamil School, told Poppie about a vacant unit in her yard and they moved in there.

That was in 1941.

They had moved into premises that would be their home for the next thirty-eight years.

Despite his unorthodox marriage, Sinthumbi was a staunch traditionalist who believed that, as the man of the house, it was his responsibility to provide for the family and a wife's place was in the home taking care of the children. He didn't ever want to see Poppie suffer as his mother had suffered. On the other hand, Poppie, an excellent machinist, who had been working in a factory until her marriage, took for granted her right to work. A few years into their marriage, when her mother, Nora, found a job for her in a Johannesburg factory, Poppie was delighted, Sinthumbi flabbergasted.

"I am going to work in Johannesburg," Poppie announced to her husband.

"Oh, very good," he replied.

"Yes, now I can help with household expenses."

"Make sure you pack all your best things and put on your best for work. Once you leave here, don't come back."

Poppie stared at him in astonishment. "What are you saying?"

"I don't want you to work. I'm the man; I must work. I want you here at home looking after the children. I don't want you coming home tired and frying an egg or some other thing for them."

Poppie gave up the idea of going to work and resigned herself to becoming an Indian wife. In the first instance, that meant learning to cook the Tamil way. Dedicating herself to this task, she mastered all the intricacies of South Indian cuisine, became an expert in no time and gained such a favourable reputation in the community that she was able to set up a catering business from home. So despite Sinthumbi's attitude to working women, Poppie, like so many Indian wives in the location, found a way to work without leaving the house.

Sinthumbi, who came from a background of Tamil scholarship, was inordinately proud of his heritage. His father Vernugopal, a respected Tamil scholar, had drawn up the original constitution of the Pretoria Tamil League in the vernacular and had officiated at ritual ceremonies. Though Sinthumbi never went to Tamil school, the hostility between his mother and Appasamy Nayagar had prevented that, he loved his language and religion and imposed them strictly on his children.

"You will speak to your mother in Tamil."

"But she can't speak Tamil," they protested.

"That doesn't matter. You speak to her in Tamil. She will answer in English."

Sinthumbi was very pleased that his children had as their teacher the outstanding Tamil scholar and priest Krishnannè (G. Krishnan Pillay), who took a personal interest in these bright, conscientious, well-mannered children. When Raymond was absent from school one day, he came in person to inquire from Poppie.

She heard his deep voice booming from the door, "Poppie."

"Annè, (Big Brother)" she answered respectfully.

"Why didn't Raymond come to school today?"

"Annè, I look after my children in the house. If they misbehave outside, you can do what you like with them, even kill them, I will not complain."

When she recounted the incident to Sinthumbi, he was really proud of her. She was not like other women who would have questioned the teacher's right to come into their home to discipline their children. Poppie who obeyed the requirements of the culture into which she had married, did not take liberties like people born into it.

Though she never spoke it, Poppie learned to understand Tamil. Living next door to the Tamil

School helped. Her kitchen window, which looked out onto the school, allowed her to listen in to the Tamil lessons in the afternoons. But she learned far more from her husband. When Sinthumbi prepared the children for eisteddfods held to promote the Tamil language and culture, he often discussed matters of pronunciation and meaning with her. Eventually, she became so attuned to the language that she could identify errors in the speech and singing of performers. As her children - there were five of them, three boys and two girls - always performed exceptionally well, she was very proud of them.

The top prizes that they won in these singing and recitation competitions, were an acknowledgment that they were among the best Tamil scholars in the community. They could speak, read and write in Tamil, sing the holy songs and recite the prayers.

With the standard of Tamil in Pretoria recognised as the highest in the whole of South Africa, this was no mean achievement. The children's successes filled both parents' hearts with secret feelings of triumph. Their children had excelled in the culture of a community that didn't fully accept them because their mother was Coloured.

But Poppie was slowly being drawn into the activities at the temple through her husband, children and Krishnannè. At first she came to watch. Then Krishnannè began to involve her in the work.

When he included her in the corps of women who prepared food for all the ceremonies, she slowly gained acceptance among them. After a while, her presence was taken for granted.

As she became familiar with the religious practices, she learned to differentiate between the ceremonies and when she found that they had to be performed at specific times, she began a study of the Tamil calendar and almanac.

The knowledge that she gained put her in a position to advise others and before long, she was being consulted widely for her ability to recognise auspicious and inauspicious days and times for important events.

Though Poppie was settling very comfortably into the Tamil community, she had not forgotten her roots. Brought up Anglican, with no thought of relinquishing the Christian faith, she remained in the congregation of the Good Shepherd Church. Being asthmatic, however, she found it difficult to walk all the way to Struben Street. As she could not attend regularly, she confined herself to the most significant church events. Sinthumbi did not interfere with Poppie's religious convictions and they never debated the merits of each other's faiths.

Only once, in a discussion about last rites, did it become apparent that there were strong differences.

Poppie said, "When I die, I want to be buried, not cremated."

Sinthumbi tried to convince her otherwise. "Why do you want to be buried? Don't you see that when someone is buried, people visit the grave once or twice, and after that all is forgotten?"

"But I want to be buried."

"Why? Cremation is much more hygienic. You will see, one day it will be law that everyone must be cremated."

She was not convinced but didn't pursue the subject. Whenever they disagreed, they both walked away from the argument, especially if they knew it was going nowhere.

After years of living in the Asiatic Bazaar, prejudice against Poppie evaporated. In 1953, even Sinthumbi's brother and sister came to accept her. It happened quite unexpectedly. Marmakka, Sinthumbi's sister, a tall, good-looking woman, who had never married and had taken up informal business and social work instead, obtained living quarters for a family in the old Tamil School building that had been converted into housing units after government schools were built on Von Wielligh Street. As the family had to wait for an auspicious time to move in, Marmakka paid the rent, locked up and put a padlock on the door. But there was such a shortage of housing in the location, that another family broke the lock and moved in.

When Marmakka decided to take legal action and needed a witness, she approached Poppie who had observed the break-in from her kitchen window. When tall, thin Marmakka and short, plump Poppie walked down the street on their way to the Magistrate's Court, people were surprised to see them together. After Marmakka won the case against the intruders, she became Poppie's friend and that led to reconciliation between Sinthumbi and Perithumbi as well.

Poppie's children and their foster-grandfather, Aiyah, who still lived with Marmakka and Perithumbi, had unconsciously facilitated the reconciliation.

Though estranged from his brother and sister, Sinthumbi had kept in touch with Aiyah and had visited the old man regularly with the children. Their constant presence in that home had broken down their aunt's prejudices and she had opened up to them completely. It took their uncle longer but constant exposure to his nephews' and nieces' refined Tamil ways and their competence in the language eventually won Perithumbi over.

Poppie's father's death in the house on Cowie Street brought them all together and healed the breach between the brothers.

In 1956, when the priest at the Good Shepherd Church retired, his replacement, Father Nye, who was making the acquaintance of his parishioners, came to visit Poppie. When he expressed concern about her irregular attendance at church, she explained that she had difficulty walking because of the asthma. What was really troubling him, however, was the fact that she was living with Hindus. But his disquiet turned to shock when he learned that she often went to the Marieamman Temple.

It seemed to him that she was falling into a pagan way of life: "Unless you give up these practices, you cannot have a church funeral when you die."

This stern pronouncement numbed Poppie into momentary silence. Then she pointed to the gopuram (entrance tower) of the Marieamman Temple that was clearly visible from her living room. "When I die, my funeral will go from there." It was an impulsive reaction, spoken in resentment, but she never attended church again and became more involved in her

husband's religious activities. She couldn't avoid it: Sinthumbi was more than a devotee; he was a religious leader, a secondary priest, with many responsibilities. Since he shared everything with her, his interests became her interests.

In 1958, the gopuram of the Marieamman Temple was renovated and new murthis (statues of deities) were installed in the shrine.

The event was celebrated with a forty-eight day kumba abishegam (major consecration ceremony) for which Sinthumbi trained a choir of youngsters. He was a strict taskmaster and as he wanted pure sounds and perfect pronunciation, he insisted that all the members of the choir scrape their tongues clean before practice. Though Poppie laughed to see her children scraping their tongues, she was proud that with their solo parts, they were prominent in the choir.

In 1961, when lamps and other holy vessels quietly began to disappear from the temple, the whole community was perturbed. Poppie, who shared her husband's indignation, watched him go with Krishnannè, and A. Nadasen, an official of the Tamil League, to stake out the holy shrine in which murthis and holy vessels were housed. They sat in the darkness of the gopuram, taking turns to sleep and to keep watch. They had rigged up a light that could be switched on the moment they spotted anything suspicious. For three weeks they sacrificed their sleep to watch and wait. As nothing happened, they decided that the thief was not coming back and gave up the vigil. The very next day, the three most important murthis, Muruga and his consorts, Velli and Devayanai, disappeared.

Sinthumbi couldn't believe it. How could this happen just after they had given up the watch? Outraged, he couldn't put it out of his mind. From his living room in Cowie Street, he looked up at the gopuram towering over the tin roofs and called out in exasperation to the Mother Goddess, "Sakthi woolla Umma

(Mother Goddess, you are strength), If you have faith in us, help us to catch the thief."

Believing that he had been heard, he rushed off to the temple with his son, Bobai. When they found the gate unlocked, they entered cautiously, peered about in the darkness and then split up to circle the shrine. When Sinthumbi caught a shadowy movement near the back of the

temple, he made a dash for it, caught the intruder and beat him mercilessly. When he let him go, he discovered that the thief was a former cleaner who had been fired for incompetence. After he lost his job, he began stealing from the shrine. He knew the temple well and in the three weeks that Krishnannè, Sinthumbi and Nadasen had kept watch at the bottom of the gopuram, he had been at the top watching them

Though Sinthumbi was a staunch Hindu, he had done nothing about having his marriage consecrated at the temple because his wife was Christian. By the time Poppie became a Hindu, their children were grown up, three of them married with children, and it no longer seemed necessary. Sinthumbi, who was quite content, forgot all about it. But it was important to his son, Ronnie, who was apprenticed to Krishnannè and studying to become a priest. Because his marriage had not been consecrated at the temple, Sinthumbi was not permitted to perform his fatherly duties at any of his children's weddings. When Bobai was to marry, an overt expression of prejudice against him, as the son of a Coloured mother, had distracted them all. His prospective mother-in-law had refused to attend the wedding. It was a real paradox; she was an activist and progressive thinker but she was the only one to object. No one else, not even the members of her family, had had any reservations. At the time, everyone was too preoccupied with her to worry about Sinthumbi's inability to take part in the wedding ceremony.

When Sinthumbi was still unable to participate in the ceremony at Ronnie's wedding and after that his youngest son Naran's wedding, Ronnie became firm with his parents. He insisted that they consecrate their marriage so that Sinthumbi could fulfil his duties in at least one wedding, that of his youngest child. To please Ronnie, his parents arranged a small private ceremony at the temple. With Krishnannè officiating, Sinthumbi tied the thali around Poppie's neck and they exchanged garlands.

When Poppie became a Hindu, she set up a little shrine in her home with the three murthis of Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and their female counterparts, Sarasvathi and Lakshmi and the sacred cow, Nandi. She lit her lamp and prayed every morning without fail and fasted, that is refrained from meat and meat products, on four days of the week - Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays. When she adopted the teachings of Sai Baba, she went beyond the sphere of her

husband's religious beliefs. Bobai, her second son, maintained, "She became more Indian than Indians; more Tamil than Tamilians."

Sinthumbi attributes his wife's transformation to dharma. "I think she was a Tamilian in her former life and didn't complete her work. Even though she was born again as a white, it was her destiny to complete what she began in her previous life."

In the early 1960s, the Group Areas Board gave notice to Indians living in the location to move to Laudium, the newly created township for Indians to the West of Pretoria. But Sinthumbi did not move because the Transvaal Indian Congress had called on Indians in the location to resist the forced relocation to Laudium. In 1979, almost two decades later, Sinthumbi, Poppie and all their children were still living in the Asiatic Bazaar.

Marmakka, Sinthumbi's sister, kept insisting that her brother buy property in Laudium. "Don't be a fool," she told him, "you will be sorry if you don't. The Council houses are cheap." But Sinthumbi was quite comfortable where he was. He had taken over the rooms of people who had relocated and had gained possession of all the units on the stand. So he had an eight-bedroom complex that housed himself, Poppie, their children with their spouses, the grandchildren, and Poppie's mother and her children. Sinthumbi paid a rental of about R39 a month for this accommodation.

He was quite content and didn't move. But when the threat of bulldozers became imminent, he was forced to give in. His family, probably the last to leave, had held out for almost twenty years.

The day after they moved out, their home was knocked flat.

In Laudium, though Sinthumbi and Poppie's extended family separated out into nuclear family units, each with its own house in a different part of Laudium, the closeness that had been nurtured in the location was not lost. The family, with its many grandchildren and great-grandchildren, continued to revolve around Sinthumbi and Poppie.

In the late nineties, Poppie became seriously ill. She had been asthmatic from birth but now her heart was failing and she had been hospitalised several times. When she was admitted to the hospital for the last time, Sinthumbi became very ill.

This was most unusual.

He was still very fit and took pride in his good health.

When he collapsed, the children were afraid that the shock of his wife's illness and impending death was more than he could bear. His grandson, a doctor, believed that he was on the verge of a stroke. But Sinthumbi knew that his sudden indisposition was a sympathetic illness, a sign to him that his wife would not recover. On the Sunday after she was hospitalised, she went into a coma and died two days later. Her funeral, in accordance with her wishes, was conducted according to Tamil Hindu rites and she was cremated.

Now Sinthumbi lives alone and his home is a shrine of memories to a dearly beloved wife.

At 86, Sinthumbi still plies his hawker's trade. With the lorry and list of standing customers, bought when he was twenty-three, he had developed a trade that is now in its sixty-third year.

Today, he drives his truck to the market at about four in the morning, stocks up with the vegetables and fruits that he knows his customers need and goes out to make deliveries in Sunnyside, Arcadia, Brooklyn, Capital Park and Gezina.

He is the only hawker left of about three hundred in the Asiatic Bazaar.

After 63 years, with customers who go back many, many years, some as many as fifty, he knows exactly what they need, in some cases, even better than they do themselves. Many

treat him as a member of the family, allowing him to walk into the kitchen, inspect the pantry and refrigerator and then of his own accord supply the vegetables and fruit that they need.

He is so used to his job that he no longer uses scales and weighs vegetables accurately in his hands.

Sinthumbi, who enjoys going on his rounds, conducts business for pleasure - not profit.

At eighty-six, hawking has become a socially satisfying hobby.

His customers still expect him at precisely the same time every day. If he is late, they telephone his home.

“Where is Mr Naidoo?”

&q

When Poppie was still there, she would answer, “He's on his rounds.”

“But he hasn't come by yet and he's always punctual.”

“Don't worry, he'll be there.”

“It's not the vegetables, I just worry about him. He's like family. He's been bringing my fruit and vegetables for fifty years now.

My daughter's and granddaughter's too.”

At about ten in the morning, his rounds done, he returns home to Laudium to relax. Despite his competence in running his business, his family is very concerned about him.

Now that he is eighty-six

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, they think that he should retire.

But as he cheerfully says, &quot;I haven't had the call.&quot;

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[1] All quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the interview with Sinthumbi.

[2] In 2001