

Maniben Sita

Passive Resister

The 4th June, 1939, will ever be remembered as a black day in the

history of Indians in South Africa. This was the day when the

Transvaal Indians were to decide, at a mass meeting at Osrin's

Bioscope Hall, Johannesburg, either for or against Satyagraha.

The rumour was afloat that there would be bloodshed at the meeting,

which was advertised to start at two p.m. The hall was full a couple

of hours earlier. Some volunteers of the Nationalist group, who were

affixing banners to the hall, were suddenly attacked. Bottles, heavy

clubs, bicycle chains, knuckle-dusters and knives were freely used.

One Indian was disembowelled by a knife thrust, four others were

seriously injured; and five were treated for minor wounds. All the

injured were of the Nationalist group. [\[1\]](#)

It was right after this dreadful event that it all began for Maniben. She was busy with chores in the kitchen of their home in Hercules, when her father, Nana Sita, who had just returned from the meeting at Osrin's Bioscope, dropped into a chair next to her mother, Pemiben.

Being extremely agitated, he wasn't even aware that Maniben, quietly going about her tasks, was listening as he recounted the events of the afternoon to her mother.

As Chairman of the Pretoria Branch of the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC), he was fully aware of the division in the organisation.

Older members led by SM Nana were in favour of negotiating with the government to bring about change, but the young radicals, led by Dr Yusuf Dadoo, had no faith in the Smuts and Hertzog governments that had brought in law after law to strangle Indian enterprise.

Dr Dadoo's group, the Nationalist Group, was calling for satyagraha, non-violent resistance, such as Gandhi had initiated in 1906.

But Nana Sita, a dedicated follower of Mahatma Gandhi, who believed in keeping communication open, supported SM Nana.

When Nana Sita was a young boy living with the Vyas family, Gandhi, who had come to Pretoria to deal with a legal matter, had stayed with them. His influence on Sita in that short time had been profound. The fifteen-year old had immediately become a vegetarian and made non-violence the principle by which he would live his life. The violence at Osrin's Bioscope, therefore, had shocked him to the core. He had not taken seriously the rumours that there would be bloodshed as that was not the way Indians behaved.

But he had been proven wrong.

He had seen for himself the attempt on Dadoo's life.

Someone behind the young doctor had suddenly raised a knife and would have plunged it into his back, had not a woman nearby pushed aside the assassin's arm and deflected the blow, which struck Dayabhai Govindjee, the man next to Dadoo, who was fatally wounded. When Nana Sita realised that all the violence against the young Nationalist Group had been instigated by SM Nana's group, the group to which he belonged, he withdrew his support of SM Nana and joined the young radicals.

The attack on Dr Dadoo's Nationalist Group at

Osrin's bioscope, had appalled many others besides Nana Sita and had swung their allegiance to the Nationalists, who were elected to the leadership of the TIC at the next AGM.

Maniben, a tiny girl, not quite thirteen years old, was greatly moved by her father's distress. In the kitchen, on that day, awakened to the plight of the Indian community, she came to a crucial understanding of the purpose of her life. From that moment, she put away childish things and embarked on a course of education that would equip her for the fight against injustice.

She read everything she could find in newspapers, magazines and pamphlets. She attended meetings at which her father and his TIC colleagues, Mr GS Krishnan, Mr BR Mooloo, Mr Mohamed Jeeva and others explained how the proliferation of land and trading acts was stifling the progress of the Indian community. Being so young - she still wore her black hair in a long plait down her back - she would have had great difficulty in understanding it all but she came from a family that was politically alive.

With her father, the chairman of the Pretoria TIC, and her activist brothers, the eldest, Ramlall, a law student, the discussions in the Sita family home were lively and vigorous, providing

Maniben with the perfect training ground for the course she had chosen for herself.

In 1943, the promulgation of the *Trading and Occupation Land Bill* (The Pegging Act), which threatened to reverse the economic advances that Indians had made, added to the momentum that was building up for passive resistance. But it was Smuts'

Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Bill

(The Ghetto Act), which became law in 1946 that finally pushed the South African Indian Congress into action. A passive resistance campaign, organised to demonstrate the community's rejection of the Act, brought thousands of resisters to Durban from all over the country from the middle of 1946 to the end of 1947.

Their protest took the form of a symbolic repudiation of discrimination: the occupation of a vacant plot of land at the corner of Umbilo and Gale Streets in a proclaimed white area.

The protesters were to camp on the site until arrested and not retaliate when confronted with violence.

On standby in batches and ready to move in immediately after the arrest of the preceding batch, the activists were to maintain a constant stream of resistance until the 'Ghetto Act' was repealed.

The campaign began in June 1946.

Three Pretoria men, Ramlal, Maniben's eldest brother, Sooboo Pillay, and BR Mooloo were in the first batch of resisters led by GM Naicker and MD Naidoo. As they had no idea how long it would be before they were arrested, they set up camp with tents, chairs and other equipment. They were prepared to stay as long as it took but waiting in the midst of a hostile crowd was not easy.

Eggs, tomatoes and other missiles came flying at them throughout the day. It would have been a relief to be arrested but they were still there after sunset.

Things quietened down after it became dark and they thought they were safe for the night but when they were least expecting it, a bunch of hooligans suddenly ran in among them, pulled

down tents, smashed equipment and threatened them with violence. The passive resisters did not fight back but they did not leave either.

Constant harassment over the next few days did not dislodge them and eventually the group's objective was met - they were arrested. At the arraignment the next morning, they pleaded guilty, were sentenced to a month in jail and taken off to prison.

This was the awaited signal for volunteers in other parts of the country to get ready to come to Durban.

Maniben immediately began to mobilise women in the Asiatic Bazaar. Inspired by what she had read about women's achievements in the political struggles of India and South Africa, she wanted to organise an all women's batch to demonstrate the strength and dedication of women. Her father, who was closely associated with the Pillay family through Mr G Krishnan, secretary of the Pretoria TIC, advised Maniben to speak with Thayanayagie (Thailema) Pillay, Mr Krishnan's sister-in-law and daughter of Thambi Naidoo who had walked side by side with Gandhi in political struggles from 1906 - 1914.

Thailema, who was filled with the same courageous, unwavering desire for justice as her late father, was glad to join forces with Maniben.

They were in sharp contrast: Thailema, tall and stately, her quiet dignity belying the fervour with which she undertook political activities and Maniben, scarcely nineteen years old, tiny, very articulate, forthright and outspoken. But they shared a passion and willingness to sacrifice that made them a perfect match.

Maniben, the daughter of the President of the TIC, and Thayanayagie, the sister-in-law of the Secretary, Krishnannè, and of Sooboo Pillay, a member of the Executive Committee, found the TIC Executive excited and eager to help them. When they began to recruit women for the campaign, Mr BR Mooloo and Mr Mohamed Jeeva, also executive members, encouraged their daughters to join in.

With Thanga
Dharmalingam, Maniben's school friend and Thailema's goddaughter, two of Thailema's relatives, Muniamma Pillay and Shunmugam Pillay, and Mrs Jassoo Gandhi and her sister, Gowrie Bharoochi, there were ten of them altogether. All readily agreed to take part in the campaign.

It was a group of mostly very young women: Thailema, the oldest, was in her thirties, Amina Jeeva and Jassooohen in their early twenties and all the rest under nineteen. Though Thailema and Maniben were the acknowledged leaders, Thailema was content to remain in the background, giving advice and organising. She made arrangements for the use of a room

behind Sooboo's Café on Boom Street where they held information and planning sessions to prepare them for their undertaking. They formed themselves into an organisation known as the Indian Women's Service League and collected funds for the campaign on behalf of the TIC.

Their upcoming participation in the Passive Resistance Campaign excited a great deal of interest in the location. Krishnannè designed a special uniform for them that aligned the struggle in South Africa with the struggle for Independence in India. It consisted of a white sari with the map of India as motifs, a border in the colours of the Indian flag, and a white Nehru cap

. These very young impressionable girls were exhilarated at the prospect of their daring adventure.

They would be players in a situation that was dangerous and exciting; an event of greater significance than anything they had ever been involved in.

Then the great moment arrived! In September 1946, The Indian Women's Service League was called to serve. After medical fitness checks at Dr Dadoo's surgery in Johannesburg, they were driven down to Durban. Bubbling over with nervous energy, the girls, especially Thanga and Amina, were in a mischievous mood. Thailema, acknowledged mother of the group, tried to keep them calm, but these high-spirited young women on their first risky adventure, could not be subdued. They arrived in Durban just as Thailema's brother, Roy, was being released from prison.

They held a combined welcome and farewell party for Roy's batch and the women from Pretoria, who had to be at the site that evening.

At dusk, they took their places on the vacant plot in Gale Street. There were no tents or chairs; these had long been removed. At any rate, they were no longer necessary. The authorities had been prodded into reacting exactly as the resisters had hoped they would. They had, involuntarily, developed a routine that allowed the Congresses to bring on batch after batch of resisters in quick succession to crowd the prisons and give the demonstration the significance that it sought. Immediately after resisters arrived at the appointed spot, a police vehicle dispatched to arrest them,

gave them twenty minutes for their demonstration before carrying them off.

"The police came and picked us up in their vans.

Somebody told us before we left for Natal we must speak in Afrikaans to the police because most police are Afrikaner and their attitude changes immediately you speak Afrikaans.

So when we were in the police van, Amina Jeeva and others started conversing with them in Afrikaans and they became friendly."

[\[2\]](#)

At the police station, where the women were giving their details and having their fingerprints taken, Gowrie Bharoochie, who was under sixteen, became flustered. It had been drummed into her that she had to say she was over sixteen or she would be sent away.

But finding herself in such extraordinary circumstances, Gowrie stumbled over her details. Her predicament sent Thanga and Amina into a fit of giggles.

After spending the night in a holding cell, the women were taken to court the next morning. At their arraignment, all the women stood in a row as Maniben, the leader of the group, read out a statement:

"We come from the capital city of South Africa where these laws are administered.

They are unjust therefore we are opposing them."

Having pleaded guilty to the charge of trespassing, they received the now standard sentence of thirty days in prison. Though she was expecting it, Maniben was still appalled at being sent to jail for a paltry offence.

The women were taken to the Pietermaritzburg Prison, the very prison in which Thailema's mother, Veerammal, and her tiny sister, Seshammal, had been imprisoned in 1913. Thailema felt very proud to be following in her mother's footsteps.

The women were divided into three groups and locked up.

Maniben shared a cell with Thanga Dharmalingam and Amina Jeeva. Their beds were coir

mattresses on the floor.

They had two blankets each: one to cover the mattress, the other to cover themselves. As there were no pillows, they rolled up some of their clothes to make bolsters.

They had to be up by seven in the morning, line up for inspection, and then go out to exercise. Twice a week, they bathed from washbasins in the yard. "The thing that surprised us most," Maniben recalls, "is that we all had to stand naked in front of each other. That was a bit embarrassing at the beginning, but afterwards, you get used to it and it becomes just ordinary." At about four in the afternoon, they were locked up for the night.

Maniben didn't find the conditions unpleasant. "It wasn't a tense atmosphere, it was very harmonious. The wardresses used to joke with the prisoners. I know that Amina and Thanga used to stare at the wardresses when they ate a sandwich with jam or butter in it because we had dry bread. They used to ask, 'Now when will the day come when we can have sandwiches like that?' The food, never enough for them, was too much for me.

Amina would say, 'Maniben, if you don't need that, please give it to me,' and she used to share my food.

Thanga used to share my food too. But it was all fun."

Time hung heavily over them. "We just sat there all day long. Sometimes they gave us socks to repair or a little bit of sewing. I wished we had our knitting there. How much we could get done. I wished they would give us books to read. How many books we could read because we've got no other work, no cooking to do, no dishes to wash and all that we have to do at home. But we just had to dream to while away the hours. Or Amina used to sing and we used to talk about our life experiences."

They felt lucky to have Amina Jeeva among them. Her pranks, jokes, her outrageous flirting with the wardresses, kept them amused. What they loved most of all was to listen to her beautiful singing. Still, it was difficult to fill up the time. Being in prison was dreary; they were in a kind of limbo that made existence meaningless. When their sentence was reduced to twenty-one days for good behaviour, they were immensely relieved.

When they returned to Pretoria, they were the heroines of the moment. "The spirit was high. There was a meeting to welcome us back and the Sooboo family prepared a special lunch for us. People were very happy to see us; they greeted us everywhere we went."

But the Passive Resistance Campaign was not over. Although it continued well into the next year, the number of new volunteers began to dwindle. To infuse new energy into the campaign, the Congresses called for people to volunteer a second time. Maniben's father, Nana Sita, and her brothers volunteered again. Of the women, only Maniben, Amina and Thanga went a second time. Though over 2000 people went to jail during the period of resistance, the campaign did not achieve its goals. After it ended, the Pretoria Indian Women's Service League died a quiet death. "We didn't meet or do anything after that."

An important consequence of the Passive Resistance Campaign, however, was the formation of an inter-racial alliance of political organisations. When the Nationalist Party, the new government after the 1948 elections, began introducing discriminatory legislation, the new alliance embarked on a Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign (the Defiance Campaign). Nana Sita, President of the TIC, working at the core of the Congress Alliance, spent more time away from home than in it. His responsibilities in the shop and house fell to the rest of the family.

In addition to her usual chores of cooking and sewing for the family, Maniben, who ironed her father's clothes and packed his suitcase for his bi-monthly meetings in Natal, also had to help out in the shop. But with her determination to make a contribution to the new campaign, she still kept abreast of all happenings, accompanied Nana Sita to many meetings in Lady Selborne and spoke on the same platform as her father and Dr AB Nkomo.

Her job was to recruit women. In a white sari, her large dark eyes flashing from a face fringed by long black hair, this tiny young woman, exhorted women to join the campaign.

In terms of strategy, the Defiance Campaign, which began in 1952, was an extension of the earlier Passive Resistance Campaign. Where the earlier campaign had used the plot in Gale Street as a symbol of discrimination, in 1952, the protest was nationwide, challenging the reality of discrimination. Activists broke curfew restrictions, ignored permit requirements for townships

and entered or occupied public facilities designated "Europeans Only."

In Boksburg, resisters led by Walter Sisulu and Nana Sita marched into the African township without permits. In central Johannesburg, while hundreds of supporters sang and danced in solidarity, Nelson Mandela and Yusuf Cachalia with fifty African resisters, waited for the clock to strike 11 p.m. the curfew deadline, before issuing onto the street. Maniben and two African comrades from Lady Selborne, who sat on a bench marked "Europeans Only" at the Pretoria Railway Station, were detained and spent a month in Pretoria Prison.

After the Defiance Campaign, Maniben, who didn't want to be dependent on her family for the rest of her life, turned her attention to her education while her father and brothers continued to work in the resistance movement. Nana Sita was involved at the highest levels in the Congress Alliance, which drew up the Freedom Charter, planned the Congress of the People and organised or supported strikes, boycotts and marches. Caught in the cycle of defiance and detention, the authorities were exposed as intolerant and repressive. Resentment at being sucked into demonstrating their lack of humanity turned them towards violence. Cau

Though Maniben was aware that the situation was becoming dire, she kept her head in her books, acquired a teachers' certificate and enrolled for the bachelors' degree with UNISA.

The decade of the fifties, a decade of runaway mass action, closed with the Sharpeville massacre in 1960. In the new decade, States of Emergency along with the growing menace of the Security Police, handicapped public protest. Nana Sita, among those detained under the state of emergency that followed Sharpeville, was incarcerated for four months.

He was released after a 'flu epidemic had taken the lives of eighteen comrades imprisoned with him.

When he returned home, the family shocked at his condition - mere skin and bone - felt certain

that had he remained in prison a day or two longer, he too would have died there.

After the open defiance of the fifties that had hardened rather than humanised the enemy, belief in non-violent resistance was shaken. While many renounced Satyagraha, the Sitas held steadfastly to it as the only humane way to bring about change.

In the early sixties, at the time that Maniben was teaching at the primary school in the Asiatic Bazaar, the government began implementing the final phase of the Group Areas Act. Indians in Pretoria were given notice to move to Claudius, (formerly Mooiplaats, and soon after, Laudium). The Sitas, with other Indians, who lived and conducted their trade in town, were among the first to be targeted by the Group Areas Board.

Nana Sita who had moved to Hercules in 1923, had purchased his home in 1931, and had lived in the area for almost forty years, had no intention of moving. His whole family was fully behind him. In December 1962, he appeared in court with other Indians living in "white" areas. They all pleaded guilty under the Group Areas Act but refused to move to the Council houses that had been allocated to them in Laudium. Nana Sita's co-accused were fined and released, but Nana Sita, who refused to pay a fine, was sentenced to three months in prison.

During the court proceedings, the Council house set aside for the Sitas in Laudium was vandalised. The act, a show of support for Nana Sita, was a symbolic gesture as the exodus to Laudium had already begun. When schools were established in the new Indian township, location schools were closed down forcing parents to relocate. Teachers too were being transferred to the new Andrew Anthony Primary School and the Laudium High School. When Maniben and her sister, also a teacher, were told to report to the schools in Laudium, Maniben, who had a sympathetic principal, refused. Her sister had no choice.

In April 1963, Nana Sita was again charged and imprisoned under the Group Areas Act. This second time, the Group Areas Board also charged his wife, Pemiben, and all those living in the family home. Pemiben and her son paid fines. Maniben did not, as she was quite prepared to go to prison like her father, but the case against her and the others never came before the court. Between 1963 and 1967, inspectors from the Group Areas Board hounded the family incessantly. They always arrived unexpectedly to inspect the premises or make note of who was living there. During this time, Nana Sita was served with a third notice to vacate his

property but, as the courts were jammed with trials, the case was withdrawn. It was also the time of the Rivonia Trial and when Nana Sita was not serving time, he and Maniben were at the Palace of Justice demonstrating their solidarity with the accused. Ahmed Kathrada and one or two others always made a point of turning to the visitor's gallery to acknowledge friends and supporters.

Despite indications that resistance was evolving into revolution, the government was steadfastly rolling out its plan of separate, unequal development. In the early 1960s, it began to set up homelands, self-governing states and town councils - new structures to co-opt African communities. For Coloureds and Indians, it appointed 'Representative' Co-uncils that were responsible for certain aspects of education, welfare, agriculture, rural areas and local government. There were strong protests against the appointment of these dummy Councils but the Government committed to its programme of social engineering was no longer in the mood to humour protesters as it had done in earlier decades.

Maniben experienced this at first hand when she joined a women's march led by Zainab Asvat in December 1963. In the tradition of the 1956 women's march, the women took petitions to the Union Buildings to protest the establishment of the Indian Council. Maniben was fully aware that as they were marching up the hill to the Ministers' offices, collaborators, sitting in the Laudium Civic Centre, were nominating candidates to the National Indian Council. But her attention was forcibly directed back to the march when the police suddenly let loose their dogs. Women scattered in all directions to avoid being bitten but a number were savaged, one very seriously. Nevertheless, the women persevered and delivered their petitions but their protest was ignored.

The National Indian Council was established in 1964.

When it took control of Indian Education, Maniben resigned from teaching.

In 1967, the Group Areas Board, now under the Indian Council, served Nana Sita with a fourth notice to vacate his premises. This time he changed his strategy; he pleaded not guilty. Satyagrahis always pleaded guilty; it was their way of saying we are guilty of not accepting injustice. But Sita pleaded not guilty this time so that he could request a preparatory hearing at which all the circumstances pertinent to the matter would have to be considered.

When his request was refused, he presented a fourteen-page statement to the court that outlined the history of economic and political obstruction of Indian immigrants including attempts to enforce repatriation.

He roundly condemned the Group Areas Act:

Shorn of verbiage the Apartheid policy as enforced through the Group Areas

Act is nothing but a barefaced expression of a desire to dominate, oppress

and exploit the non-Europeans and to subject them to perpetual servitude of

the White Man who claim to be God's chosen people, the Master Race, the

Herrenvolk, a concept which plunged the world into a holocaust which was

defeated at the cost of millions of lives. Is the world going to be made to

witness the same holocaust by perpetuating the concept of the Master Race

theory? [3]

His statement, however, made no impression on the court. Though he was sixty-nine years old and suffering with chronic arthritis, he was sentenced once more to a term of six months with compulsory hard labour.

Each time that Nana Sita went to prison, his wife, Pemiben, who suffered from hypertension, had to take to her bed for three or more weeks to stanch the heavy, prolonged nosebleeds. The responsibility of nursing her, running the shop and managing the house, fell on Maniben's shoulders. But Maniben was proud to be able to help her mother. In her eyes, her mother was the real hero of the family. It was she who had always made it possible for her husband and children to follow their convictions. In keeping the house and business going, she had given them the freedom to engage in the fight for human dignity.

When Nana Sita came out of prison for the last time he went straight back to his home in Hercules. When he became seriously ill in 1969, his son, Ramlall, took him to his home in Lenasia where he would be within easy reach of the Coronation Hospital. They all knew that the end was near. Nana Sita died in December 1969. As he had never vacated his home, in death he remained the victor over the Group Areas Board.

Maniben took his ashes to India and scattered them at the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati Rivers.

Maniben and her mother stayed on in the house in Hercules until 1976 when the threat of expropriation forced them to move.

Indian political organisations, which had been dormant during the sixties and seventies, began to revive after the Soweto Uprising in 1976, and came alive in 1981 when the

government announced elections for the Indian Council (now the South African Indian Council - SAIC) hitherto a government-appointed body. Anti-SAIC Committees, established in opposition, called on the Indian community to repudiate the SAIC by boycotting the elections.

Though the campaign was very successful - the turnout at the polls in 1982 was negligible - the fact that elections had been held was all the proof of democracy that the Government needed.

The SAIC elections had been a trial run for elections to the new Tri-Cameral System of Government that were to be held in 1984. Opposition to the Tri-Cameral Parliament brought African, Indian and Coloured anti-apartheid organisations together to form the United Democratic Front (UDF) that was launched in August 1983. Under the charismatic leadership of Dr Alan Boesak, the UDF called on the whole of society to reject the Tri-Cameral System and on Indians and Coloureds to boycott racial elections.

This was a busy time for Maniben, who was now an executive member of the TIC, which had been resuscitated after the SAIC elections and had become a key organisation in the UDF. Travelling to Indian communities in the Transvaal and Natal, she was a featured speaker on many UDF platforms. Despite savagely repressive conditions, Maniben, now a tiny grey-haired woman, in a white sari and glasses, spoke out boldly and scathingly against the new proposals and called unequivocally on people to stay away from the polls.

The government has the nerve to proclaim that they are trying to bring about

reform, and want us to collaborate and be a party to the oppression meted out

to our own people and also to our African and Coloured countrymen. Does

the government think that we are mad? Only ignorant people, that are also

insane will stoop to the level of collaboration. If such there be, (and I think

there are); I pity them from the bottom of my heart for they are being used as

tools in their own destruction. [\[4\]](#)

On voting day, August 1984, despite a strong police presence, she stood outside the polling station at the Laudium Civic Centre dressed in a black sari to register her silent protest. In the evening, young activists, who were not allowed near the station, joined her in a demonstration from across the street. When more voters, hoping not to be recognised in the dark, appeared at the polls, the demonstrators grew more vociferous. Police loosed their dogs to chase them off and ensure that the electoral process was "free and fair".

After the elections, the new Indian and Coloured "leaders" in ethnic Houses of Parliament, who were given greater power to enforce apartheid policy on their respective communities, took up their seats in separate parliaments thus demonstrating their allegiance to oppression in the name of democracy.

But there was a new spirit among the people. As their opposition grew more vociferous, more determined, more resourceful and less tolerant, severe repression followed. All forms of protest were brutally suppressed, all associations fell under suspicion, jails were filling up and activists were being murdered. The many funerals, which gave opportunity for mass protests, brought the police into the townships with teargas and dogs to disperse mourners.

In 1985, after the mutilated bodies of Matthew Goniwe and three other comrades from the Eastern Cape, were found, the UDF organised a massive funeral to restore to these men, who had been brutally tortured and murdered, their dignity as human beings and their honour as heroes. Each organisation under the umbrella of the UDF was allowed a specified number of

representatives to attend the funeral of the Cradock Four.

Maniben was one of those chosen to represent the TIC.

Having packed clothes and food, she set off to board one of two buses leaving from Lenasia. Though all those embarking on the trip anticipated intimidation and arrest, it was still a shock when police vehicles suddenly appeared on either side of the buses just outside the Lenasia border and travelled along with them as they made their way south. Maniben and the others sat watching, waiting, expecting the worst from this unwelcome escort. But the police just stayed with them, stopping when they stopped, moving when they moved. They accompanied them all the way to Colesberg where the bus stopped to refuel while the travellers got out to refresh themselves. When they resumed their journey, they were relieved to find the police gone. They hoped they would be allowed to proceed without further harrassment.

When they arrived in Cradock at ten the next morning, they drove straight to the football stadium where the service was being held. Buses from all over the country were arriving by the minute and the stadium was packed to overflowing. Banners of the various organisations were on proud display, even those of the banned ANC and Communist Party. Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Dr Alan Boesak were the main speakers. In his address, Dr Boesak boldly declared, "We know who killed these men."

When the ceremony was over, the buses from Johannesburg set off on the return journey and travelled without incident until they reached Colesberg where they found the police waiting to escort them back. When they arrived at the Lenasia border, police from Protea Police Station in Soweto stopped the buses. Someone in Maniben's bus shouted, "Hey, the police, the police!" Maniben stood up to look out as a couple of policemen carrying rifles boarded the bus. One of them shouted at her, " *Haai, wat kyk jy daar? Sit.*" (Hey, what are you looking at? Sit.)

"Don't talk to me like that," she replied but she sat down.

The policeman, menacing others with his gun, growled, "*Bly stil.*" (Keep quiet.)

The buses were driven to Protea Police Station where all the passengers were arrested. While they were waiting in a narrow passage, Maniben thought she saw one of the policemen in the office beckoning to her. When she approached him, he shouted at her, "Loop, man. Wie het jou geroep" (Get out. Who called you?)

After the usual procedures of fingerprinting and giving the police their personal particulars, they were taken to Diepkloof Prison where they were locked up twenty to a cell and given blankets, coffee and bread. The next day, they were put into single cells. This was detention without trial. They had no idea how long they would be there.

Maniben is a vegan. In those first few days, she became quite weak because she couldn't eat the food provided. When the security police tried to interrogate her, she was unable to focus. She couldn't remember the simplest things, such as the registration number of her bakkie. Not knowing what to make of her, they asked, "Do you take drugs?"

"Do you drink?" Then they ordered the Matron to search her for drugs every night. For three days, she suffered the indignity of being strip-searched.

On the fourth day, she told the wardresses, "I won't strip and I won't be searched. If you knew what sort of family I come from you would be ashamed to treat me like this."

They stopped the searches.

When they eventually realised that Maniben's confusion was due to a lack of nourishment, they at last acceded to her request for vegetarian meals and provided her with grated cabbage on one day, followed by grated carrots on the next. She was not allowed food from home or visitors. And the only reading material provided was the Bible. After constant requests for Hindu scriptures, she received the writings of Swami Vivekananda, which she read over and over and over.

After many weeks of solitary confinement, she became aware of sinister and threatening happenings around her - strange vibrations above her cell and gas drifting in under the door. When she saw a workman replacing a nozzle on a pipe, she became convinced that it was for the

gas. So she took action. During exercise time, she spoke to other detainees, urging them to stand up against any kind of mistreatment in prison. Then she asked for pen and paper to write to the Minister of Justice to complain about the injustice of her detention. Two weeks later, when she was given writing materials she wrote out a statement that she handed to the matron.

Then one day, out of the blue, she was told that she had visitors. She couldn't believe it. Apparently, her sister and sister-in-law were waiting for her at the Protea Police Station. Maniben, who was taken there to see them, was very happy to have contact with members of her family at last. She had been in prison for more than two and a half months and had not been allowed a single visit during that time. Two days after this unexpected visit, the Matron informed her that she was being released. She was astonished. In all the time of her detention, eighty-one days, she had been allowed only one visit and that just two days before her release. This was very unfair. But she recorded no complaints in the questionnaire that she had to fill out before she left because the wardresses had been kind to her.

She also believed that a good report would benefit future detainees. On her release, she spent two weeks with her family in Lenasia before she returned to Laudium.

She continued her work with the TIC until the end of 1989 and in 1995, in the first democratic local government elections, Maniben, a little white-haired woman in her late sixties, the ANC representative for Ward 11 in Laudium, won a seat on the Centurion Town Council. She was one of very few ANC Councillors on a mainly National Party Council and served for one term only, until December 2000.

Now, at age seventy-four, [\[5\]](#) she is busy with other projects. Having published a vegetarian cookbook, *Give Me Vegetables*, she is dedicating herself to yoga studies. Being most concerned about the high levels of crime in the country, she believes that the introduction of Gandhian studies in schools would help to build a nation with moral strength and integrity.

She is still plagued by the vibrations that she first experienced in Diepkloof Prison. They are somehow connected with the cars that she hears stopping and moving off just before they begin. Maniben can do nothing about the terrible shuddering that overtakes her in her bed or wherever she hides to escape them. It is most unnerving but she has given up complaining. She will not allow such happenings to deflect her from her life's purpose which is to continue to be of service in the struggle for human rights and human dignity.

[1] PS Joshi, *Tyranny of Colour*, p.255-6

[2] All quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from interviews with Maniben Sita.

[3] Nana Sita, *Statement by Nana Sita at his Trial under the Group Areas Act*, p. 13

[4] Maniben Sita, *Women Power: The Role Indian Women Play*, The Mirror, 1984.

[5] 2001