

## **Thanga Kollapen**

### **The Spirit of Independence**

Thanga was born to Valliamma and Rathnasamy Dharmalingam of the Asiatic Bazaar on 25 November 1927. Fourteen days later, she lost her father. When Rathnasamy, chef at the Victoria Hotel in town, came home from work on 9 December, he complained of a severe pain in his chest. Being an impatient man, he easily made enemies and when he collapsed at home, neighbours and family put it down to witchcraft and revenge. They believed that some person had tricked (bewitched) him. They didn't realise he was having a heart attack. Valliamma put him to bed and went into the kitchen to fetch medicine. When she came back, she found her husband dead on the floor.

He was of the Padayachy clan and one of many who had left India to seek their fortunes in South Africa. He married Valliamma Chetty from Port Elizabeth and they came to live in the location around the turn of the twentieth century. They had thirteen children, six of whom did not survive childhood ailments, such as measles and whooping cough, and the flu epidemic after the First World War. When Rathnasamy died, Valliamma, with seven children to support, took up hawking. She acquired a horse and cart and drove all over town collecting and selling bottles. At the end of her rounds, she stopped at the market where Strydom Square is today, to buy fish and vegetables. Back in the location, she packaged these items, loaded them in a barrow and went around the location selling her goods.

For some reason - it may have been that she was the only one to sell fish - Valliamma came to be known as Fish Mary.

No one in the location called her Fish Mary to her face; Mary, a corruption of Marie, was a derogatory term for an Indian woman. When Thanga was still a young girl, she was called Fish Thanga.

As she admired her mother, her role model, for her enterprising spirit, she was proud of the name.

Before Rathnasamy died, he had bought a house for his family in Jerusalem Street so Valliamma didn't have to worry about accommodation. She and her children had a home with a yard that they didn't have to share with other families. Valliamma could also rely on her brothers in the location, who knew that she didn't earn enough for the needs of her family and made sure that she was never in want.

Her neighbours also helped out by baby-sitting her daughter while she was at work and little Thanga spent her days in many different homes. When Aunty Thailema, Mrs Thayanayagie Pillay, offered to look after the little girl, Thanga was glad because she liked Mrs Pillay best of all. Thailema, who lived next door to the Marieamman Temple where her brother-in-law, Krishnannè, was the priest, often took Thanga to help her with her duties at the temple and taught the little girl about Tamil customs and religious practices. From helping and observing, Thanga eventually memorised every step of the marriage ceremony and became very knowledgeable about Tamil rituals.

Thanga owed her religious education entirely to Thailema as her mother, Valliamma, had no time for prayers, rituals and politics. All her efforts went into making sure her children had enough to eat, and that meant constant attention to her various trades and household chores. Like most women in the Asiatic Bazaar, she prepared her own spices:

she

cleaned and washed seeds - cumin, coriander, and fennel - and set them on the flat roof to dry. Then she roasted, ground, mixed and stored them away.

As she was also a very good cook, she was invited to cook at many weddings in the location.

When Thanga grew up, she too made her own spices and cooked at weddings and other ceremonial occasions.

As Valliamma could only afford what the family needed for the moment, she never bought groceries in bulk. She sent the children to the shops on Bloed Street for her little purchases. & quot;We used to buy a cup of oil at a time from the oil factory. Meat was eight cents; bread five cents. You could feed a whole family for a few shillings. We used to go to K.K. Khoja's shop to buy rice. There we used to get bunsella. We'd eat the bunsella and come home. Then my mother would say, 'This is not the right rice. Take it back.'

But we couldn't; we ate the bunsella.

So we just sat outside on the pavement trying to think of how to tell her.&quot;

[1]

Like most children in those days, Thanga began school at the age of seven.

She was very bright and enjoyed school. She loved dramatic activities and when she was in one of the higher primary grades, her Afrikaans teacher, Mr Van Heerden, chose her for the leading role of &quot;Wawonka.&quot; She enjoyed it so much and was so good in it that some of her classmates nicknamed her &quot;Wawonka&quot; and still call her that to this day.

Thanga had many friends at school, among them Maniben Sita and Amina Jeeva, with whom she would engage in political activities later in life. At school, they played three tins, kennetjie and *pelangoli*. For *pelangoli*, they made holes in the ground into which they put stones and then played a form of draughts or chess.

In those days there were no uniforms. She and her brothers went to school barefoot, like most children in the location. She had three dresses. When she came home in the afternoon, she had to wash and iron her clothes for the next day. Thanga also went to Tamil School where her teacher was Thailema's brother-in-law, Krishnannè, a dedicated teacher and religious leader. At school, he taught Tamil and at the temple, he conducted religious ceremonies. Thanga and her friends, who had great respect for their teacher, went to the Marieamman temple on Sixth Street every Friday to clean it and wash the clothing of all the murthis (statues).

Though she was a keen and enthusiastic student, Thanga's school career was brought to an abrupt end when her mother arranged a marriage for her eldest son, Sababathy. After his bride,

Mangalum, a young woman from a farm in Seekoei Water (Witbank) came to live with them in Jerusalem Street, Valliamma realised that her daughter-in-law knew nothing about housework or living in a location. On the farm, her only chores had been washing and ironing. So Valliamma made Thanga leave school to teach her sister-in-law to cook and to help with the catering business. Thanga, very upset, protested loudly but her mother was adamant. So at age thirteen, Thanga gave up school to help her very beautiful, pleasant sister-in-law run the home and the catering business. Together, they made a great success of it, expanding it to provide snack foods - samoosas, kerriballs and vadè.

They also looked after Mangalum's children, who had made their appearances on a regular basis until there were six little ones running about and crowding the house. When Thanga's brothers married, they each brought their spouses to live in the house and soon the home had to accommodate three sisters-in-law and many more children. Thanga's brothers built on additional rooms, each room to accommodate a whole family. Only one of Thanga's brothers, Govindasamy, popularly known as Vasanda, left the house when he married. He went to live in Claremont where his wife, Mariam Layloo, being Malay, could own property.

So they built a home there.

The routine in the household changed when Mangalum's husband, Sababathy, developed Addison's disease. This debilitating condition put a tremendous strain on the family. Mangalum had to look after a sick husband and six small children so the weight of the catering business fell on Thanga. When Sababathy died, Mangalum, who could no longer cope, went back to her parents, leaving her six children with Valliamma.

Soon after, when Thanga was about seventeen, Valliamma, busy setting trays of spices on the roof, fell with the ladder as she was descending and broke her leg; her shinbone was severed in two. As she never completely recovered and walked with great difficulty ever afterwards, she was forced to give up her business. That meant Thanga had to go to work. She found a job in a Johannesburg clothing factory, *Pearl Modes*, on Pritchard Street in Doornfontein where Mr Shaw and his brother-in-law, Mr Segal, Jewish owners, employed hundreds of people in a well-equipped factory that complied with the Industrial Standards Act.

On her first day at work, Thanga, who had no knowledge of sewing, was asked to set a pocket

into a skirt. After she had completed the task, she was asked to put her hand into the pocket. When the pocket went out instead of in, she was so embarrassed that she burst into tears. Declaring she was no good at this kind of work, she wanted to go home but Shaw insisted that she try again. Referring to the garment, he said, &quot;No, that is a dead thing. You are alive so you make mistakes but you can learn. You don't have to go.&quot;

One of the Coloured instructresses took her in hand; she learned and within three months became a proficient machinist.

Travelling to work from the Asiatic Bazaar to Johannesburg everyday was onerous. Thanga had to take the bus to the Pretoria station and then the train to Doornfontein. Exhausted when she came home in the evening, she would &quot;go straight to the pots&quot;. Her mother, who cooked the family meals from a chair, prepared the ingredients, after which Cigarette, their African helper, assisted her with the cooking. Cigarette, who had run away from his home on a farm when he was a young boy, lived in the yard and did odd jobs around the house: chopping wood, cleaning the stove and making the fire. Valliamma's home, like the majority of homes in the location, did not have a geyser so Cigarette also prepared the family's bathwater. He built a fire in the yard between bricks that supported two iron bars and put on two large tins to boil. In those days, empty twenty-gallon paraffin tins were very useful especially for boiling water.

In 1946 [\[2\]](#) , when the Ghetto Act was passed, the discontent that had festered in the Indian community for decades erupted in the Passive Resistance Campaign and broke the routine of Thanga's life. Maniben Sita and Thailema, who were recruiting women to take part in the campaign, invited Thanga to volunteer. She joined the small band of women resisters from the Asiatic Bazaar, went to Durban and spent the month of September in jail. As a result she lost her job at *Pearl Modes*. But it didn't take her long to find new employment. *French Model*, another factory in Johannesburg that also produced exclusive ranges, offered her a better position as a sample hand. Then in 1947, Congress leaders called on people to volunteer a second time to boost the flagging campaign. After another month in jail, Thanga lost her job at *French Model*

When she found work again, it was at a garment factory where the work was very different. She was no longer creating fashions for boutiques but was working at a conveyer belt in a mass production line. Garments came down the belt in thirty sections, one for each of the machinists seated on either side. Each machinist inserted her section of the garment and sent the work on.

By the time the garment arrived at the end of the belt, it was complete. The constant flow down the line put the machinists under great pressure. The thirty machinists, fifteen on either side of the belt, had to complete thirty garments at a stint. Though the work was demanding, once she got used to it, Thanga settled into a safe, boring routine.

She travelled to work with Ainamma Kollapen who became her good friend. In 1953, when her sister-in-law died, Ainamma asked Thanga to help her cook for the funeral. While she was busy, Thanga became very aware of Ainamma's brother, Billy Kollapen, a dapper, good-looking young man, who had created something of a stir when he married Minnie Fisher, a Coloured woman, and went to live in the Cape Location. "He had just lost his wife. We were doing all the cooking but this man is standing in the doorway, only watching me."

[3]

She became quite self-conscious, "Why is he looking at me like that all the time?" She did not wait around to find out. When she had completed her tasks, she went home.

Thanga wasn't a complete stranger to Billy. He had seen her a few times at his mother's place when she had come to visit Ainamma. Always elegantly dressed and very smart, this very pretty woman, with bright eyes and curly black hair, struck him as arrogant, "She thinks she's really it." She presented a challenge that excited him. When all the formalities of the funeral were over, even though he didn't think he stood a chance, he began to court her.

He was delighted to find her responding to him and it wasn't long before they were meeting and taking little strolls together. But her family was incensed and Billy was not allowed into the Dharmalingam home. Each time he came to the door, Thanga's mother would chase him off,

&quot;Bhai go. Thanga not here.&quot;

Billy could see that her mother and her brothers did not like him. They looked down on him for two reasons; he was 'low caste' and he was a waiter. Everyone knew waiters were heavy drinkers! And even worse, he had married a Coloured woman, was living in the Cape Location and had taken up 'their' ways! They did not believe he would make a good husband and father and tried to get Thanga to break it off with him. But their opposition spurred Thanga on.

She would slip out of the house to meet Billy round the corner where he was waiting for her under the lamplight. Handsome, flamboyant Billy, given his circumstances, cut a very romantic figure.

He, however, was very conscious of the fact that the Tamil community regarded him as a pariah. During his schooldays, for instance, when he went to his friends' homes, he was never invited to share a meal with them. He had to leave before they sat down to eat. At Tamil School, even though he was an exceptional student, Krishnannè overlooked him for parts in the dramas that he produced. Constantly having to endure snubs in a community in which caste prejudice was strong, Billy became disenchanted and began to question many things including the Hindu religion, from which the caste system stemmed. Adopting an outsiders' view of the many deities that bewildered him, he decried the fact that there was no common holy text, like the Bible or Koran, to help him overcome his confusion. So he learned to reject where he felt rejected and privatel y repudiated the Tamil community. He was more at home with his Coloured friends.

But here he was, courting a girl from a staunch Tamil background.

Opposition to their relationship forced the pace of events. Things came to a head when Billy's family decided to take matters into their hands and arrange a marriage for him with a cousin from Johannesburg. On the day he was to meet his parents in Johannesburg where he and his cousin would become officially engaged in the presence of the two families, he never showed up. Mortified, his parents returned to the location to discover that while they were waiting for him in Johannesburg, he was having tea with Thanga at Auntie Thakri's house. So that evening there was trouble.

Billy's family went to Jerusalem Street to confront Thanga's family. They got into a loud argument, accusing Thanga of interfering with their arrangements and humiliating them. The whole neighbourhood listening in to the quarrel was agog. When Thanga's brother began shouting at her, she picked up her bag and ran out with Billy

The whole street rippled with excitement.

Thanga and Billy went off to Johannesburg, to Billy's Auntie Baba Pillay. At his aunt's house, the family began to congratulate him on his engagement. They hadn't heard that Billy had thwarted that scheme. His aunt apologised for not having attended. As she had developed a problem with her legs, she couldn't walk properly. Thanga, who had already been humiliated at her own home, now felt worse. His relatives were congratulating Billy on his engagement to some one else and didn't seem to be aware of her presence. She couldn't stay there.

Billy took Thanga to her sister's house and he stayed with Auntie Baba. When he went back to Pretoria the next day, he found the Asiatic Bazaar buzzing with the news that he and Thanga had eloped. Billy's colourful history, combined with Thanga's reputation as a fastidious and uppity woman, made it a very juicy tale. Thanga was mortified and upset. Her impulsive action had cut her off from the family and left her with no choice. There was no turning back. She had to get married.

That April in 1954, Aunt Baba arranged their wedding. It was not the typical, colourful Indian ceremony, every step of which Thanga had memorised when she had been with Thailema.

She would have to forego all the rituals that bind two people and two families together: the exchange of garlands, tying the thali, planting a tree and the bridal procession to her new home in the bosom of her husband's family. For Billy and Thanga, the legal registration of the marriage would be the entire wedding. Nevertheless, Thanga tried to make it special.

She bought herself a wedding outfit consisting of a blue shantung two-piece suit and a pair of black shoes. But Auntie Baba shook her head at the black shoes - bad luck!

Though Thanga exchanged them, the fact that no one from her family would be present, was the worst luck and black shoes didn't compare. A friend from the factory, who helped with her make-up, was the only one there for her on her wedding day. When they arrived at the magistrate's court, Thanga found that Billy had not brought a ring.

She took it as another bad

omen. Aunty Baba, who was witness to the marriage, quickly lent him the ring that declared Billy and Thanga a union.

After the wedding, they had to confront the consequences of their rash actions.

They had no home. Where were they to live? When Billy's uncle in Barberton offered to take them in and find a job for Billy, they went to stay with him. This uncle and his family received them with such great excitement and joy that Thanga's misgivings were allayed to some extent. Here in this house, she and Billy would share a bed for the first time; she was afraid but excited. "I was so upset about the whole thing. This was for the first time. And this was a stranger's home." But Thanga's run of bad luck was not over. Billy went out for a drink with a teacher who was boarding at the house, got drunk, came back, collapsed on the bed and was soon sound asleep.

The wedding was not consummated and Thanga spent the whole night crying.

The next morning, they began fighting. Thanga wanted to go back home and Billy was angry. "If you want to go back to your family, you can go."

Thanga was shocked, *Everybody will say, I ran off with him, had a good time and now I'm back home.* So she remained in Barberton but after a week went back to her job in Johannesburg and stayed with Aunty Baba. Billy didn't stay on in Barberton either; he went back to Pretoria to a job at Janina's Restaurant.

It seemed that the newly-weds were going separate ways.

Then one day, after Thanga had just bought a cup of coffee from the tearoom near the factory and was going back to work, she suddenly found herself face-to-face with Billy. He didn't want to be apart from her and had come to make up. Before he left, he promised he would come to fetch her when he had found a place for them in Pretoria. But it was difficult to find accommodation in the location and Billy had to settle for a garage in Claremont. Thanga wasn't happy but she had no choice. To make things worse, she and Billy were just up the road from her brother, Vasanda, who would have nothing to do with them because his sister had brought disgrace on the family. His wife, Mariam, however, was very sympathetic and entertained Thanga at the back of her house, out of sight of her husband.

Three months after she moved to Claremont, Thanga fell pregnant but she wasn't pleased. She didn't want to raise a baby in a garage. She took her troubles to Mariam who did her best to comfort her, made her maternity dresses and visited her during her confinement in the Claremont nursing home. Though Thanga hated bringing her baby back to the garage, she had to stay put until they could find a place in the Asiatic Bazaar.

That happened a year later.

When Thanga and Billy moved into rooms in Jeeva Barber's yard on Eleventh Street, Thanga had the chance to renew her friendship with Amina Jeeva. They were old school friends, had played tennis together, were in the passive resistance together and had shared the same cell. When Maniben and Thailema were organising meetings at that time, Amina, the only driver among them, would give some of the girls a lift to the venue. Thanga's family had always expressed their disapproval of Amina. "When she used to come and hoot, my brothers would get mad. 'Why doesn't she come in? Why is she hooting outside?'"

But Thanga ignored other people's opinions: she had a great deal in common with Amina and liked her very much.

And Amina popped in all the time. She came into the kitchen, sat talking to Thanga and often stayed for a meal. Billy was resentful. He didn't like this woman, who always wore trousers, hanging around his wife. One day when he came home and found her at the table enjoying a meal of cabbage and meat, he lost his temper. He picked up the plate that Thanga had set out for him and flung it against the wall. After that, they had to find another place to live.

They moved to Cowie Street, opposite Sinthumbi and Poppie, and into the heart of the Tamil community.

Thailema then insisted that their marriage be consecrated at the temple. She asked Krishnannè to perform the rites. Thanga in a new sari, carrying a tray of fruit, and Billy, in his best suit, set off for the Marieamma Temple where Krishnannè blessed the thali that Billy tied around Thanga's neck. Billy and Thanga exchanged garlands and the nuptials were over. Thailema then insisted that Thanga go to Jerusalem Street, prostrate herself before her mother, Valliamma, and ask for her forgiveness. When Thanga went to see her mother, she took baby Nimmi with her. It was the baby that won Valliamma over. She forgave her daughter but still wouldn't have anything to do with Billy.

Living across the road from Sinthumbi and Poppie, made Thanga very happy because they provided the loving support that she missed from her family. Aunty Poppie with her home remedies helped Thanga through many a little crisis and some big ones. When Thanga, who was expecting her second baby, came home after helping at a funeral where she had carried heavy pots, she began to bleed during the night and realised that she was having a miscarriage.

Billy went across to Aunty Poppie, who rushed over to help Thanga. When she found that there was nothing she could do, she took Thanga to the hospital.

But they were too late; Thanga lost the baby.

Even though people snubbed her because of her marriage to Billy, when Thanga moved back into the location, she moved back into the Tamil community, into her family and had come home. But it wasn't the same for Billy. He was uncomfortable in a caste conscious community. He longed for the good times he had had with his friends in the Cape Location. He had been different then - young, unmarried, carefree and much happier.

He'd come home from work after nine o' clock at night, don his best and cruise the locations. In those days, very few people had cars, so young men strutted around on the streets. This is how he had made friends with young Coloured men, had gone with them to the dances at the Orient Hall and learned to dance by watching them.

In those days, people danced  
*lang-arm*,  
which he quickly mastered.

He loved it so much that he became very accomplished, could be very selective and chose to dance only with women who had &quot;educated feet.&quot;

As they couldn't dance past midnight on Saturday - it was against the law because of the Christian Sabbath - Friday nights became the main dance nights. They danced at the hall till two or three in the morning, then with the band, flitted off to a picnic spot in Faerie Glen where they danced on the grass till dawn. Billy, debonair and rakish, sweeping women off their feet both literally and figuratively, never missed a Friday night at the Orient Hall. He had the talent to go professional but the location provided no opportunities beyond recreation.

It was at the Orient that he met Minnie Fisher. With all the confidence of an aroused nineteen year old, he set off in lusty pursuit of her and they became an item. Although Minnie's widowed mother accepted Billy, other members of the community were suspicious of him. Indian men didn't always do right by Coloured women. They treated them as mistresses and set up &quot;legitimate&quot; families with Indian women in the Asiatic Bazaar. Here was young Billy, someone they knew well, someone they knew to be carefree, in love with life but with no thought of marriage. He was not to be trusted. When Minnie fell pregnant, they anticipated the worst. But Billy surprised them; he proposed.

To avoid trouble with his family, Billy decided on a civil marriage but found that as he was under twenty-one, he could not marry without parental approval. So he and Minnie set up house together in Fourth Street in the Cape Location and put the wedding off to the following year. Their home had three rooms and Billy took pride in furnishing them. He felt proud; he was young, making good money as a waiter and doing very well for himself. And in the Coloured community, he found the affirmation that was denied him in the other location just over the road, on the other side of Blood Street. Being lavish in his ways, he was very popular with the young partying crowd and never missed a dance. But his love of dancing and his flirtatiousness led to serious trouble in his marriage.

One Friday night, he upset Minnie dreadfully when he spent most of the evening dancing with a new and very beautiful arrival at the dance hall. After work the next day, he came home to find that Minnie had tried to poison herself with a large dose of caustic soda. He rushed her to the hospital where they managed to save her life but she never recovered fully. She remained sickly and ailing and for the next four years Billy devoted himself to caring for her while his mother-in-law looked after their son. Then Minnie died. When Billy remarried, his mother-in-law adopted his son.

Unfortunately for Billy, Thanga was from an orthodox family that did not approve of Western-type dancing. She didn't go to dances but dancing was Billy's life; he couldn't give it up. On Friday nights, he simply left her at home with the baby, while he went dancing into the wee hours of the morning. Frustrated and angry, Thanga found ways to punish him. One Saturday, he returned home in the early morning darkness to find the door locked.

He knocked in vain. Then, being quite drunk, he slumped onto the veranda where he sat singing the pop song  
*Ramona*.

Some hours later, when Aunty Poppie saw Billy sitting in the cold, she became very angry with Thanga.

*"Hoekom het jy nie die deur oopgemaak vir Billy nie?"*

*"He left me with the baby at eight o' clock last night and he comes home now. So I didn't open the door for him."*

Thanga, who knew that this was no solution to the problem, did the only sensible thing - she learned to dance. With Billy as her teacher and partner, she came to love dancing as much as he did.

In the next year, Thanga and Billy found that their quarters in Cowie Street were becoming quite uninhabitable. As the place was old with a roof that leaked badly, they decided to move. And they did - across the road to the old Tamil School yard. The classrooms had been converted into living quarters while the schoolyard had been portioned off into tiny plots to accommodate about fourteen families living in typical location shanties. When Thanga and Billy discovered that a small section of the playground right next to Sinthumbi's house was still vacant, they decided that that was where they would build a little home and Sinthumbi helped them to acquire the land from the Tamil League

When they were about to put up their little structure, Thanga's cousin asked to share the plot. Though she was reluctant, Thanga couldn't refuse. Aboo Chetty, Thanga's uncle, had been a tremendous support to Valliamma and her children when they were struggling so she felt obliged to help his daughter.

And two tiny units went up on that little piece of land.

The room and kitchen that Thanga and Billy built would be their home until they moved to Laudium over a decade later.

Thanga, who was still working in Johannesburg, employed Ouma from Atteridgeville to look after little, Nimmi. As Ouma, who had a drinking problem, was not reliable, Thanga was never sure she would arrive on time to take charge of the little toddler before she left for work.

While Billy was still working as a waiter, he took care of Nimmi until about nine in the morning before setting off to the restaurant.

Billy, however, was very uncomfortable about leaving his daughter in this precarious situation; it haunted him all his life.

"I am sorry when I think about Nimmi. It couldn't have been a happy childhood."

When Thanga became pregnant again, she gave up her job to stay home with her children. Her son, Jyothi, [\[4\]](#) was born in 1956, the year of the women's march against passes for African women. Though she was pregnant at the time, when Thailema approached her, Thanga became one of the 20 000 women who marched to the Union Buildings that ninth of August in 1956.

In the meanwhile, Billy, who had given up his job at the restaurant, was working at a big linen place, Ace Imports. The owner, Mr Lulu Ginsberg, a regular client at Janina's Restaurant, had singled Billy out as his special waiter and they had become well acquainted. Realising that Billy

was an intelligent, hardworking man, Ginsberg offered him a job as a buyer and dispatch clerk in his company. Billy, who was going nowhere in his present job, accepted Ginsberg's offer and went to work for him only to find that he had not improved his prospects. He was working harder than ever but wasn't being paid for the extra time and effort that was required of him. H

Ginsberg took it for granted that Billy, because of his experience as a waiter, would be on duty for weekend functions at his home.

Billy, feeling trapped and helpless, succumbed to these exploitative conditions and stayed with Ace Imports for the next seventeen years, partly because Thanga had been offered CMT (cut, make and trim) projects for

*Laura Linens*

, an outlet for Ace Imports' manufactured goods. To fill the orders, Thanga needed a big machine that cost about eight hundred pounds. As she had no funds, she approached her grocer, Choonilal Chagan, who loaned her the money. When she discovered that the work was more than she could handle alone, she decided to use the expertise and experience she had gained in other people's factories, to start her own factory. After Jyothi was born, Thanga turned earnestly to setting up her enterprise. She employed several women from the location to work with her in her home and Jan, a young boy from Atteridgeville, to look after her baby son. She had already sent Nimmi off to school in Pietermaritzburg where she would stay with friends until she had completed primary school.

Thanga, who had begun her factory with one machine, needed to expand when the volume of work increased. She did so to the extent that her tiny home would allow. She bought two more machines and increased the number of employees to seven. Among her first group of workers were the machinists Parvathy and Salatchi from the Asiatic Bazaar, A. Williams from the Cape Location, and a table-hand, Selina from Mamelodi, who measured and ironed curtains and other large items. The

articles that they made for

*Laura Linens*

- pillowcases, sheets and curtains - arrived cut and ready for sewing.

Thanga was paid four pence a piece for pillowcases and thirty-five pence for two pillowcases and a sheet. Her little factory also manufactured theatre gowns, boots and caps for doctors. In addition to CMT items for

*Laura Linens*

, the factory began producing goods for other retailers.

Soon Thanga was supplying a number of shops -

*Ahmed Tayob's*

and

*Osman's*

in town, their branches in Laudium,

*Jubie's*  
in Brits and  
*Solomon's*  
in Pretoria North.

So when Laura Linens closed down, Thanga's business didn't collapse.

Her factory continued to operate.

It was a very busy factory and most of the packing was done at night. That was Jan's job. He folded and packed with such distinction, that their products looked like Christmas gifts. All Thanga's employees were registered, paid the minimum wage and received bonuses and gifts. They were carefully trained, became highly proficient and went into business for themselves when they left her little establishment.

When the general trek from the Asiatic Bazaar to Laudium began in the sixties, Thanga and Billy saw no reason not to move. Though they had taken over the quarters of people who had moved to Laudium, they wanted better conditions. Using their place as a factory by day and rearranging it into a home at night, was onerous. If they moved to Laudium, they would have a home separate from the factory. So they sold two of their insurance policies, obtained enough money to buy two plots and three years later, in 1969, moved into their new house in Laudium.

The factory continued to operate in the Asiatic Bazaar for the next ten years with Thanga travelling to work by minibus taxi. When practically all the Indians had moved out of the location in the late seventies, Thanga moved her factory to her garage in Laudium. Jan, an invaluable part of the enterprise, came too and continued to work for her.

Sadly, he came to an untimely end just two weeks before Jyothi's wedding in 1981. On a Friday after work, having collected his wages, Jan went to see his girlfriend and the mother of his two children, who worked for an Indian family in Laudium. When he arrived at his girlfriend's room, he found another man with her. There was a fight and Jan was stabbed to death. When Thanga heard, she immediately informed Jan's aunt in Atteridgeville, made arrangements for his body to be taken there and paid for the funeral. She felt Jan's loss very deeply.

Thanga continued to run her business for another fifteen years or so but in the mid 1990's, after she suffered a mild stroke, her children insisted that she close the factory. But she is still very busy. She continues to sew little household items such as oven gloves, tablemats and covers for wastepaper baskets. She brings these and other projects to the Senior Citizens' Club where she teaches people to sew, crochet and knit. She devotes much of her time to social welfare work: raising funds for handicapped children, distributing Deepavali hampers to poor families, finding shelter for abandoned and abused women and working with senior citizens. She has set her heart on establishing an old age home in Laudium but like everything in her life, it is proving to be an uphill battle.

Thanga, however, is a go-getter - nothing stands in her way.

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**[\[1\]](#) Interview Thanga Kollapen, 2001**

**[\[2\]](#) Passive Resistance Campaign, Chapter 5**

**[\[3\]](#) Interview Thanga Kollapen, 2001**

**[\[4\]](#) Thanga's son, Jyothi (Jody Kollapen) became Chairperson of the Human Rights Commission in 2000.**