

Segregation and the emergence of a left-wing grouping within the Transvaal and Natal Indian Congresses

The initial concept of separate residential areas for European and Coloured, including Indian, residents of South Africa became apparent in the experimental planning of a servitude scheme in February 1939 by Stuttaford, the then Minister of Interior. It was based on the principle that if 75% of the white residents of a township voted for the removal of their coloured neighbours the residents would be segregated.

This potential new policy shocked the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) and Colonial Born and Settlers Indian Association (CBandSIA) and both groups held numerous protest meetings where resolutions condemning the scheme were passed. Ultimately, however, they depended on the intervention of the Indian Government and the goodwill of the Union Government, but the Natal radicals were not coherently organised and could not offer alternative proposals.

In the Transvaal a more radical group led by Dr. Yusuf Mohamed Dadoo had already formed a left-wing group in 1939 described by P. S. Joshi as:

“Sincere, youthful and courageous, they commenced their activity... in cultivating public opinion... in offering resistance and standing erect with a consciousness of their cultural heritage. The forces were not organised at this stage (1938), but they were clearly making headway.”

When the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC) held a mass meeting on 1 March 1939 to consider and discuss the servitude scheme about 1000 people attended. The new group was organised under the leadership of Dadoo and also enjoyed a measure of mass support. Dadoo, on behalf of his group, moved an amendment to the official resolution, which called on the TIC to elect a Council of Action to “devise ways and means of starting a passive resistance campaign”. It also called for closer co-operation with other non-European political organisations. This move marked the demands of the progressives for militant resistance and for closer fraternal ties with African and Coloured South Africans. Moderates had previously shunned these actions.

Later TIC officials issued a press statement relating that the TIC was not going to form a Council of Action and refused to admit that the amendment had won. Dadoo claimed, in turn, that the amendment had won and pointed out that S.M. Nana, secretary and leader of the TIC had offered to resign because the adoption of the amendment was tantamount to a vote of no confidence in TIC officials. Both the ‘Indian Opinion’ and Joshi stated that the amendment had been adopted. Following this the radicals formed the nationalist bloc of the TIC. The term ‘nationalist’ was presumably used to denote their radicalism and was probably borrowed from India.

The nationalist bloc remained part of the TIC and continued staging their own propaganda and agitational campaigns to win the support of the people. They held meetings, put up posters and placards, distributed propaganda material and generally carried out an active campaign to obtain their goals. Stuttaford's scheme was, however, not approved as a result of visits of representatives from the Indian Government, and the protest and outcry of the Indian and Coloured communities and the South African Communist party (SACP). The Transvaal Indians were, however, given no leeway and in place of the servitude scheme the government introduced the Asiatic Land and Trading Bill in May 1939.

This Act postponed the Feetham resolution, which had been established in 1936. The resolution had come into being as a result of the withdrawal of the Transvaal Asiatic Land Tenure (Amendment) Bill on 28 May 1936 by J.H. Hofmeyr. The Act had initially been introduced in January of the same year. In its place a new Bill, which had been amended by a Parliamentary Select Committee, was rushed through parliament. By 16 June the Transvaal Asiatic Land Tenure Act (Amendment) Act of 1936 was part of the Statute Book. The Select Committee had conceded the granting of property rights, but in the Act this concession was limited by the proviso that the Minister of Interior had to obtain the sanction of both houses of Parliament before any area could be exempted, wherein Indians would enjoy property rights. This was named the Feetham resolution. Great store was set on the resolution by leaders of the NIC and South African Indian Congress (SAIC), as it would ensure greater security of tenure and investment opportunities if passed.

The nationalist bloc called for passive resistance and at a mass protest meeting on 7 May 1939, which was attended by about 3000 people, a resolution was adopted stating that:

"Upon resorting to passive resistance as the only means at our disposal to register our protest by self-suffering and... appoints... a council of 25... (to conduct) this struggle to its final end and determination."

The SAIC refused to support the resolution and at an executive meeting V.S.C. Pather, the president, ruled that in terms of Rule 16 of the SAIC constitution provincial bodies may make representations, but that only the SAIC in "conference assembled" could lay down a policy or principle on any issues that could have national repercussions. At the end of the meeting the executive also condemned the Bill, but gave no suggestion as to how it was to be opposed.

The nationalist bloc was not seriously perturbed by the meeting and compelled the TIC officials to call a mass meeting for 4 June 1939 to make a decision on the issue. Just prior to the beginning of the meeting the passive resistance supporters were attacked with butchers' knives, bottles, clubs and other weapons, resulting in the death of Dahyabhai Goovindji and severe injuries to a number of people. S.M. Nana and some other officials had apparently hired the thugs. This event swung Indian opinion in favour of the radicals, who now had the overwhelming support of Indians in the Transvaal.

This was emphasised at a meeting held on the 9th of July, and was also confirmed by the Agent-General, a supporter of the moderate conservatives, when he stated that,

"The passing of the Asiatic Land and tenure Act and the use of violence at the meeting... swung Indian opinion heavily in favour of passive resistance. Many of the branches of the TIC passed resolutions of no confidence in the officials and in support of Dr. Y.M. Dadoo and his nationalist movement."

The meeting had drawn 6000 people and representatives from Natal were also present. All the speakers condemned the Asiatic Land Tenure Act of 1939 and called on the crowd to prepare for passive resistance. Three resolutions were adopted at the meeting:

First, the Indian community in the Transvaal, having exhausted all constitutional means... declares that the only means left to combat the Act is passive resistance... and declares that it is launched in the Transvaal on the first day of August 1939. The second resolution demanded the withdrawal of the Agency and the third denounced the moderates and expressed full confidence in the policies and programme of the nationalist bloc.

On 23 July important Natal Indians held a mass meeting of solidarity, largely from the CBandSIA. Only one of the NIC leaders, J.W. Godfrey, agreed to sponsor the meeting. The declarations had caused some upset among conservatives and A.I. Kajeje condemned the passive resistance resolution as unconstitutional. He felt that it would harm the Indian cause and that the nationalist bloc could achieve nothing without support from the Indian community in Natal and the SAIC. His statements were repudiated by V.S.C. Pather who stated that he had been expressing his personal opinion and that neither the SAIC nor NIC had made a decision regarding the issue.

S.M. Nana, the leading spokesman for the conservatives in the Transvaal, also believed that the passive resistance campaign would have a negative effect by antagonising Europeans. He also said that,

"Any measure of success... would be an encouragement to the native people to adopt it as a weapon to seek redress of their grievances. The Union Government cannot, even if it desires to do so, make any concession to the Indians in the face of a passive struggle because of its effect on the Native people of this country."

This statement is a clear reflection of the political approach of the conservative leadership. They were opposed to militant resistance and were fearful of negatively affecting their own business interests. They were also guarding their sense of political and social superiority over Africans and proposed an accommodating policy aimed to please authorities. It was obvious that Dadoo's national bloc held a great deal of support in the Transvaal and that they were willing to offer resistance, but external factors intervened.

A week prior to the commencement of the campaign M.K. Gandhi made a call on the nationalist bloc to postpone the struggle in the hope that a peaceful settlement could be attained. Both the Indian and British Governments were communicating with the Union Government, and Gandhi himself was in touch with the Minister concerned. The group accepted his suggestion and Dadoo offered the following explanation,

“Mahatma Gandhi has been our guide and mentor in all that the passive resistance council has been doing in the matter, and we shall wholeheartedly await his advice.”

This decision had a negative effect on the aims of the national bloc. They were on the verge of embarking on a militant struggle with a great deal of support and were suitably placed to win control of the TIC. The postponement dampened the spirit of their followers and gave the conservatives opportunity to consolidate and reaffirm their claim on the TIC.

Links:

Stuttaford, Al Kajee, Dr YM Dadoo, PS Joshi, SM Nana, VAC Pather,
Dahyabhai Goovindji, JW Godfrey, MK Gandhi

NIC, TIC, SAIC, CBandSIA, SACP

Indian Opinion, Feetham Resolution

Union, Indian, British Governments

Natal, Transvaal, India

Asiatic land and Trading Bill 1939, Transvaal Asiatic land and Tenure Bill
1936/39