

Chapter One

BLACK ORGANISATIONS

POLITICAL GROUPS

THE NATAL INDIAN CONGRESS (NIC)

Historical Background

THE NIC HAS a long history dating back to the end of the last century. The account given here is a condensed account covering only a few highlights in the history of NIC.

The NIC was founded by Mahatma Gandhi in 1894 as a political organisation to champion the cause and aspirations of Indians who had come to South Africa both as indentured labourers for the sugar fields of Natal and as ambitious traders and artisans. It was under the banner of the Natal Indian Congress that Mahatma Gandhi first began his civil resistance campaigns in Natal in the form of protests against the discriminatory measures implemented at the time by the British against Indians.

In 1946, the leadership of NIC passed to young University graduates with Dr Monty Naicker assuming presidency. From that time onwards, NIC became more activist oriented, joining hands with other groups sometimes or picking up issues on its own where necessary. Pieces of legislation that were used as direct targets included the Asiatic Land Tenure Act and the Indian Representation Act.

Co-operation with African and Coloured political organisations heightened from 1950 with NIC taking an active part in the 1952 Defiance campaign and ultimately participating in the formation of the Congress Alliance and the Kliptown Freedom Charter.

By 1962 almost all articulate leaders of the NIC were either banned, house arrested, or still worse, in Robben Island. Because of tremendous police vigilance and persecution, the NIC went defunct though not formally banned.

In 1971 Mewa Ramgobin, fresh from a five year banning order, immediately launched a successful campaign to revive the NIC. After campaigning for a few months Mr Ramgobin and his ad hoc committee received a mandate to revive Congress from a meeting attended by some 600 people in Durban. On the 2nd October, 1971, the first Convention of the Natal Indian Congress was held at Phoenix Settlement and here the NIC was formally revived.

Shortly before the Convention, on September 20th, Mewa Ramgobin was banned and house arrested following a visit with Charles Diggs to the sugar industry, thus exposing the living conditions of workers. This was followed by a spate of protest meetings throughout Natal but mainly in Durban. These meetings were organised by the Natal Indian Congress under the leadership of Mr George Sewpersadh who was elected at the Convention.

Towards the end of 1971, some NIC executive members were once more subjected to police attention, interrogation and raids. Those involved were Dr D. Naidoo and Mr G. Sewpersadh, General Secretary and President of the NIC.

Activities in 1972

At the beginning of 1972 the NIC was faced with the reality of the existence of the Black People's Convention. For a time before this, the all-Indian stance of NIC had been criticised by people inside and outside the NIC. The Durban Central Branch of the Natal Indian Congress had been particularly vocal on this issue, believing that the mandate given to the initial ad hoc committee towards revival of the NIC was specifically in the spirit that NIC would be open to all. This branch, under the leadership of people like Saths Cooper and Strini Moodley, was also a strong advocate of the Black Consciousness approach.

At the beginning of the year, NIC officials attended a meeting with BPC in Lenasia, Johannesburg, but no real agreement was reached between the two bodies either towards a common stance or an amalgamation. It was at this stage that the leadership of the Durban Central Branch completely defected towards BPC leading to a virtual collapse of the Durban Central Branch, till then by far the biggest and most active branch of the NIC.

In April the NIC held a two-day conference at which were discussed a number of issues central to the existence of the organisation. Amongst

these were the question of participation in possible elections of the South African Indian Council, the possibility of becoming non-racial and the acceptance or rejection of Black Consciousness.

The NIC rejected the SAIC and opted to operate completely outside this institution. The Executive was instructed not to take any part in so-called politics of the SAIC. This closed a long chapter of speculation that the NIC had been revived amongst other things to be able to participate in an eventual election of the South African Indian Council.

Regarding the possibility of going non-racial, attitudes were extremely divided within the NIC. A number of people felt that the 'all-Indian' stance of the NIC was contradictory to the whole philosophy to which the NIC had committed itself by joining the Congress Alliance and accepting the Freedom Charter. On the other hand some advocates of a 'go-slow' approach were convinced that there was still a place in South African politics for the NIC as presently constituted. Some people argued that it would be arrogant of an all-Indian organisation to perfect its machinery first and then declare itself open to other groups. In the end a compromise agreement was reached through a resolution mandating the Executive to 'investigate' the possibility of the organisation becoming both non-racial and national.

The debate on Black Consciousness was a sequel to a symposium on Black Consciousness organised by the Durban Central Branch in December, 1971. At that symposium the division in the ranks of the NIC on the topic had been thoroughly demonstrated. Following this, the issue was picked up by the Executive which ruled that it rejected Black exclusiveness. Attitudes at the Conference did not differ much from the stance taken by the Executive, although the division was once more apparent. The debate was based on an anti-Black Consciousness paper presented at the Conference by Dr Jerry Coovadia, an Executive member of the NIC.

A side effect of the debate on Black Consciousness was the straining of relationships between NIC and SASO. This was occasioned by libellous statements about SASO made at an Executive Meeting of the NIC by a certain Mr Ramesar. These related to comparisons between the SASO and the Pan African Congress policy. SASO demanded an apology from NIC at the threat of a possible legal suit. The NIC initially refused to apologise but instead, through a statement by Mr Sewpersadh, almost reiterated the earlier statements. SASO then went on to carry out the threat but later withdrew following discussions with NIC officials and other personalities. However relations between the two organisations remained strained and could not compare with the enthusiastic reaction from SASO ranks when intentions about NIC revival were initially announced.

Further attempts at reconciliation between NIC and BPC were shattered at the BPC Conference in July in Maritzburg where officials of the NIC were made to feel unwelcome by some of the BPC delegates. It appeared that the resentment of the exclusive NIC stance had built up to a pitch in many circles amongst BPC ranks. The NIC delegates left the conference of their own accord.

Following their April conference the NIC hierarchy committed itself to the production of fact papers on a number of topics including education, housing, trade unionism and economics. These were designed to heighten the level of social awareness and involvement of the people served by NIC. In an attempt to bear witness to their policy, NIC increasingly identified itself with existing trade unions and assisted in the establishment of Benefit Societies.

Towards the end of the year the NIC participated in the massive bus protest at Chatsworth in Durban. After an unsuccessful meeting organised by the Local Affairs Commission, the NIC organised its own meeting at which the grievances of the commuters were discussed. At this meeting a one day bus boycott was decided upon in an attempt to demonstrate the people's rejection of the 'no bus' decision.

BLACK PEOPLE'S CONVENTION

Background

The Black People's Convention is a newly established political organisation set up to cater for the interests of black people. It was preceded by a number of conferences attended by several organisations in 1971.

The first conference was held in Bloemfontein on 24th April, 1971. At this conference the main theme was co-operation between, and co-ordination of the work of, several black organisations that had a national outlook at the time. The main organisations represented at that conference were ASSECA, SASO, IDAMASA, AICA, YWCA.

It was decided as an outcome of this conference to elect an ad hoc committee to invite more people and organisations to a bigger conference.

A two day conference was then called in Maritzburg in mid-August which drew over 100 representatives from welfare, religious, educational, sporting and student organisations. Meeting around the central theme of 'Development of the African Community', the conference was addressed by several speakers amongst whom were Drake Koka, Steve Biko, Mrs Mabiletsa, Mrs E. Kuzwayo and Chief Gatsha Buthelezi.

The main decisions from this conference were:

1. That all African organisations be asked to join in the formation of a confederate organisation.
2. That these work in conjunction with other black groups towards realisation of the black man's aspirations.
3. That the proposed organisation operates outside the system but keeps contact with well-oriented blacks inside the system.
4. That the proposed organisation devotes itself to representing African opinion on a political basis and to promoting community development programmes on education, economic and cultural aspects.

The meeting further elected another ad hoc committee, this time to draw up a draft working document for the establishment of the organisation envisaged in the confederation plans approved by the conference. This ad hoc committee was under the chairmanship of Mr M.T. Moerane. The Ad Hoc Committee immediately adopted for themselves the name National Organisations Conference which was meant to be an interim name. The Ad Hoc Committee was given a time period of 4 months during which to draft a constitution, draw up blue prints for and call a conference for the establishment of a national confederation to embrace all African organisations.

The subsequent conference called by the Ad Hoc Committee was held in Soweto on the 17th - 19th December, 1971. It was preceded by a national day of prayer at Jabulani Amphitheatre where 400 people were addressed amongst others by Dr W.F. Nkomo and Drake Koka. At this rally Dr Nkomo bitterly attacked the policy of dividing Africans into different ethnic groups and called upon Africans to be united and not be deceived by outsiders who wished to see them divided.

At the actual conference where about 40 actual delegates were present, the Ad Hoc Committee presented its findings to the conference and fierce debates ensued as to the nature of the new organisation to be formed. Two views were prevalent; on the one hand, some people opted for an umbrella culturally oriented organisation that would act as a parent organisation to all African organisations; on the other, some people, particularly the younger members of the conference, felt that the black people had lived for too long in the doldrums and needed a vibrant political mood to be infused by a direct political organisation. The SASO delegation under the leadership of Mr Harry Nengwekhulu, SASO Permanent Organiser, was at the helm of this viewpoint and ultimately

swung opinion their way. The students piloted a motion through conference calling for an *all-inclusive* black political organisation to be established through which blacks would realise their aspirations.

The Chairman of the Ad Hoc Committee is reported to have said that though he was not basically against the idea he felt that it was a wrong platform from which to operate (2). On the other hand the SASO stand was supported by people like Mrs W. Kgware who spoke against the establishment of any further supra-cultural organisations. Ultimately the motion calling for a political organisation was adopted by a comfortable majority of 40 votes with only three abstentions but no votes registered against. The people who abstained explained that they had come to represent organisations and could not cast votes in favour of this new move without consulting their organisations.

At the end of the conference a 10-man Ad Hoc Committee towards the Black People's Convention was elected under the chairmanship of Mr Drake Koka, a trade-unionist.

Activities

As early as 14th January, 1972, the BPC Ad Hoc Committee issued a press statement announcing the establishment of a black people's political movement under the banner of Black Consciousness. Amongst other things the statement said: (3)

It is the inalienable birthright of any community to have a political voice to articulate and realise the aspirations of its members.

In this our country, Africans, Coloureds and Indians comprise the Black Community which has been deprived of this inalienable right; and for too long there has been a political vacuum in the black community.

False impressions have been created that it is illegal and unlawful for blacks to found political movements and to engage in political activity unless such activity has been created as prescribed and approved of by white society and its government.

The Ad Hoc committee is therefore working towards the formation of a Black People's political movement whose primary aim is to unite and solidify black people with a view to liberating and emancipating them from both psychological and physical oppression.

Our interests therefore lie within the black community and our sole aim will be directed towards realising its needs, which needs will coincide with those of all Black people throughout the world.

It is therefore essential and imperative that all black people, individuals and organisations, should pool their resources together in order to achieve their aspirations. Their future destiny and ultimate happiness is in their hands.

The chairman of the Ad Hoc Committee explained through the press that the new movement was a movement for black people and that it did not recognise tribal affiliation or ethnic groupings. He further said: 'at present we have no attitude towards the whites. They are irrelevant' (4).

Once the draft constitution had been drawn up and accepted, the new movement would hold mass meetings and issue statements on current issues in an effort to set up a countrywide organisation. The BPC would not resort to 'negative forms of expression' such as demonstrations and protest marches unless the occasion required it.

Between the beginning of the year and July (the deadline set in its terms of reference), the Ad Hoc Committee organised symposia particularly on the Reef and in Durban, and consulted with several organisations like NIC, Labour Party people, SASO and others to try and obtain a consensus of opinion on the role to be played by the new movement.

Support for BPC came from a wide range of people of different backgrounds. Speaking at a BPC symposium in May at Orlando in Johannesburg Mr Don Mattera, public relations officer of the Labour Party, told the meeting:

'Never has democracy been suppressed and crushed as in this country ... It is only when all Black groups - Coloured, African and Indian - can come together in a common brotherhood that there will be any hope for us' (5).

On the 8-10 July, 1972, the Black People's Convention had their conference in Pietermaritzburg (6). The conference was attended by more than one hundred Africans, Coloureds and Indians from a variety of political backgrounds. The conference adopted the constitution and formally launched the organisation. The ground work for the conference was prepared by several commissions that looked into:

general planning and organisation
 urban and rural politics
 economic development
 black education
 community work programme
 financial and legal affairs
 black communalism.

Also decided upon at the Conference were the following aims: (7)

- to liberate and emancipate blacks from psychological and physical oppression;
- to create a humanitarian society where justice is meted out equally to all;
- to co-operate with existing agencies with the same ideals;
- to re-orientate the theological system with a view of making religion relevant to the aspirations of the black people;
- to formulate, apply and implement the principles and philosophies of Black Consciousness and Black Communalism;
- to formulate and implement an education policy of blacks, by blacks for blacks.

The BPC resolved unanimously to work outside government-created institutions such as Bantustans, the Coloured Peoples Representative Council and The South African Indian Council.

It pledged itself to establish and promote black business on a co-operative basis including establishments of banks, co-operative buying and selling, flotation of relevant companies, all of which would be designed as agencies for economic self-reliance for black people as a corporate unit and not for individuals.

In the field of labour, the BPC resolved to apply itself fully behind attempts to fully establish trade unions for black people, particularly directed at co-ordinating and unifying all trade unions.

On the political front, BPC resolved

- to stimulate formation of community groups that shall strive to

redirect political thinking of black people;

to form residents vigilante committees, for the protection of the interests of the community in their residential areas;

to make known to black people that there shall be no co-operation with government institutions.

Regarding planning and organisation of the movement, BPC resolved

to operate openly as an overt peoples movement;

to establish branches throughout the country;

to work on a membership drive towards a target of 1 million in 3 years.

The conference decided to treat itself as an interim conference, believing that a proper conference could only come about after an intensive membership drive had been put into effect, particularly directed at the grass roots.

At the end of the conference, the following were elected to the interim executive:

Mr A. Mayatula	President
Mr M. Shezi	Vice President
Mr D.K. Koka	Secretary-General
Mr S. Cooper	Public Relations Officer
Mr A. Dlamini	National Organiser

Following the July conference, BPC applied itself particularly in areas like: Johannesburg, Pretoria, Durban, Pietermaritzburg, Natal, South Coast, Cape Town, in all of which areas branches have already been established.

The issues picked up by BPC have to date depended a lot on spontaneous reaction by black people to their various situations, e.g. bus strikes in Johannesburg and Durban and the dock workers' strike in Durban.

Following the banning of buses in Chatsworth, by the Durban City Council, the BPC in a statement said: (8)

It is important to remember at a time like this, that these acts of racism against us are not isolated. They are part of a master plan by the white man to keep us in perpetual servitude and to seal the shackles that bind us in bondage. It was only a while ago that our brothers and sisters in Gelvandale, Port Elizabeth, were affected similarly by transport hurdles imposed by the white man. The people of Gelvandale preferred to walk to Port Elizabeth and back rather than sell their souls to the cut-throat price of the white man ... Let us not forget that the government is not here to please us at all. The government is out on a deliberate campaign to destroy us physically and spiritually. The government is definitely not on our side'.

On 16 to 17 December, 1972, the BPC held their actual conference at Hammanskraal in the Transvaal. Here BPC consolidated their policy on many fronts, including foreign investments, trade unions, youth, sport, etc. At the end of the conference Mrs W.M. Kgware was elected president.

While the BPC Conference was in progress, Mtuli Shezi, till then vice-president of BPC, was lying very ill in hospital following a mysterious 'accident' at the Germiston station.

According to various people who went to see Mr Shezi in hospital and also confirmed by a report in *Sunday Times*, 24 December, before Mr Shezi died, he related events that led to the 'Accident'. According to his account, he had originally quarrelled with some white employees of the Railways following their unacceptable treatment of some black women at the station some days before the fatal 'accident'. On a subsequent occasion on the 12 December, while passing through the Germiston station, he was apparently spotted by one of the white men he had quarrelled with. This man apparently gave chase and caught up with him and following a short scuffle, pushed him onto the rails in front of an on-coming train. After being knocked down and dragged by the train, Mr Shezi sustained a number of injuries including a dislocated hip, fractured pelvis and ruptured bladder. Five days after he had been taken to hospital, Mr Shezi died following excessive bleeding.

No real official explanation was given by the authorities and at the time of writing the case was still under investigation by the police. The police were reported as having said at the time that they did not suspect foul play.

REFERENCES

1. SASO Newsletter, September 1971, Vol. 1, No. 4.
2. *Rand Daily Mail*, 21.12.71.
3. BPC Press Release, 14.1.72.
4. *Star*, 22.1.72.
5. *Rand Daily Mail*, 1.5.72.
6. *Rand Daily Mail*, 11.7.72.
7. BPC Conference report, 8-10 July.
8. Pamphlet by BPC.