

THE BIRTH OF FOSA

by Pat Poovalingam

And Tim died. And the Church in Carlisle Street, called Bethesda Temple, was packed with mourners attending the funeral service. Black and White, off-white and brown, Indian, African, Coloured and European; Hindu and Jew, Christian and Muslim, believer and unbeliever.

The large FOSA Family was grieving over the loss of one of its most loved members and when members of FOSA gather together, they are persons, people, not members of this race or of that group; they are individuals working together for the common good, each having his own religious convictions, the members often differing widely in their political affiliations.

FOSA—the Friends of the Sick Association—is more than an anti-TB organisation; more than just a welfare agency although it has for thirty-three years been both these with a vigour and a steadfastness that earned it the support and the affection of the community. As I say, FOSA is these things but it is more. In a sense, banded together though they were in a desire to do welfare work, the Fosaites began, thirteen years before the Liberal Party was formed, to live a life together which completely ignored the barriers of race and which made of differing religious beliefs not barriers but bonds.

The Friends of the Sick Association was itself first constituted as a sub-committee of the Society of Servants in South Africa which in turn had been founded here by Harold Satchell on the lines of Srinivasa Sastri's famous Servants of India Society. Harold Satchell was the English-born, India-trained Anglican priest about whom more anon, but first something about the Servants. This was a semi-religious organisation much impressed by the Early Christians and the scholarship of the Hindu philosophers and by Reverend C. M. Doke and by Mahatma Gandhi. They regularly gave discourses to each other, and spent many hours in contemplation and in meditation over similarities in the ancient Jewish and the ancient Hindu religious writings. Sometimes they would giggle over something one or other would say over the exhibitionist self-flagellation of Hindu sadhus, and at the next session they would spend hours on anguish-sharing searchings with St. Augustine in his spiritual fire-walking. Their library, for their Society boasted a well-stocked one, had among its several hundreds of books, well-thumbed copies of the **Rig-Veda**, and the **Artharva Veda** as well as the **Upanisads** in addition to the usual works found in the libraries of such men.

Into this essentially atavistic self-satisfied though searching and not self-seeking group a medical doctor named

Arthur Copley dropped a hand-grenade. The year was 1941, when South Africa, led by that great democrat Jan Christiaan Smuts, had thrown in her lot to save democracy and to fight the purveyor of the Aryan herrenvolk racism. The fact that like South Africa's choicest fruit, Smuts was mainly for export was however well known to the people of South Africa, to those who actually practised herrenvolk racism here as well as those who suffered from it. For that was the time of the great anti-Indian agitation in Natal, led by that great adherent of British Fairplay and Justice, Colonel C. F. Stallard, leader of the Dominion Party who was ably helped along by that exquisitely fairminded journalist, Mervyn Ellis, Editor of "The Natal Mercury".

That was the time when Durban's Town Clerk, one John McIntyre would have liked to see "all the bloody coolies lined up on their damned Indian ocean and shot down like the rats they are". Anti-Indian agitation was so rife, that valiant attempts by Edgar Brookes and by Maurice Webb and by Dennis Shepstone to reason with the Whites proved of little use. And brave forays by Paul Sykes often into the heart of the hostile tribes of the English exposed him, who never learned to like curry, the label of "curry-lover", said with all the sexual overtones as when "nigger lover" is spat out. To all this, General Smuts, being the great democrat that he was, naturally responded with the Pegging Act, which was the forerunner of the Group Areas Act.

Into this miasma of racial prejudice Dr Arthur Copley threw his little bomb. So great was the death-rate from Tuberculosis among Durban Indians, he said, that in 15 years, the Indian Manace would have been taken care of, for unless something was done urgently to halt the spread of TB, there would be no Indians left.

The Servants were shocked into action, for as Harold Satchell, the Anglican priest was wont to say, quoting Krishna from the **Bhagavad Gita**, "in the right cause, there must be action". The action taken was to form a sub-committee of the Society of Servants, the task of which was to take steps to bring about Community Action to prevent the spread of TB. The sub-committee consisted of five people, and it was called Friends of the Sick. And notwithstanding the five of Cleisthene's **Ebors** or the penchant for **panach** or **panchayat** among the Hindus, there was no magical or other significance in the number five; this was pure coincidence. But what was of the greatest interest is that these five were in a way representative (if not wholly then largely) of South Africa.

Thus it was that the Friends of the Sick Association, which started off as a sub-committee of the Society of Servants in S.A., was founded by five men, two of whom began its life as a multiracial organisation in March, 1941 and in spite of the terrible happenings in this country since, and in spite of the ruthlessness with which apartheid has been enforced, it retains to this day its multiracial or rather its non-racial composition. Not that "they" have not tried, for they have, in several ways. The most serious was some nine years ago when an emissary came to see me from Johannesburg. A directive had been received "from Pretoria" that the S.A. National TB Association—SANTA, which FOSA had had a part in forming—should be divided up into four national organisations, one for each racial group. It followed logically from that, said the emissary, who was no less than Mr C. H. Greathead, General-Secretary of S.A.N.T.A., that FOSA would have to be restricted to Indian members only.

My answer was clear. If "they" imposed unracialism upon FOSA and compelled it to ask longtime devoted members like John Schofield, and Freda Bulkeley and Hans Reyers and Basil and Margaret Cory and Albert Skakane and Gwen Jones and so many others to resign, why, I would resign too, and "they" could damn well take over the organisation and run it and take over the Fosa TB Settlement and run it too. Conceited it perhaps was, my threat then to resign, but not egotistical; it was seriously made for I knew that if on that score I had resigned, hundreds of others would have followed me . . . if I could have, at the crunch, mustered the courage to resign and leave the work to the tender mercies either of officialdom or its nominees.

But man lives by compromise, which is an art in which you insist upon fundamentals while giving way on aspects of it without surrendering the core, so that at some future date you could try and retrieve that which was traded to buy time. And Greathead and I compromised, he later being supported by his Committee and I by mine. We agreed that, for the time being (which in S.A. could be short, or it could be quite long), that "for the time being", S.A.N.T.A. would, as it must, continue as the sole national organisation and that FOSA would, as its largest and most important constituent which was not all-white, be represented only by its White members at all SANTA meetings and conferences and of course cocktail parties and dinners.*

And so it has been for some years that every time Hans Reyers or John Schofield attends a SANTA conference, we have what we call a "briefing" session together. A Black Power supporter will without doubt condemn this compromise, but when one has spent a lifetime trying to build something, however small, is it sin to try and hold it together?

I have mentioned Albert Skakane. He was not one of the five founders of FOSA. The African founder was in fact Edgar Brookes's erstwhile student at Adams College, one

named Braim Nkonde who later became Mayor of Kitwe in Zambia. Albert is quite illiterate. He was first employed by FOSA as a lowly-paid labourer to mix cement and umgeni sand with which to make concrete blocks. In time Albert became no mean block-layer and plasterer and at a pinch bricklayer and roof-thatcher. This was at the time of the building of the Fosa TB Settlement at Newlands.

The area was "raw", the people there rough. Tshimiyane-brewing was rife, shebeen-queens numerous. The week-day-compulsorily-celibate compound-dweller came out to Newlands on Saturday afternoons and Sundays for liquor and for women.

Assaults at Newlands we had by the score every week. Of murders or homicides there were at least two or three each Sunday, as one could expect of a district in which liquor-selling and prostitution were the chief occupations at week-end and the customers were town dwellers out on the binge.

What has all this to do with Albert Skakane, the labourer who was my friend? You see, on Sundays, Albert was a lay-preacher in a Methodist Church or some Zulu off-shoot of the Methodist Church. And in something like five years, Albert had achieved what all the forces of law and order could not. He tamed Newlands. The "trippers" still came at week-ends but drinking was in moderation. The beer-sellers brewed and sold only tshwala, no tshimiyane (note that gaviné had not been discovered then); and if women of the profession existed and entertained their customers, this was done discreetly, certainly in such a manner that Mr Albert Skakane, the semi-skilled building worker at Fosa who had become the induna there but who on Sundays was the Umfundisi, dog-collar and all, did not get to know of it. He had become the leader, this unlettered man one was proud to call friend, and he "cleaned up" Newlands and made it safe for ordinary folk.

The Fosa TB Settlement was established in December 1942 by the pitching of a borrowed tent on donated land at Newlands by three persons, an Englishman, an Indian and a Zulu. Established to help Indian TB patients and TB contacts, its main staff for many years consisted of full-time voluntary workers. There was a period of eight years during which an Englishman and three Dutchwomen, and two Indians gave such service. And they lived together as part of a multiracial community; in mutual esteem and affection; sometimes quarrelling with each other but most times co-operating together. We lived together and no laws were broken, not even those ridiculous laws which were only to be thought of by fear-ridden, guilt-laden, hate-warped minds much later.

FOSA is pre-eminently a welfare organisation and it has had much success in that field. It has also been, incidentally, a splendid example of continuing multi-racial co-operation for promoting the common weal.□

*After ten years, news has just come through that SANTA conferences will be multiracial again.