RESISTANCE IN THEIR BLOOD

The Naidoo-Pillay family: pacifists, protestors, prisoners, patriots
The history of the Naidoo-Pillay family in South Africa starts in the late 1800s with Thambi and Veerammal Naidoo, among the first Indians to join Gandhi’s satyagraha movement and resist unjust laws. Both of them went to prison for their beliefs, Thambi fourteen times.

Their commitment to fighting injustice continued through subsequent generations. As national and global events unfolded in the 20th century, so did the family’s activism evolve from the satyagraha movement to more mobilisation against segregation and apartheid, to armed struggle. In each generation various Naidoo and Pillay family members were detained, imprisoned and tortured for their beliefs.

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Barbara Hogan, former political prisoner

The Naidoo and Pillay women made a particularly important contribution. Not constrained by the expectations of tradition, they juggled roles as homemakers, cooks and mothers with political activism. Their homes were open to people of all walks of life, and all races. The family lived the notions of equality and non-racialism as contained in the Freedom Charter.

Core to the family ethos, through all generations into the present, is the notion of service to people, community and country. This has sustained them through the darkest times, and remains an activating force for change.

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From the 1840s, the British colonial government in India sent millions of Indians to work in other colonies through a system of indenture. The majority—over 450,000—ended up in Mauritius, while more than 152,000 came to the then-British colony of Natal to work on sugar farms. Among the indentured labourers to arrive in Natal were the maternal grandparents of Manonmoni (Ama) Pillay, who is central to this story.

Indentured labourers were contracted to work for five years. Indentured life was hard, with long working hours, low wages and poor living conditions.

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From the 1860s, ‘passenger’ Indians, who paid their fares on steamships bound for southern Africa, also arrived in Natal. They were mainly from the state of Gujarat, and came to trade and do business. Thambi Naidoo, who was born in Mauritius to Indian parents, was one of these ‘passenger’ Indians.

By 1885, Indian farmers had cornered the fresh produce market in Durban and Pietermaritzburg. Despite—or perhaps because of—their success, Indians experienced shocking racism and discrimination at the hands of the white community in Natal.

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Promises of a new life

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Govindasamy K. Naidoo, affectionately known as Thambi, was born in Mauritius in 1875. Thambi’s father, who had emigrated from India to Mauritius, was a prosperous fertiliser and cartage contractor.

In 1889, when he was 14, Thambi, together with his brother and sister, decided to seek their fortune in southern Africa. They made the journey as passenger Indians from Mauritius to Port Elizabeth, then travelled on to Kimberley in the Cape Colony, where Thambi set up a trading business.

Three years later, the gold rush brought him to Johannesburg. He became a successful produce merchant and wholesaler and married Veerammal Pillay, the sister of a close friend.

“There was always a beautiful atmosphere in Veerammal and Thambi’s home. One could drop in at any time, no matter how busy Veerammal was, and always feel a welcome guest.” Mohandas Gandhi

Thambi, still in his teens, became a leading figure in the large Tamil-speaking community in Johannesburg and was a founder of the Tamil Benefit Society. Indians were restricted by law as to where they could live and do business. Thambi found this deeply unjust and was an outspoken opponent of such laws.

“There was a smallpox epidemic in the Indian location. Indian traders were excluded from the Newtown Market while European traders were allowed free access. Father was active among the organisers of a protest against this discrimination.” Thailema Pillay, Thambi’s daughter
Through his activism, Thambi befriended Gandhi, who would become leader of the independence movement in India. A devout Hindu, Thambi was greatly influenced by Gandhi’s philosophy of satyagraha, which was a form of non-violent resistance meaning ‘holding onto truth’.

In 1907 the colonial government passed yet another law discriminating against Indians. The Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance forced Indians in the Transvaal to be fingerprinted and registered. Thambi campaigned, with Gandhi and others, for people to resist this demeaning law.

Gandhi and Jan Smuts, the Colonial Secretary, reached an agreement that Indians would register voluntarily and that the law would be repealed – but Smuts reneged and the law remained in place.

After signing the agreement with Smuts, Gandhi was assaulted by an angry nearest. Thambi intervened and was badly beaten, suffering lifelong health problems as a result. On 16 August 1908, thousands of Indians publicly burnt their registration certificates. This and other protest action resulted in repeated arrests and periods of imprisonment.

Through his activities, Thambi helped transform the philosophy of satyagraha into a mass movement across religious, ethnic and class divisions. He was particularly successful in mobilising indentured and other workers, women as well as men.

“Perhaps the bravest of all is the indomitable Thambi Naidoo. I do not know any Indian who knows the spirit of the struggle so well as he does. He has sacrificed himself entirely.” Mohandas Gandhi

“All Tamil prisoners discharged from the prison are ready to go to jail again and again until the government will grant us our request.”

Thambi Naidoo, in a letter to Gandhi, 1909

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In 1913 the Natal Supreme Court ruled that all marriages not performed according to Christian rites (therefore most Hindu and Muslim marriages) were invalid. Also, the £3 tax on non-indentured Indian families was crippling many families. Thambi, Veerammal and her mother, Mrs Parenithama Pillay, mobilised hundreds of women, most of whom were ordinary homemakers, to resist these unjust laws.

Thambi led a march to Newcastle in Natal to persuade Indian coal miners to strike against the £3 tax. Twelve women from Tolstoy Farm participated, some with their babies and children. Parenithama was the oldest woman on the march.

“When the miners decided to strike, the women were arrested and sentenced to three months' incarceration in the Pietermaritzburg prison, with hard labour. They were imprisoned during the great march of satyagrahis from Natal across the Transvaal border that ended with the arrest of Gandhi and hundreds of others.

The women were released in February 1914. Twelve hours after their release, Veerammal gave birth to a son, Mithalin.

“My aunt Seshammal was only a little girl but she marched with her mother, Veerammal, who was heavily pregnant.”

Shanthie Naidoo