Thambi and Veerammal had nine children: Kuppusamy, Thayanayagee (Thailema), Pakirisamy (Pakiri), Naransamy (Roy), Barasarthi, Balakrishnan, Shanthavathi (Shanthie), Seshammal and Mithalin. Shanthie died in childhood, probably of smallpox, at Tolstoy Farm.

In 1909 Kuppusamy was sentenced to seven days’ imprisonment with hard labour for hawking without a licence. In 1910 he was again sentenced to three months with hard labour.

At Gandhi’s farewell banquet in July 1914 on the eve of his departure for India, Thambi presented four of his sons — Naransamy (Roy), Pakirisamy (Pakiri), Barasarthi and Balakrishnan — to him, saying that they were to become servants of India. He referred to them as his “four pearls”.

The boys travelled to India in 1915 and were educated in the tradition of sacrifice and dedication to the common good at an ashram in Kochrab, Ahmedabad. In March 1916, Pakiri died at the ashram.

After Pakiri’s death, Veerammal insisted that the other boys be sent back to South Africa, and raised the money for their return passage. Barasarthi and Balakrishnan returned to South Africa in 1919, but Roy stayed on to study under the poet and Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore at Santiniketan.

“Of all the precious gifts given to us, those four boys are the most precious. I don’t know that we are worthy to take charge of them.”

Mohandas Gandhi

“The Four Pearls”, from left to right: Barasarthi, Naransamy (Roy), Pakirisamy (Pakiri), Balakrishnan. Photo: Naidoo Family Collection/Liliesleaf

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Naransamy, nicknamed Roy, returned home from India in 1928. By then he was deeply under the influence of the Indian nationalist movement and the teachings of Tagore: “opening the mind and reawakening the goodness of mankind.” His life thereafter was dedicated to the South African liberation struggle.

Roy worked in a laundry and as a driver for a bakery. He was active in his trade union, the Transvaal Peace Council and the Tamil Benefit Society. He was elected deputy president of the Transvaal Indian Congress and campaigned for the vote for Indians, the repeal of segregationist laws such as the Ghetto Act and the Pegging Act, and non-racial alliances.

Through politics he made lifelong friends, like the Afrikaner Communists Bram and Molly Fischer, and ANC leader Walter Sisulu. Roy was an uncompromising believer in the ideals of non-racialism and equality. He instilled these ideals in his children from a very young age.

“I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy.” Rabindranath Tagore

“My dad was a very dedicated member of the Communist Party. He was also a founding member of the Friends of the Soviet Union. And he always wore a red tie.” Murthie Naidoo
Militant passive resistance

Thambi Naidoo died on 31 October 1933. His ashes were buried in the Indian Cemetery in Brixton.

“Crowds turned out for the funeral of the late Thambi Naidoo. It was an awe-inspiring sight and a fitting tribute to a great patriot and hero. The procession was nearly two miles long, evident of the great appreciation for the man who was determined to lay down his life for the honour of the Indian community in South Africa.”

Indian Opinion, 17 November 1933

The impact of Thambi’s life of sacrifice was felt far beyond the South African Indian community. His and Veerammal’s descendants would continue the struggle for justice and equality for decades to come.

From the late 1930s, a radical grouping known as the nationalist bloc emerged in the South African Indian Congress, led by Dr Monty Naicker (Natal Indian Congress) and Dr Yusuf Dadoo (Transvaal Indian Congress). World War II and the fight against fascism in Europe greatly influenced their political thinking.

In 1946 the Indian Congresses launched a countrywide passive resistance campaign. Over 2,000 people were imprisoned, including Roy, his sister Thailema, his wife, Ama, and three of Ama’s brothers. The Indian Passive Resistance Campaign continued Gandhi’s tradition of non-violent resistance, but in a more militant fashion.

“Roy was a committed Communist, and a militant. He was not entirely a pacifist. Being involved in the passive resistance struggle didn’t mean that you weren’t militant.” Prema Naidoo
**INSTILLING A SPIRIT OF DEFIANCE**

“The 1946 Indian Passive Resistance Campaign became a model of the type of protest that we in the Youth League were calling for. It reminded us that the freedom struggle was not merely a question of holding meetings, passing resolutions but of meticulous organisation, militant mass action and the willingness to suffer and sacrifice.” Nelson Mandela

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Emiliano Zapata, leader of the Mexican Revolution of 1910

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Emiliano Zapata, leader of the Mexican Revolution of 1910
“Jail was almost a family shelter and, at times, our home address.” Thailema Pillay

Roy’s sister, Thailema, was four years old when her family moved to Fairy Farm, like her siblings, she was politically active from a very young age.

Thailema – known as ‘Mrs Pillay’ – went to prison during the 1946 and the 1952 defiance campaigns. But she became famous not only for her activism, but also for her cooking. When the Treason Trial, in which people of all races were charged with treason, moved to the Treason Trials in 1956, Thailema organised volunteers to collect groceries and cook meals for the accused. They provided breakfast and lunch daily from 1959 to 1961 when the trial ended.

The security police frequently came to her house and demanded information about people who provided supplies, but she was never intimidated.

“When the trial started I was 15 or 16 and my mother used to wake us up at 4.30 to make food. I used to get so mad. We had a green station wagon which she would load with food and my father’s brothers would go and deliver it.” Sinda Pillay-Naidoo

Thailema remained an activist all her life. In 1988, aged 80, she protested alongside her grandson, Thillay, against segregated municipal elections. They were arrested by a relative who had joined the South African Police.

Thailema died in 1991. She was the oldest surviving resident of Tolstoy Farm. Many ANC stalwarts attended her funeral, among them Walter and Albertina Sisulu, Ahmed Kathrada, Molvi Cachalia and Mosie Moolla.

EIGHTY ENERGETIC YEARS OF ACTIVISM
After Roy's death in 1953, Ama took in sewing to make ends meet. She also rented out rooms to lodgers. However, she continued her political activities, going door-to-door, often with a child in tow, to persuade people to join or support various campaigns, such as the Congress of the People of 1955.

In 1954, Ama was elected to the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) executive. Many FEDSAW meetings were held in Bokkies Street, with Lillian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Amina Cachalia, Mildal Bernstein, Ruth Mompati, and others. Ama was active in mobilising and recruiting for FEDSAW, and baked cakes to raise funds for the organisation.

In 1956 she was involved in organising the FEDSAW march against proposed pass laws for African women.

“You strike a woman; you strike a rock.”

Ama would never stop. She went from house to house to get women to join. Many Indian women came from very traditional households and had to ask their husbands’ permission to participate.” Ramnie Dinat

20,000 women, including Ama and her daughter Ramnie, and Thalema and her daughter Sinda, marched on the Union Buildings in Pretoria on 9 August 1956 to protest against passes.

On 10 December 1963, Indian women activists led by Zainab Asvat again marched to the Union Buildings to protest against the Group Areas Act. At the time, Indians were being evicted from areas like Fordsburg and Doornfontein, and taken to Lenasia. Ama, Thalema and other family members joined the march. The police turned dogs on the marchers and baton-charged them.
“Solitary confinement is the worst kind of torture that can be inflicted on any human being. No amount of physical torture can equal that of solitary confinement. I had absolutely no contact with any of the other prisoners but I could continually hear the beating and sjamboking.”

Murthie Naidoo

From Thambi’s first incarceration in January 1908, over a period of more than 80 years, many members of the Naidoo and Pillay families were detained, tortured, imprisoned and held in solitary confinement in some of South Africa’s most notorious holding cells and prisons.

In particular, the Old Fort and the Women’s Gaol in Johannesburg housed three generations of Naidoos: Thambi, Kuppusamy, Roy, and his children Indres, Shanthie and Prema.

“The hardship my mother suffered all these years, going from one prison to another to visit her sons and daughters. Is there another mother who has seen the inside of more prisons than Ama?”

Indres Naidoo

NAME | YEAR | PRISON | DURATION | GETERATION
--- | --- | --- | --- | ---
Thambi Naidoo | 1908 - c. 1920 | The Fort | 13 years | Thambi’s children
Kuppusamy Naidoo | 1908 | The Fort | 7 days | Thambi’s children
Veerammal Naidoo | 1913-14 | Pietermaritzburg | 3 months | Thambi’s daughter
Seshammal Naidoo | 1913-14 | Pietermaritzburg | 3 months | Thambi’s daughter
Parenithama Pillay | 1913-14 | Pietermaritzburg | 3 months | Thambi’s daughter
Ray Naidoo | 1946 | The Fort | 2 sentences | Thambi’s son
Thailema Pillay | 1946 | Pietermaritzburg | 1 month | Thambi’s son
Ama Naidoo | 1946 | Pietermaritzburg | 1 month | Thambi’s son
Sagun Pillay | 1946 | Pietermaritzburg | 1 day | Thambi’s son
Shanthie Naidoo | 1946 | Pietermaritzburg | 1 day | Thambi’s son
Roy Naidoo | 1946-1950 | The Fort | 2 sentences | Thambi’s son
Thailema Pillay | 1946-1952 | Pietermaritzburg | 1 month | Thambi’s son
Ama Naidoo | 1946-1952 | Pietermaritzburg | 1 month | Thambi’s son
Shanthie Naidoo | 1946-1969 | Pietermaritzburg | 1 day | Thambi’s son
Indres Naidoo | 1946-1973 | Marshall Square | 10 years | Thambi’s son
Murthie Naidoo | 1946 | Pietermaritzburg | 2 days | Thambi’s son
Kuben Naidoo | 1946-1989 | Pietermaritzburg | 1 day | Thambi’s son
Shan Naidoo | 1946-1989 | Pietermaritzburg | 1 day | Thambi’s son
Prema Naidoo | 1946 | Pietermaritzburg | 1 day | Thambi’s son
Parmesh Everitt | 1946 | Pietermaritzburg | 1 day | Thambi’s son
Issy Dinat | 1946 | Pietermaritzburg | 1 day | Thambi’s son
Nava Pillay | 1946 | Pietermaritzburg | 1 day | Thambi’s son
Thushan Padayachee | 1946 | Pietermaritzburg | 1 day | Thambi’s son
Thillay Pillay | 1946 | Pietermaritzburg | 1 day | Thambi’s son
Parmesh Everitt | 1946 | Pietermaritzburg | 1 day | Thambi’s son
Shan Naidoo | 1946 | Pietermaritzburg | 1 day | Thambi’s son

The hardship my mother suffered all these years, going from one prison to another to visit her sons and daughters. Is there another mother who has seen the inside of more prisons than Ama?”

Indres Naidoo

Prison was our home address

The Old Fort prison at Constitution Hill in Johannesburg housed three generations of Naidoos: Thambi, Kuppusamy, Roy, and his children Indres, Shanthie and Prema.