

United action in the liberation Struggle produced legions of tireless activists.



Mariemuthoo Pragalathan 'MP' Naicker has earned an honoured place in the annals of South African freedom. This year marks the centenary of his birth. The 1860 Heritage Centre, an agency of the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Arts and Culture, hosted an online tribute on July 26. Judge Thumba Pillay, who was part of the tribute, reflects on the life's work of MP Naicker

THERE are just a handful of us who survived the tumultuous days of the liberation Struggle going back to the 1950s and early '60s.

The doyen of them all, until a few days ago, was Andrew Mlangeni, whose passing will be mourned by the nation.

Of those remaining, as far as I can recall, are Swaminathan Gounden, now well into his nineties, and of course, the good Reverend Desmond Tutu, Albie Sachs, Frene Ginwala and a somewhat younger Mac Maharaj.

All of which means that there are fewer and fewer people left to share their personal knowledge and experiences of the stresses and strains of the freedom Struggle, its up and downs, its anecdotes of torture, its solitary confinement and of operating undercover, its imprisonment, its impact on family lives, and the ultimate sacrifice itself, death.

The family of Mariemuthoo Pragalathan ("MP"), who passed on at age 56 on April 29, 1977 when engaged in work for both the ANC and the SACP, have every reason, as do all freedom-loving citizens, to celebrate the 100th anniversary of his birth which fell on Tuesday, July 28.

Much is known and has been written of MP's contribution to the liberation Struggle. And those interested in liberation history would do well to access the archives of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, which (as the University of Durban-Westville) some years ago had presented to it by the Naicker family 17 bound volumes of weekly newspapers printed between the 1940s and the early 1960s, in the compiling of which MP played a seminal role as activist, writer and journalist.

The introductory brochure titled *Don't Mourn, Mobilise*, is excellently prepared and presented through the efforts of Dr Dasarath Chetty and Pamela Adams in collaboration with MP's wife, Saro; his son, Dr Prenaven Naicker; and most extensively and significantly by his daughter and confidant, Suganya. (I must here acknowledge some source material from that publication.)

More than 40 years have passed since MP's tragic passing from a heart attack while on his way to the German Democratic Republic to have the ANC official journal *Sechaba* printed. Now on this milestone, when he would have turned 100, it is only befitting that we reflect on the history of a man who played such a seminal



MP NAICKER: 100 years



ABOVE: Family portrait: MP Naicker, seated, at 4 years of age.

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LEFT: Accused number 56, treason trial. MP Naicker Collection.

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MP NAICKER and family, Saro Naicker, Suganya and Preneven, before they went into exile in 1965. This picture was taken at Suganya's ear-piercing ceremony. MP had just arrived after playing a game of tennis.

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LEFT: MP Naicker addressing the Anti-Apartheid Committee on Racism in 1971.



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role in the freedoms we enjoy today.

Recalling my final days as a young student, when the political icons of the time, the Monty Naickers, the Yusuf Dadoos, the JN Singhs, the Ismail Meers, the Dr Goonams, the Chief Luthulis and the Fatima Meers were household names, it was just a matter of time as a university freshman in 1955 and by dint of good fortune that I came to meet and befriend a firebrand of the likes of a Mac Maharaj, a staid and measured MJ Naidoo and Pat Samuels, a passionate and committed Kader Hassim (Essack) and others of the ilk of a Khalaki Sello, Ernest Galo, Raymond Kunene and Johnny Makhathini.

As my political activism gained momentum, I was drawn to MP like a host of other university activists, whom MP must have identified as having the potential and the interest to distribute, sell and disseminate liberation literature, many written under his own hand.

From a brief a description of MP's early history, we know that from as young as 18, he took to the writings of Marx and joined the Communist Party, and by 1944 he took up a job as a full-time trade union organiser and in the same year joined the Anti-Segregation Council in which his cousin, Dr Monty Naicker, was a key figure.

By 1946, he had risen to be one of the key figures in organising the Passive Resistance Campaign and edited the Passive Resistance Bulletin (Flash), himself serving two terms of month-long sentences as a passive resister.

Moving on in time, we learn that in 1952 he served a month in hard labour for having participated in the Defiance Campaign, at which time he formed a close friendship with Chief Albert Luthuli. It is widely known that



FRONT cover of *Sechaba*, official organ of the ANC, 1977. MP Naicker was the ANC director of information and publicity and editor of the *Sechaba*, 1966 – 1977.

he was one of the 156 accused in the 1956 treason trial, which followed the compiling of the Freedom Charter at Kliptown in 1955.

Thereafter came the turbulent '60s, with MP serving two lengthy periods in solitary detention, a trial in Ladysmith with several others, at the end of which he was acquitted, and then exile, and finally and unfortunately, an untimely death before freedom was won.

There was a side to MP which many an activist will recall with great fondness: his almost magical gift to interact with and befriend the young,

and if one looks back to the history of the time, he had a host of youngsters virtually "eating out of his hand", in a just cause.

He was gifted with an engaging and friendly smile and a God-given gift of being able to engage with the young, especially those who understood the yoke of oppression.

And so it was that I was drawn by his magnetic personality, much like many a youngster who stood trial as part of the first batch of the Natal Command of Umkhonto weSizwe.

As best I know, only three are still alive: Ebrahim Ebrahim, Sunny Singh and Siva Pillay. As young enthusiasts of the movement, we would make the weekly trip to Lodson House to collect our supply of *New Age* or whatever was then legal to sell to our regular customers and supporters.

There were those occasions when the publication was under threat of confiscation or seizure by the security police and we would collect our papers from a sympathetic café owner across the road, a Mr Manilal, at the corner of Saville and Grey streets. Also at Lodson House, a great journalist/photographer and social buddy of MP was GR Naidoo ("GR") of *Drum* magazine fame, a legend in his own right.

As I progressed with my studies and served articles with a firm of attorneys also in Lakhani Chambers, where coincidentally the Natal Indian Council (NIC) and the South African Congress of Trade Unions also occupied office space, I grew closer to both MP and GR (who featured me in one of his articles in *Drum*), and got yet closer to MP when I eventually became president of the SRC and finally an executive member of the NIC in 1961.

As bannings of the NIC leadership under the Suppression of Communism

Act gained momentum there were fewer and fewer left to address protest meetings.

The pressure on me gained momentum, as would appear from security police intelligence files, addressing meetings on December 2, 1962; February 7, 1963; April 1, 1963; April 25, 1963; as a speaker on behalf of the Africa Day committee to commemorate Africa Day on April 15; and yet again on June 15, 1963, as NIC speaker at a joint NIC/Sactu protest meeting in opposition to the General Laws Amendment Act.

In between all this, MP entrusted me to undertake sensitive missions about which I have written in preceding articles. And so it came as no surprise that at the end of it all, and when there was virtually no one left in the NIC executive in Durban, on December 31, 1963, in the midst of the Natal MK trial, I was served with my first five-year banning order.

MP was a trusted cadre of the SACP and very close to his cousin Dr Monty Naicker. MP's arrest and detention preceding his trial with several others in Ladysmith marked a turning point in his life in that it meant leaving his beloved South Africa where he was born a century ago, on June 28, 1920.

About the time of the Ladysmith trial, MP had me pay bail of R500 each for Eric Singh (now late) and Basil Weaich, about whom I have not heard since.

His indefinite detention in solitary, the endurance, the stresses and strains of worrying about family, the impact of detention and torture on fellow combatants in the Struggle and the possibility of a lifetime in prison are all recorded in his clandestine prison writings.

They make poignant reading.