Dr Goonam - South African Medic, Feminist, Indian Nationalist, Freedom Fighter (1906-1999)

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A cigarette-smoking single mother of three, who graduated from Edinburgh in 1936, ran numerous successful medical practices and dressed in the cutting-edge cosmopolitan fashions of the day, Dr Kesaveloo Goonaruthnum Naidoo cut through the male-dominated black politics of 1940s South Africa.[1] A feminist, intellectual and communist - more commonly known simply as Dr Goonam - she led a dynamic, outward-looking Indian nationalism in South Africa alongside fellow Edinburgh graduates Dr Monty Naicker and Dr Yusuf Dadoo. Together, they argued for an Indian nationalism that critically argued for the role of women in the broader black liberation struggle, assured Goonam become the first woman to attain the vice-presidency of the Natal Indian Congress, and galvanised South Africa’s 1946 Passive Resistance Campaign.

Whilst there was initially “great objection to Dr Goonam’s western style of dressing and her outrageous habit of smoking in public”, on her death in 1999, Goonam was commemorated as “the first black woman doctor and freedom fighter”[2]. But Goonam should also be remembered for asserting the central role of women in South African liberation politics, telling a meeting in 1946: “Britain is an example where women sacrifice their hearth and home giving their services for the war. Women in India are in the vanguard of the freedom struggle and their achievements have been remarkable. Nearer home our African women took
a militant stand in the Industrial [and Commercial Workers’ Union] under the leadership of Clements Kadalie. The time has now come for our women to throw in our lot with our men to save our homes and our families.”[3]

Born in Durban, 1906, Goonam first engaged with Indian nationalist politics, in Edinburgh, and during the 1930s clearly understood herself as part of a broader, increasingly agitative, Indian Ocean world. Studying alongside a “great melee of young people from all parts of the world - every tinge of black, yellow and white; Indians from India, Trinidad, Mauritius, Fiji and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Africans from the vast number of African States as well as Egyptians, Arabs, Chinese and Japanese”, Goonam felt “world came to Scotland!” but “the most compelling influence was that of the Indian students who were intensely patriotic, highly critical of the British and passionately supportive of Gandhi. It was very easy to feel kinship with them for I, too, was Indian. I was attracted to the firebrands in the college and came to feel a strong affiliation with India”.[4] Having led a ‘closeted’ early life in Durban, where I had rarely come face to face with the indignities of racism, I understood what it was and responded wholeheartedly to their arguments against the British empire, and their commitment to freedom. Winds from the world blew around me and ideas of justice and injustice, freedom and exploitation began to excite my imagination and awaken my political consciousness. I was attracted to the firebrands in the college and came to feel a strong affiliation with India. I attended political protest meetings and applauded the rhetoric against tyranny and the British empire.[5]
Goonam in Dublin having passed her midwifery exam, fellow South African Indian Monty Naicker is in the centre.

On her return to South Africa in 1936, Goonam increasingly focused on the role of women within the Indian nationalist movement. Challenging the established hierarchy of the Natal
Indian Congress alongside Naicker, Goonam engaged in a “battle royale”, in print and in hustings, against more conservative, business-orientated Indian leaders.[7] Her activism ignited by the calls of Indian nationalist women, Cissie Gool and Sarojini Naidu, for gender equality and non-racial unity, Goonam established the Natal branch of the Non-European United Front (NEUF) along with Cassim Amra, DA Seedat, HA Naidoo, P Tsele, S Rubin and Stephen Dlamini in 1939, but this programme of cooperative action was crippled by the “opposition of the Old Congress”, who held up “its hands in horror” at the programme of the NEUF.[8]

Marginalised by the existing Indian nationalist leadership, Goonam relied heavily on such alternative organisations to rethink Indian politics and challenge the established leadership. In an attempt to “fill the social and intellectual void I experienced since leaving Edinburgh” Goonam engaged in the CPSA, the Anti-Segregation Council, the Left Book Club and the Liberal Studies Group which all “had overlapping memberships.” And these overlapping intellectual groups became key to the Anti-Segregation Council’s take-over of the Natal Indian Congress. Elections in 1945 saw Naicker voted as the new leader, but whilst Goonam “was prominent on the platform and there was a large turnout of women at the rally, we, did not vote on that day as the NIC’s constitution denied that right to women.” At the very first meeting after the election of Naicker, however, “an urgent amendment was made to the archaic constitution, whereby women were given full membership on an equal basis with men.”[9]

Having captured the Natal Indian Congress, in 1946, Edinburgh graduates Goonam, Naicker and Dadoo launched the Passive Resistance Campaign - in which Indian women became a leading political force. In Coolie Doctor: An Autobiography, Goonam reflected: “While the victory bells rang in Europe declaring peace, the South African Parliament declared war on Indians and introduced the Asiatic Land Tenure and Representation Bill, which proposed the segregation of Indians into ghettos…We called it the Ghetto Act and in a leaflet informed our people of its diabolical intent.”[10] Indian women were central to these new struggles. On first day of the campaign, Goonam recalled “Dr Dadoo and Dr Naicker, supported by a group of women from the Transvaal, including Zainab Asvat, a young medical student, were our first volunteers. A huge crowd walked with them to the resistance plot. The procession was headed by a large banner which read, ‘We Shall Resist’.”[11] Goonam herself led the march on the third day with Rev Michael Scott of Johannesburg - which resulted in her arrest. When addressing a meeting in Pietermaritzburg after her release, “as we entered the hall, a deafening applause broke out followed by a catchy ditty with the names of Dr Dadoo, Naicker and Goonam….We later learnt that we had unwittingly set the pace for a woman’s liberation movement…wives had defied their husbands and joined us.”[12]
South African politics rapidly shifted in the years 1946-1948 that Goonam spent in and out of prison during the Passive Resistance Campaign, and when she was finally “released from prison to a South Africa that faced the atrocities of apartheid” she felt politically “we had to reorganise and reorient ourselves…the Durban Riots that followed, made it clear to us that never again would we take up the government as Indians alone. Our survival lay in a Non-European United Front.”[13] Whilst Goonam had questioned the ‘Three Doctors Pact’ - signed by Edinburgh alumni Albert Xuma, President of the African National Congress, Monty Naicker, President of the Natal Indian Congress, and Yusuf Dadoo, President of the Transvaal Indian Congress - as ‘premature’ in 1947, by 1949 she saw non-racial solidarity as the only way forward.

Yet Goonam, herself, was also a crucial pioneer woman in South African politics, a ‘fourth’ Edinburgh doctor, leading the forward march of women who were increasingly integral to the broader non-racial Congress Movement - most notably coming to the fore during the protest of 20,000 women through Pretoria in August 1956 - even if the movement remained dominated by male leaders. And, at the same time, she was also a pioneer woman in medicine, working full time and raising a family, through fraught circumstances. Connecting the overlapping politics of Indian Ocean, Southern African and British worlds, in particular the voices of important Indian and British feminists, Goonam demanded democracy and equality of opportunity not only from British imperialists and South African white governments, but also from Indian nationalists and the medical profession.
Goonam addressing a rally during the 1946 Passive Resistance Campaign

References


[2] J. Kindra, ‘Coolie Doctor Succumbs at 92’, The Leader, 25 September 1999, cited p.230 of Burton; Goonam in her autobiography claims that Waradea Abdurahman, the daughter of Dr Abdullah Abdurahman leader of the Cape Town-based African Political Organisation, also studied at Edinburgh, although Glasgow also claims her as an alumni. Lovejoy notes, in the early 20th century whilst there “were universities with good medical schools in South Africa - for white students…black ones had to go foreign countries to qualify. No mention is made in the [1930s] Balfour Report of any native women with a medical degree.” Only in “1940, during World War II, the University of Witwatersrand, up at Johannesburg, was induced to admit qualified African students students to its medical school. Dr Mary Susan Malahlele graduated in August, 1947 - the first woman doctor of native blood to qualify in South Africa…” E.P. Lovejoy, *Women Doctors of the World*, (New York, 1957), pp.254-258.


