

Women in Protest: Indian Activism in the Wake of Soweto, 1970s-1980s

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Abstract

The Soweto Uprising of 1976 was a pivotal event in South Africa's history of resistance. Before the Uprising, Indian women's participation in politics was limited to a small group of women, who embraced non-racialism and hence, affiliated with political parties such as the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUF), the Natal Indian Congress (NIC), and the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC). The mass student protests in Soweto, however, re-awakened many Indian women to the shared realities of racial oppression and inspired a new wave of resistance in the liberation struggle. This article utilises archival sources, digital interviews, newspapers, and secondary sources, focusing on Natal, and arguing that the Soweto Uprising of 1976 had a profound impact on the political consciousness of South African women of Indian origin¹. It marked a significant shift in their political identity and activism. Early participation, before 1976, was limited to a few, politically well-connected and educated individuals. The uprising of 1976 saw the emergence of a more assertive, vocal, and visible radical group of Indian women who took on leadership roles and challenged gendered norms. It broadened their political ideologies within the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). It hastened their growing involvement in student movements, civic organisations, and national campaigns, notably through the revitalised NIC and the later United Democratic Front (UDF). This paper contributes to the growing historiography on liberation narratives, which seeks to integrate the role of minorities in their efforts to strengthen non-racial unity and dismantle apartheid, thereby providing a

¹ Under apartheid, non-white South Africans were classified into racial categories. The Population Registration Act of 1950, one of the cornerstone laws of apartheid in South Africa, classified South Africans into these racial categories: White, African (Native or Bantu), Indian (people of Indian descent), and Coloured (mixed race). From the late 1960s, 'Black' emerged as a political identity encompassing all groups oppressed by apartheid. These categories were apartheid-era social constructs rather than natural or fixed identities. The term Indian and Indian women is used here in this historical context.

broad understanding of political resistance in apartheid South Africa.

Keywords: Soweto; Women; Indians; Riots; Black Consciousness

Introduction

The Soweto Uprising of June 1976 marked a decisive turning point in South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle. Although it began as a protest by African high school learners against the implementation of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, its repercussions reverberated far beyond Soweto and far beyond the youth who first demonstrated. Among those profoundly affected were Indian women.² Yet, in the vast corpus of literature, its effects and impact on Indian women have been eclipsed by scholarly works that have largely focused on the causes, effects, legacy, memory, commemorative, and transnational aspects of the 1976 uprising.³ There is scholarly consensus that the event was a turning point in anti-apartheid political struggles, that it "changed the course of history in South Africa";⁴ in "defining [the] role of youth in South Africa"⁵ and a "watershed in the national liberation struggle".⁶ Gendered discussions of the event are few and far between, with past and recent scholarly studies seeking to problematise how gender hierarchies shaped women's involvement in the uprising and how the apartheid state structures used 1976 to malign the political identity of African women activists.⁷

² J Brown, *The road to Soweto: Resistance and the Uprising of 16 June 1976* (Johannesburg, Jacana, 2016); J Seroto, "Analysing the presentation of the 1976 Soweto Uprising in Grade 9 History textbooks", *Africa Education Review*, 15(4), 2018, pp. 1-19.

³ R Butterworth, "South Africa after Soweto", *New Zealand International Review*, 3(1), 1978, pp. 26-28; G Baines, "The master narrative of South Africa's liberation struggle: Remembering and forgetting June 16, 1976", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 40(2), 2007, pp. 283-302; S Gukelberger, "Youth and the politics of generational memories: The Soweto uprising in South Africa", *Ateliers d'anthropologie*, 47, 2020, <https://journals.openedition.org/ateliers/12436>, accessed 1 March 2026; AJ Hall, "Black students and the U.S. anti-apartheid movements on campus, 1976-1985", *Zanj: The Journal of Critical Global South Studies*, 6(1), 2022, pp. 8-28; J Herbst, "Prospects for revolution in South Africa", *Political Science Quarterly*, 103(4), 1988-1989, pp. 665-685; RE Johnson, "The day that fell off the calendar: 16 June, South African newspapers, and the making of a national holiday, 1977-1996", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 42(6), 2016, pp. 1143-1160; J Brown, *The road to Soweto...* D Mokonyane, "Soweto and The Next Perspectives", *Présence Africaine*, 140, 1986, pp. 25-34; H Pohlandt-McCormick, "'I saw a nightmare...' Violence and the construction of memory (Soweto, June 16, 1976)", *History and Theory*, 39(4), 2000, pp. 23-44; J Seroto, "Analysing the Presentation...", *Africa Education Review*, 15(4), 2018, pp. 1-19.

⁴ R Butterworth, "South Africa after Soweto", *New Zealand International Review*, 3(1), 1978, p.26; G Baines, "The master narrative...", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 40(2), 2007, p. 283; SM Ndlovu, "The Soweto Uprising" In *The road to democracy in South Africa*, vol. 2, 2004, pp. 320-321, <http://www.sadet.co.za/docs/RTD/vol2/Volume%2020-%20chapter%207.pdf>, accessed 10 March 2026.

⁵ G Baines, "The master narrative...", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 40(2), 2007, p. 283.

⁶ J Seroto, "Analysing the presentation...", *African Education Review*, 15(4), 2018, p.1.

⁷ H Pohlandt-McCormick, "Controlling woman: Winnie Mandela and the 1976 Soweto Uprising", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 33(3), 2000, pp. 585-614; E Bridger, "Soweto's female

Scholarly work on the roles and contributions of Indian women in South Africa's political struggles still remains under-researched. Past and current historiography have largely focused on biographies, autobiographies, and general accounts of political activism. Scholarly work on Indian women's political resistance, at the turn of the century, notably the Satyagraha campaigns between 1907 and 1913, argues that their political activism was limited and temporary. Women's participation was largely a response to specific socio-political conditions. Constrained by a patriarchal social order, their activism was deemed acceptable, and even encouraged, because it was framed as defending religion and fulfilling domestic responsibilities rather than challenging gender norms.⁸ Since 1994, a growing body of biographies and autobiographies by and about Indian women has, to some extent, assisted in highlighting their political contributions. These works illuminate women's experiences of family, race, class, gender, sexuality, and identity, particularly under apartheid, while foregrounding their agency in navigating systems of oppression. Notable examples include the works of Zubeida Jaffer, Pregs Govender, Amina Cachalia, and Sam Naidu.⁹

In recent years, a growing body of scholarship has expanded the historiography to include oral histories and feminist frameworks to highlight how Indian women navigated and assimilated their ethnic identity within the anti-apartheid struggle.¹⁰ Govinden's *Sister Outsiders* offers a feminist intervention by recovering the neglected writings of Indian women under apartheid. Govinden's work highlights the complexities of identity formation and the ways women navigated racial, gendered, and political oppression.¹¹ Lallas's study of Indian members of *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK) examines how activists reconciled ethnic identity with political commitment, contributing to understandings of Indian participation

comrades: Gender, youth and violence in South Africa's township uprisings, 1984–1990", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 44(4), 2018, pp. 559–574.

⁸ C Walker, *Women and resistance in South Africa* (New Africa Books, 1991); D Chetty, "'Sammy' and 'Mary' go to Gaol: Indian women and South African politics in the 1940s", Unpublished paper presented at the In: Conference on 'Women and Gender', 30 January – 2 February 1991, University of Natal, Durban, pp. 1–24.

⁹ A Cachalia, *When hope and history rhyme: An autobiography* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2013); P Govender, *Love and courage: A story of insubordination* (Johannesburg, Jacana, 2007); Z Jaffer, *Our generation* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2003); S Naidu, *Navi Pillay* (Arcadia Books: New York, 2011).

¹⁰ P Naidoo, *156 hands that built South Africa* (Durban: Art Printers, 2006); A Diesel, *Shakti: Stories of Indian women in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2001); B Govinden, 'Sister outsiders' *The representation of identity and difference in selected writings by South African Indian women* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2008); D Rajab *Women–South Africans of Indian origin* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2011); S Gunn, *Knocking on: Mothers and daughters in struggle in South Africa* (Cape Town: Human Rights Media Centre, 2008). S Haricharan and S Gunn (eds.), *Voices from the underground* (Cape Town: Penguin, 2019).

¹¹ B Govinden, 'Sister outsiders' *The representation of identity...*

in the liberation struggle.¹² Devi Rajab's *Women – South Africans of Indian Origin* documents the achievements of Indian women across politics, academia, media, and culture.¹³

The discussion around the impact of the Soweto Uprising in 1976 on Indian women is rare and is often fleetingly explored.¹⁴ Rarer still, are the lived experiences and voices of Indian women on the event. When examined, it is cursory, framed within the discourses of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM).¹⁵ The current article addresses current historiographical gaps by exploring and documenting how the Soweto Uprising of 1976 served as a significant catalyst for the political re-awakening of Indian women. The Uprising re-awakened many Indian women to the shared realities of racial and gender oppression, as well as a rethinking of the 'Indian' identity and how they positioned themselves within the larger political struggles. The impact of 1976 was, however, long-term, rather than short-term, most noticeable in their grassroots activism, through civic and women's organisations. It inspired a new wave of resistance from a constituency that remained on the periphery of political activism: mothers; wives; housewives; university students; and high school learners. This article expands liberation historiography by foregrounding minority women's efforts to build non-racial unity and challenge apartheid, offering a broader understanding of political resistance in South Africa.

The current article is based on archival sources, digital interviews, face-to-face oral interviews with women activists, newspapers, and secondary sources. One of the most invaluable oral collections utilised was the *Voices of Resistance* housed at the Gandhi-Luthuli Documentation Centre on the Westville campus at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The project captures the voices of political activists involved in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. These oral histories are significant because they highlight ongoing Indo-African unity during the anti-apartheid struggle. In addition, both telephonic and face-to-face interviews were conducted by the author with Indian women activists between 2009 and 2012, and provided insights into individual political experiences. Moreover, it

¹² V Lalla, "Being Indian, being MK: An exploration of the experiences and ethnic identities of Indian South African *Umkhonto we sizwe* Members" (MA thesis, Rhodes University, 2011).

¹³ D Rajab, *Women...*

¹⁴ DS Dhillon, "*The Indians of Natal-resistance to apartheid, 1971-1985*" (PhD dissertation, National University of Singapore, 1999); K Naidoo, "The politics of youth resistance in the 1980s: The dilemmas of a differentiated Durban", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18(1), 1991, pp. 148-165; V Padayachee, "Struggle, collaboration and democracy: The 'Indian community' in South Africa, 1860-1999", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 34(7), 1999, pp. 393-395; G Vahed and A Desai, "A case of 'strategic ethnicity'? The Natal Indian congress in the 1970s", *African Historical Review*, 46(1), 2014, pp. 22-47.

¹⁵ K Moodley, "The continued impact of Black Consciousness in South Africa", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 29(2), 1991, pp. 237-251; S Moodley (ed.), *Time to remember-reflections of women from the Black Consciousness Movement* (Durban: Women For awareness, 2018).

illuminated how Indian women navigated their ethnic identity, and how being 'Indian' and South African was contested, negotiated, and embraced at different historical periods. Whilst there are potential discrepancies between personal memories and documentary evidence, these oral accounts remain valuable for revealing how individuals understood and experienced both their own lives and broader political realities. Community newspapers such as *Indian Opinion*, *The Leader*, *Flash*, the *Graphic*, *Post*, and *Sechaba* were important sources, as they provided eyewitness accounts and historical context of the Uprising and how it shaped Indian women's political consciousness. Collectively, these sources proved indispensable, recovering silenced and overlooked narratives that broaden one's understanding of liberation narratives.

Historical context: Indian women under apartheid

To understand the impact of 1976, it is essential to situate Indian women within the broader historical context of South African history. Indian women's resistance to oppression and political and social inequities can be traced back to the 1860s. Indentured women, who arrived in 1860 to work on Natal's coastal plantations, were subjected to physical, verbal, and sexual abuse. Working as domestic servants and as fieldhands on plantations, whilst others did surface work on the coal mines in the Natal Midlands, some employers were at times abusive and exploitative. These women lived in poorly ventilated, overcrowded conditions, and employers at times withheld wages and rations.¹⁶ However, some women resisted exploitation by means of desertion, reporting late for work and submitting grievances to the Protector of Immigrants.¹⁷

By the turn of the century, however, agrarian labour activism gave way to broader political activism. The myriad grievances that Indians in Natal, as in other provinces, faced were to galvanise the community into protest actions. For example, former indentured labourers were forced to pay the dreaded £3 (British Pound) tax, introduced in 1895 and implemented in 1902, which was a means to coerce ex-indentured labourers into re-indenturing.¹⁸ 'Passenger' Indians (who paid their own fare to Natal), who followed in the wake of indentured labourers, were equally targeted, because their long working hours, thrifty living habits and competitive pricing made them a formidable competitor to the

¹⁶ J Beall, "Women under indentured labour in Colonial Natal 1860–1911", C Walker (ed.), *Women and gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, (Cape Town, David Philip, 1990), pp. 147–167.

¹⁷ J Beall, "Women under Indentured Labour...", C Walker, *Women and gender...*, pp.147–167.

¹⁸ South African History Online, ; *Indian Opinion*. 1992.

colonial trader.¹⁹ Subsequently, the Natal government, upon receiving self-rule in 1893, introduced a series of legislation that hindered their mobility, trade, and political franchise. Similar oppressive laws were passed in the Transvaal (now Gauteng), most notably the Asiatic Law Amendment, dubbed the 'Black Act', which provided for the compulsory registration of all Indians.²⁰ These measures galvanised the Indian community to resist and led to the first Satyagraha campaign between 1907 and 1911.

During the first Satyagraha campaign, conservative gender norms significantly restricted Indian women's participation. The vast majority of Indian women were housewives, while others worked as domestic servants or plantation labourers. Access to education was also severely limited, restricting their economic opportunities. Despite their marginalised position within the household and wider society, women expressed a strong desire to join the resistance, but were denied the opportunity. Gandhi and the wider Indian community operated within a masculinised notion of resistance that defined political activism as a male responsibility. Since the 'Black Act' directly targeted Indian men, husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers, resistance was constructed as a male obligation, effectively barring women from active involvement. Gandhi himself acknowledged that several women had volunteered to join the struggle and even accompany imprisoned Satyagrahis to jail. However, he opposed their participation, arguing that it, "...would be derogatory to our manhood if we sacrificed our women in resisting a law, which was directed only against men."²¹ Thus, Gandhi, while challenging racial discrimination, upheld traditional gender beliefs that confined women to supportive roles. These included cooking meals and providing moral and material support to Satyagrahi families. Women also mobilised through organisations that served as important platforms for challenging the government's racial policies. It gave rise to the Durban Indian Women's Association (1907), and the Transvaal Indian Women's Association (TIWA) in 1909.²²

However, by the second campaign in 1913, women's participation could not be denied, largely because the two key issues, the 3£ tax and the invalidation of non-Christian marriages, severely affected both indentured and 'passenger' Indian women. Indian women's reactions

¹⁹ S Bhana and J Brain, *Setting down roots, Indian migrants in South Africa, 1860-1911* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand Press, 1990), pp. 73-75

²⁰ *Indian Opinion*, "South African British Indian Committee and the Registration Act", 2 November 1907; *Indian Opinion*, "The Registration Law", 28 December 1907; "Passive Resistance", *Indian Opinion*, 31 August 1907; *Indian Opinion*, "Mass Meeting in Johannesburg", 4 January 1908.

²¹ MK Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, (Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 1961), p. 275.

²² MK Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, p. 275; *Indian Opinion*, "Indian Women's Association", 6 November 1909; *Indian Opinion*, "Notes on the Transvaal Struggle", 10 April 1909; *Indian Opinion*, "A Fruit of Passive Resistance", 28 October 1911.

were bold and vociferous: they were willing to offer “stubborn satyagraha” and “suffer imprisonment”.²³ The campaign, launched in September 1913, united women from all walks of life, students, teenagers, wives, mothers, grandmothers, domestic workers, hawkers, and labourers from sugar and tea estates as well as the coal mines.²⁴ Defying traditional roles, they risked arrest by crossing the Natal border, entering the Transvaal at Volksrust, without permits and flouting inter-provincial immigration laws; they heckled the police by challenging municipal by-laws on hawking. They also rallied indentured workers in the mines and on the railways in the Natal Midlands, strengthening the movement’s reach and impact. The campaign was successful in achieving limited concessions, most notably the scrapping of tax and the recognition of Indian customary marriages.²⁵

In the campaign of 1913, Indian women could not be denied participation, because they were responding to specific grievances: the £3 tax drove some ex-indentured women to poverty, and the non-recognition of non-Christian marriages was a slur on ‘passenger’ Indian women as it invalidated their status as a wife and mother within Indian customary marriages.²⁶ Indian women’s persistent demands and determination made it clear to Gandhi and the wider Indian community that their participation in the 1913 campaign could no longer be denied, “...Not only could the women now be not prevented from joining the struggle, but we decided even to invite them to come into line along with the men.”²⁷ However, in the aftermath of the Satyagraha campaign of 1913, the women’s political activism dissipated. This was primarily due to enduring patriarchal norms that still prevailed in Indian society. Conservative cultural values continued to confine women to subordinate roles, limiting their public engagement to welfare and charitable organisations such as the Durban Indian Women’s Association (DIWA), the Red Cross, and Friends of the Sick Association (FOSA).²⁸ These organisations were viewed as acceptable, because they extended women’s domestic responsibilities into the public sphere. While they provided opportunities for leadership and community involvement, women remained

²³ MK Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, p. 277; *Indian Opinion*, “Indian Women as Passive Resisters”, 10 May 1913.

²⁴ *Indian Opinion*, “Indians on Strike”, 22 October 1913; MK Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi, Publications Division, Government of India, 1958-1994), vol. 12, p. 512.

²⁵ The Indians’ Relief Act, a negotiated settlement between General Smuts and Gandhi in 1914, recognised Indian customary marriages, even though polygamous, but only one wife was allowed to enter the Union. Source: *Indian Opinion*, 25 March 1914.

²⁶ *Indian Opinion*, “The Marriage Imbroglia”, 12 April 1913.

²⁷ MK Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, p. 277

²⁸ *The Leader*, “Sterling Work Done to Uplift Community”, 28 September 1990; *The Leader*, “Girl Strike Blow to Make Egos”, 22 August 1986; *Fiat Lux*, “Durban Indian women’s Association”, June-July 1979, vol. 14, No. 5, p. 14.

largely reformist and apolitical, reinforcing rather than transforming existing gender hierarchies and male dominance.²⁹

However, with the outbreak of World War II and the gradual urbanisation of both African and Indian women in the 1940s, there was a shift towards greater politicisation and non-racial collective resistance. War conditions led to rent and food hikes, food shortages, and increased poverty amongst the working class. Many African and Indian women entered factory employment and trade unions. Together they confronted labour and gender exploitation, and shared motherhood struggles. It laid the early foundation of working-class activism for Indian women.³⁰

This was, to some extent, noticeable in their participation in the Passive Resistance campaign between 1946-1948 against the discriminatory legislation, the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act (1946). Dubbed the 'Ghetto Act', it restricted Indian land ownership, as well as the purchase and occupation in specific areas in Natal. Many Indian women, among them Dr Goonam, Zainab Asvat, Suriakala Patel, and many others courted arrest and were imprisoned.³¹ These movements, however, remained largely 'Indian', despite some support from whites and Africans. Early forms of meaningful, collective non-racial activism were minimal, at best superficial, largely because the two key political bodies, the African National Congress (ANC) and the National Indian Congress (NIC), representing the interests of Africans and Indians respectively, operated in relative isolation, responding primarily to legislation affecting their own constituencies, with little attempt to forge broader political solidarity against shared oppression. Both groups were denied the vote, treated as secondary citizens, and their mobility restricted (passes for Africans and permits for Indians seeking to travel between the provinces).³²

Despite this political setback, there were efforts by progressive Indians to forge closer relationships with like-minded individuals across racial groups. In the 1930s, a group of educated Indians formed a multi-racial organisation, known as the Liberal Study Group (LSG), where weekly regular discussions were held on a range of topics. It included, people of diverse political ideologies, moderates, liberals, and radicals. Indian women,

²⁹ J Beal, "Women under indentured labour...", C Walker (ed.), *Women and gender...*, p. 107; D Chetty, "'Sammy' and 'Mary' go to Gaol", pp. 1-23

³⁰ J Beal, "Women under indentured labour...", C Walker (ed.), *Women and gender...*, pp. 41-42.

³¹ Historical Papers, Research Archive, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (Digital Collection), *Flash*, July 1946, AD 1715-23-9-3-001, South African Institute of Race Relations; *Flash*, 14 April 1947, AD1715-23-9-3-001, South African Institute of Race Relations.

³² J Beal, "Women under indentured labour...", C Walker (ed.), *Women and gender in South Africa*, pp. 33-34; D Chetty, "'Sammy' and 'Mary' go to aol", pp. 1-23.

though their numbers were negligible within the group, consisted of young, educated, and progressive women, some of whom came from middle-class and politically connected families. Among them were Dr Goonam and Halima Ahmed Nagdee. Dr Goonam was a feisty, Tamil-speaking Hindu who qualified in Edinburgh, Scotland, as a medical doctor. A passionate activist, she drew sharp criticism from conservative members of society for her chain-smoking habits and consumption of alcohol.³³ Nagdee, a devout Muslim, had little formal education, but abhorred the injustice and discrimination that prevailed in society. She was an avid reader who submitted articles in the local press on diverse topics such as poetry, history, purdah, and women's education. Writing under the pseudonym H. Ahmed in the local community newspaper, *Indian Views* column "Muslim Girl", Nagdee articulated radical critiques of male dominance and advocated for women's emancipation. Goonam and Nagdee were strong advocates of non-racialism and believed it could be achieved only through political solidarity.³⁴ Goonam, in the 1940s noted, "it was already becoming apparent to us that we would only succeed against oppressive race laws through a non-European united front".³⁵ Many Indian women later became members of the non-racial organisations such as the National Liberation League (NLL); the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUF), later revived as NEUM, with branches throughout South Africa. For example, Nagdee, became secretary of the NLL and was actively involved in the NEUF in the Cape. In August 1938, she was a speaker at the Non-European Women's Suffrage League and organised a Laundry Workers Union.³⁶

Moreover, the gradual shift towards non-racialism must also be viewed against the framework of the 'Indian' identity. By the 1940s, a vast majority of Indians were born in South Africa, and viewed South Africa as their 'home', as the place of their birth. They recognised that political change in South Africa had to come from within, and that unity among oppressed groups was essential. In a letter dated 4 July 1940, Dr Yusuf Dadoo wrote to ANC President-General Professor DDT Jabavu, "...that the future of the Non-European people of this country depends on the coming together of the African, the Coloured, the Indian and the Malay into one solid powerful organisation."³⁷ This subsequently culminated in the Indo-African pact, signed in 1947 by the NIC, Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC), and

³³ K Goonam, *Coolie doctor, An autobiography by Dr Goonam* (Durban: Madiba Publisher, 1991), p. 99; *The Leader*, "Coolie Doctor Succumbs at 92", 25 September 1998; *Graphic*, "Boss Quiz Durban Doctor", 6 July 1973.

³⁴ K Goonam, *Coolie doctor*, p. 99; *The Leader*, "Girl Strike Blow to Make Egos", 22 August 1986.

³⁵ K Goonam, *Coolie doctor*, p. 100.

³⁶ *The Leader*, "Girls Strike Blow to Make Egos", 22 August 1986.

³⁷ *Indian Views*, "Dr Dadoo's Advice to Prof Jabavu", 26 July 1940.

the ANC, which sought to challenge oppression and racism through collective activism while respecting their political individuality. This solidarity pact became a practical reality when Indian women joined forces with the African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL) and embarked on a joint Defiance Campaign in 1952 to defy all discriminatory and civic laws. Their participation was not only visible as organisers, speakers, resisters, and courting imprisonment, but it symbolised that Indian women were determined to be part of a broader political struggle that transcended racial divisions.³⁸ This was reinforced when the Natal-based ANCWL, an auxiliary of the ANC, and women from the NIC sought to engage collectively in grassroots activism and established the non-racial women's organisation, the Durban and District Women's League, at the Bantu Social Centre on 4 October 1952. Among its key members, consisting of social workers, activists, professionals, and housewives, were Bertha Mkhize, Fatima Meer, Dr Anusya Singh, Marie Naicker, V Ponen and RI Arenstein, Fatima Seedat, Ruth Shabane, and Edith Khuzwayo. The symbolism of collective grassroots political activism was poignantly expressed by political commentator AC Meer in his memoirs, "It was most potent political work showing how Indians and Africans had common problems, common suffering and common objectives."³⁹

The 1950s created further opportunities for Indo-African political solidarities and for rethinking the 'ethnic' identities. Classifying themselves as South Africans rather than Indians, activists such as Fatima Meer, Fatima Seedat, Amina Cachalia, Radhi Singh, and Anusya Singh began to broaden their political associations. They became active members of the first non-racial women's organisation, the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW).⁴⁰ Within FEDSAW, these activists worked side by side with women from other racial groups and organised a massive march to the Union buildings against the imposition of passes on African women. Although pass laws did not directly affect Indian women, many supported the protests, recognising them as a dehumanising assault on the dignity of African women. Their participation reflected a growing political awareness that their own futures were inseparable from those of the broader oppressed population. This commitment to a shared struggle was later sustained through their activism in organisations such as the Natal Organisation of Women (NOW), Black Women's Federation (BWF),

³⁸ *The Leader*, "Defiance Campaign Launched in Natal at Berea Station", 25 November 1988

³⁹ *The Leader*, "Women and Youth Contributed to Framing Charter", 31 March 1989; Enuga S Reddy and Fatima Meer, "I REMEMBER Reminiscences of the Struggle for Liberation and the Role of Indian South Africans, 1924-1958 by I. C. Meer", Bertha Mkhize and Fatima Meer in Cato Manor, accessed 30 July 2026 https://sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/I_remember_IC_Meer.pdf

⁴⁰ Gandhi Luthuli Documentation Centre (GLDC), University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), Westville, Cachalia Family, Accession no. 1963/01-17.

and the United Democratic Front (UDF), where collective, non-racial resistance remained central.⁴¹ The 1950s marked a turning point in Indian women's political activism, laying the groundwork for later non-racial mobilisation. By the 1970s and 1980s, the struggle had shifted, as the rise of the BCM and the Soweto Uprising steered Indian women to the forefront of the liberation struggle.

Rise of Black Consciousness and the impact on Indian women

The Soweto Uprising of 1976 must be seen against the backdrop of growing international support for the anti-apartheid struggle, the emergence of youth activism, and the development of a new ideology, BCM. These factors significantly shaped youth political ideology and activism. More significantly, it catalysed Indian women's political activism, and challenged narrow notions of 'Indian' identity, fostering renewed political consciousness and solidarities that transcended racial and community boundaries.

In the 1960s, Black students, frustrated by the anti-apartheid, white-dominated, liberal organisation, the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) formed the South African Student Organisation (SASO) to address their grievances. Established during the political lull of the 1960s when the ANC, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), and many activists were imprisoned, banned, or driven into exile, SASO attracted young and dynamic members from various racial groups.⁴² Key among them were activists Steve Biko, Mamphela Ramphele, Strini Moodley, Arun Naicker, Asha Moodley, Janey Juggernath Ramkissoo, Sam Moodley, and Hersheela Narsee, to name a few. Added to this was the growing international support for the anti-apartheid struggle and the emergence of independent African states, who began to break free from colonial and imperial rule. It is against this background that Biko's Black Consciousness (BC) ideology must be viewed: it inspired students, sparked an interest in reclaiming their lost heritage and reignited their political consciousness. BC celebrated Black power, and solidarity through physical and mental liberation from colonialism. While it appealed to university students and high school learners, it did so too for intellectuals, urban communities, and young women, particularly Indians.⁴³

⁴¹ GLDC, Cachalia Family, Accession no. 1963/01-17; *Sechaba*, August 1967; *The Leader*, "Architects of Group Areas Accused of Causing Ruin and Misery", 24 August 1990; Alison Mary Lazarus, Personal interview by author, 6 December 2010, Durban

⁴² J Brown, *The road to Soweto...*, pp. 40-46.

⁴³ *Sechaba*, "Black Students Unite", January 1973; Interview, Sam Moodley, 7 September 2018, 1860 Heritage Centre, Durban; SM Ndlovu, "The Soweto Uprising", In *The road to democracy...*, pp. 320-321, J Brown, *The road to Soweto*, pp. 47-49; K Naidoo, "The politics of youth resistance in the 1980s...", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18(1), 1991, pp. 148-149.

For Indian women, like Sam and Asha Moodley, Ramkissoon, Naicker, and Narsee, BC transformed their political thinking and allowed them to transcend and negotiate their ethnic (Indian) identity and to embrace a broader South African identity in a multicultural, multiracial political space. For Merebank (suburb south of Durban) high school learner, Ramkissoon, BC was a powerful formative vehicle for early politicisation, it, "...really got us thinking politically, it definitely had a place... it awakened a lot in me".⁴⁴ Similarly, for Durban-born Naicker, a community activist, in the 1980s, BC allowed her to assert her voice, and to think more critically around issues such as her ethnic identity, racial, economic, and gender oppression,

*... [It BC] impacted on me and I started to ask deeper questions. The oppression of women, the lives of domestic workers, mine workers, solidarity amongst the oppressed and worker rights became concerns I expressed in our discussions....My attraction to the ideas of Black Consciousness grew. I was drawn, in particular to the values of self-definition and self-reliance. It began to dawn on me that the option of a psychological revolution was possible; that I could free myself from the narrow stereotypes and the slave mentality that were embedded in the psyche of the oppressed and exploited in our society.*⁴⁵

For activist, Zeni Thumbadoo, her "active Black Consciousness Movement days" provided a space for mutual political comradeship and activism, "They were ..vibrant days with long bus trips to AZAPO congresses and meetings. We would read and analyse articles and documents, engage in animated discussions and debates and sing the protest songs with great enthusiasm. We learnt so much from each other..."⁴⁶

BC inspired organisations, such as the Black Women's Federation (BWF), established in 1975, provided a political platform for Indian and African women to challenge the apartheid state. It worked in urban and rural areas seeking to promote gender literacy and healthcare programmes. Added to this were BCM 'Protest Theatres'. Key among them was the Theatre Council of Natal (TEACON), which utilised drama and arts to educate the youth and communities on the evils of apartheid. It was through TEACON that Kogila Perumal Cooper, a student in the 1970s, became politically conscious of BC, which then spurred her political activism, "I did not consciously choose to become an activist.

⁴⁴ GLDC, Interview, Janey Juggernath Ramkissoon, 10 September 2002, *Voices of Resistance*, pp. 51-53.

⁴⁵ A Naicker, "A beginning of a journey", S Moodley (ed.). *Time to remember-Reflections of women from the Black Consciousness Movement* (Durban: Women For awareness, 2018), pp. 177-178.

⁴⁶ Z Thumbadoo, "A blue bench and Black Consciousness", S Moodley (ed.). *Time to remember-reflections of women from the Black Consciousness Movement* (Durban: Women For awareness, 2018), p. 181.

TEACON catapulted me into the world of political activism. I was in the company of very radical thinkers, some of whom, unbeknownst to me, were the founders of the Black Consciousness Movement.”⁴⁷ Asha Moodley, an ardent BC activist and a member of SASO, worked within BC community initiatives, most notably with the media department. She managed the BC publication *Black Review*, and part of her job description was to “...get newspaper cuttings, file them into particular subject categories, and isolate themes, which would be written up for *Black Review*.”⁴⁸ Before the Soweto Uprising in 1976, whilst the ANC and PAC were banned, BC, to some extent, served as a vehicle for youth activism. Reflecting on this period, Moodley notes, these were “exciting times” as there were protests and meetings against the apartheid state on various campuses.⁴⁹ On Salisbury Island, an Indian-designated university established in 1961, BC activists formed the Café Clan and produced a series of satirised plays to “stimulate debate” on political issues.⁵⁰ The play “Black on White”, “did extremely well” and was promoted on across campus in Fort Hare, Zululand, and Rhodes.⁵¹

Equally significant, the BC ideology also shifted debates around notions of “Indianess”. BC members of Indian origin, like Saths Cooper, Asha Moodley, and Strini Moodley, were critical of the NIC and challenged it for being an ethnic and narrow community-based organisation that hindered broader political solidarity and advocated for a more inclusive, non-racial struggle.⁵² Thus, BC did, to some extent, create political-ideological differences amongst Indian activists over how they should navigate Indian identity in a multi-racial struggle for freedom. Moreover, Indians, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, whilst politically conscious, were yet to make inroads in mobilising the community.⁵³ While politics began to attract many radical youths and working class groups, some Indians were still conservative and reluctant to become involved in the struggle, because they feared state repression. Asha Moodley recalls her parents fears, “... [They] didn’t support your activities precisely because of their fears for you. It wasn’t anything else, they just didn’t want you to get involved.”⁵⁴

⁴⁷ K Cooper, “A destiny unchallenged”, S Moodley (ed.). *Time to remember-reflections of women from the Black Consciousness Movement* (Durban: Women For Awareness, 2018), p. 65

⁴⁸ GLDC, WC, UKZN, Interview, Asha Moodley 15 August 2002, “Voices of Resistance”, Oral History Project, University of Durban-Westville, . 14.

⁴⁹ Interview, Asha Moodley 15 August 2002, p.15.

⁵⁰ Interview, Asha Moodley 15 August 2002, pp. 23-24.

⁵¹ Interview, Asha Moodley 15 August 2002, pp. 24-25.

⁵² Interview, Asha Moodley 15 August 2002, p.15.

⁵³ Interview, Asha Moodley 15 August 2002, p.16; Vahed and Desai, “A case of ‘strategic ethnicity’?”, pp.22-47.

⁵⁴ Interview, Asha Moodley 15 August 2002, pp. 22-23.

Added to youth resistance in the early 1970s were labour activism. In 1973 a series of spontaneous strikes swept through Natal, with over 360 stoppages recorded that year and 54 more in 1974. In February 1973, more than 50 000 African workers marched in Durban demanding higher wages, including dockworkers, bricklayers, and employees from the textile, rubber, and municipal sectors. Indian workers were an integral part of the strike and showed solidarity with their African counterparts.⁵⁵ It is against this political context that the Soweto uprising of 1976 must be viewed and its impact on Indian women.

The Soweto Uprising 1976

The outbreak of the Soweto Uprising of 1976 must be viewed against a broader, political, social, and economic landscape. Some commentators, scholars, and activists have attributed its outbreak to it being spontaneous, a political awakening, shaped by ideas, rather than by political organisations.⁵⁶ The political lull of the 1960s provided for the ideas of BC to spread widely, and thus, made inroads amongst the youth. For example, Asha Moodley reiterates this point,

I'm not going to say that it was the Black People's Convention that was responsible for it. Nor will I say that it was the South Africa Students Organisation, but certainly I think, it is a result of the kind of awareness, political awareness that was created that was re-awakened by the Black Consciousness Movement.....The BC Movement worked overtly and was heard quite openly at conferences and I've mentioned all those movements to you so I would say that the uprisings were a kind of expression of black consciousness without specifically saying that any organisation was responsible for it.⁵⁷

Similar sentiments were expressed by the Azanaian People's Organisation (AZAPO), which stated that BC did not view itself as an "alternative" to existing banned political organisations, but recognised its role in contributing to the struggle, and hence advocated, "psychological liberation which was the driving force behind the student uprisings of

⁵⁵ G Houser, "The International Impact of The South African Struggle for Liberation", January 1982, United Nations (available at <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/recordFiles/210-849-29845/32-130-C9C-84-al.sff.document.acoa000562.pdf> as accessed on 19 March 2026).

⁵⁶ Interview, Asha Moodley 15 August 2002, pp. 24-25; A Moodley, "The continued impact of Black Consciousness in South Africa", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 29(2), 1991, pp. 237-251; K Naidoo, "The politics of youth resistance in the 1980s...", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18(1), 1991, pp. 148-165; AZAPO, *Azaniaan People's Organisation, June 16, 1976, background and aftermath*, (available at <https://azapo.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/AZAPO-June-16-1976-Background-and-Aftermath.pdf> as accessed on 19 March 2026).

⁵⁷ Interview, Asha Moodley 15 August 2002, pp. 31-32.

1976”.⁵⁸ Whilst BC may have ignited youth consciousness and activism, its roots can be traced, to some extent, to decades of inferior education, systematic inequalities, and abject poverty. African urbanisation in the 1930s and 1940s overburdened the already insufficient school facilities. There were overcrowded classrooms and a lack of qualified teachers. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 merely exacerbated these problems. It brought African education under state control, and African schools were subject to state funding on the acceptance of a racially discriminatory curriculum, administered by a new Department of Bantu Education, that prepared African learners for manual labour. There were rumblings by African students of discriminatory education by the 1960s, however, the introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in African schools was the catalyst for protest. Afrikaans was seen as an attempt by the State to oppress the African community psychologically. In contrast, the BC ideology espoused psychological liberation, thereby making resistance and protest inevitable.⁵⁹

Before 16 June 1976, the day of the protest, students had already been engaging in stay-away class boycotts. However, students decided to make a “public stand”.⁶⁰ Students mobilised in Soweto schools, with placards and posters made from cardboard boxes, which read, “Away with Afrikaans”, “Afrikaans is the language of the oppressors”, raised fists and confronted security forces. Police tried to disperse the crowds with teargas initially, and later resorted to using ammunition, killing and wounding hundreds of students.⁶¹ The brutal repression of African students in Soweto led to international condemnation and sanctions against the apartheid state. Locally, it also drew strong criticism from various non-white political organisations as well as increased state repression. Thousands of men and women were banned and arrested, there were house-to-house searches and intimidation of students and workers. According to some reports, some people had simply “disappeared without a trace” and there were “mass graves and midnight burials in Doornskop and other cemeteries in Soweto”.⁶²

⁵⁸ AZAPO, *Azanian People's Organisation, June 16, 1976, background and aftermath*.

⁵⁹ AZAPO, *Azanian People's Organisation, June 16, 1976, background and aftermath*.

⁶⁰ H Pohlandt-McCormick, “Controlling Woman...”, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 33(3), 2000 pp. 585-614; H Pohlandt-McCormick, “‘I saw a nightmare.’”, *History and Theory*, 39(4), 2000, pp. 23-44; AZAPO, *Azanian People's Organisation, June 16, 1976, Background and Aftermath*.

⁶¹ Pohlandt-McCormick, “Controlling Woman...”, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 33(3), 2000, pp. 585-614; Pohlandt-McCormick, “‘I saw a nightmare.’”, *History and Theory*, 39(4), 2000, pp. 23-44; AZAPO, “Azanian People's Organisation, June 16, 1976, Background and Aftermath”.

⁶² *Sechaba*, “ANC Report to OAU Liberation Committee”, vol. 11, Third Quarter, 1977, pp. 4-5

Indian response to the Soweto Uprising

Indian women's response to the Soweto Uprising must be viewed within the dynamics and complexity of segregated politics and socialisation. At the time of the Uprising in 1976, non-African students, for example, Coloureds and Indians, remained generally racially segregated, given the apartheid policies and may explain their immediate non-involvement, "... Indian and 'Coloured' secondary students in the 1970s were not involved in significant resistance. Durban did not feature prominently in the 1976 student uprisings even though there were both university and high school boycotts in some African communities... .. The Indian schools in Durban were virtually untouched by the events of the period..."⁶³ However, by the mid-1970s, the minimal relaxation of racially based admissions allowed more interactions and collective political activism across races. By the late 1970s, despite the social segregation, there was a growing solidarity between African and Indian students.⁶⁴ Moreover, whilst SASO was an increasingly African movement, there were some Indians who became members, "Although officially the Black Peoples Congress (sic) cannot show significant numbers of Indians as members, due to fear of political repercussions. the idioms and essential message of this movement have penetrated the minds of a significant number of university students and, to an even greater extent, high school students."⁶⁵ This may explain the politicisation of Indian university students and in the aftermath of the 1976 riots, "... well over half the black students arrested by the police in Durban for distributing pamphlets were Indian."⁶⁶ For example, in June 1976, 87 students, mainly Africans and Indians, from the University of Natal medical school appeared at the Durban Magistrate's court for contravening the Riotous Assemblies Act for staging a march in Durban in sympathy with the Soweto students.⁶⁷

For BC and SASO supporters, such as Narsee and Alison Lazarus, June 1976 was a political turning point. Lazarus, at the time of the Uprising, was a matriculant at the Durban Indian High School. Her school circle of friends consisted of young girls who

⁶³ K Naidoo, "The politics of youth resistance in the 1980s...", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18(1), 1991, pp. 149.

⁶⁴ K Naidoo, "The politics of youth resistance in the 1980s...", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18(1), 1991, pp. 146-148.

⁶⁵ Cited in K Naidoo, "The politics of youth resistance in the 1980s...", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18(1), 1991, pp.148-149.

⁶⁶ K Naidoo, "The politics of youth resistance in the 1980s...", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18(1), 1991, pp.149.

⁶⁷ *Post*, The Riotous Assemblies Act of 1956 was a repressive law that empowered the apartheid state to suppress political opposition by banning gatherings, censoring publications, and criminalising acts deemed to encourage protest, civil disobedience, or racial dissent. *Post*, 18 June 1976.

were politically conscious and motivated. Amongst them were Vidhu Vedalankar, Pregs Govender, and Sagoona Gordhan. In 1976, in the last year of her secondary school studies, Lazarus was appointed head prefect, however, she declined it. Instead, she successfully motivated for the formation of a Student Representative Council (SRC) and subsequently became its first president. The outbreak of the 1976 riots made a lasting impression and fuelled her political consciousness and activism,

*When 1976 happened ... we were very challenged; how can you not write matric exams, education was of utmost importance ... but ... I remember us coming together, as a form of protest ... we handed in our prefect badges, we formed an SRC. I was first SRC President at Girls High, and we made a promise ... that if we pass and go onto university ... we will make a contribution to society. And that drove us. It drove us ... it turned my direction from the law to teaching ...*⁶⁸

Upon matriculating, Lazaurus enrolled at the University of Durban-Westville (UDW), an apartheid-created tertiary institution for Indians, and continued her political activism. Together with her contemporaries, such as Pregs Govender, Lazarus was active in university and school protests of the early 1980s. They mobilised students at schools, Technikons, and other campuses and organised rallies and protest meetings. Lazarus became involved in coordinating and assisting in student orientation programmes off-campus, attended several political meetings, and drew up posters. She recalls, "I marched ... I got baton-charged, but it made me go into the classroom with a fire ...".⁶⁹ Lazarus was not detained by the security police, nor served with banning orders, however, she provided refuge for many political activists when they were hiding from the Special Branch.⁷⁰

Similarly, for Narsee, in solidarity with the Soweto pupils, she attended meetings and distributed pamphlets and handbills, whilst a student at UDW. Moreover, Narsee drew inspiration from imprisoned ANC political leaders such as Nelson Mandela, and American civil rights activist, Martin Luther King. She read widely on political literature, such as the Russian and Chinese revolutions, to help her understand the complexity of class, race and politics. The 1976 Soweto resistance spearheaded her political awakening.⁷¹ Thus, one of the Uprising's most significant impacts on Indian women was a greater political awareness, both in terms of their identity and how they could spearhead non-racial collective activism.

⁶⁸ Alison Mary Lazarus, Personal interview by author. 6 December 2010, Durban.

⁶⁹ Alison Mary Lazarus, Personal interview by author. 6 December 2010, Durban.

⁷⁰ Alison Mary Lazarus, Personal interview by author. 6 December 2010, Durban.

⁷¹ Hersheela Narsee, Telephonic Interview by Author. 11 November 2010, Johannesburg, South Africa; Hersheela Narsee, Email message to author. 6 December 2010.

Non-racial solidarity, whilst it existed, was further nurtured, strengthened, and reinforced in the wake of 1976. The brutal state repression by state security forces made African and Indian women realise the urgency of non-racial political solidarity. They increasingly saw their struggles as inseparable and the need to present a united front. As women, they had shared grievances, both political and gendered, and it provided a catalyst for accelerated politicisation and rising committed resistance. Apartheid had segregated communities along racial lines, thus making it difficult for the ANC and NIC to reach out to Indian and African communities.⁷² Hence, a new strategy was warranted post-1976: grassroots activism, which was revived with the formation of new civic bodies, youth movements, and women's groups, often spearheaded by women.⁷³ BC conscious members within the NIC, and a new radicalised, politicised group of university students stressed the urgency to work within the communities, to mobilise political support, promote non-racialism and the "...coordination and effectiveness of grassroots struggles".⁷⁴ This was to be achieved through the formation of civic organisations, largely spearheaded by university students, high school learners, and young activists.⁷⁵ Moreover, the economic climate of the 1970s and early 1980s saw communities struggling with high costs for housing, transportation, electricity, forced removals, and water issues, thereby, making it conducive to political mobilisation.⁷⁶

In several Indian working-class areas, Indian women were at the forefront in the formation of civic organisations. It led to the establishment of the South Durban Civic Association, Phoenix Working Committee (PWC 1978), Chatsworth Housing Action Committee (CHAC 1979), Cato Manor Residents Association (1979), Durban Housing Action Committee (DHAC) and the Asherville Housing Action Committee (1980), amongst others. Similar structures were transplanted in Coloured and African townships.⁷⁷ For Indian women activists, grassroots activism made them aware of the daily struggles of working-class families, and it marked the beginning of their committed political

⁷² K Naidoo, "The politics of youth resistance in the 1980s...", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18(1), 1991, pp. 150.

⁷³ DS Dhillon, "The Indians of Natal-resistance to apartheid, 1971-1985", pp. 23-25; Hersheela Narsee, Telephonic Interview by Author. 11 November 2010, Johannesburg, South Africa; Alison Mary Lazarus, Personal interview by author. 6 December 2010, Durban.

⁷⁴ K Naidoo, "The politics of youth resistance in the 1980s...", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18(1), 1991, pp. 163.

⁷⁵ DS Dhillon, "The Indians of Natal-resistance to apartheid, 1971-1985", pp. 22-26.

⁷⁶ K Naidoo, "The politics of youth resistance in the 1980s...", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18(1), 1991, pp. 148-153; DS Dhillon, "The Indians of Natal-resistance to apartheid, 1971-1985", pp. 23-24.

⁷⁷ DS Dhillon, "The Indians of Natal-resistance to apartheid, 1971-1985", pp. 22-25.

consciousness. For law student activist Dhaya Pillay, her “real political education” began post-1976, when she was embedded in community organisations through her interactions with PWC, CHAC, and the DHA. It became more “focused” and “structured” and she was involved in a number of “support activities”.⁷⁸ As an Article clerk, Pillay drafted letters, formed residential organisations, co-ordinated meetings, engaged in fundraising, and distributed pamphlets. For example, she was actively involved in the Release Mandela Campaign,⁷⁹ and the Prisoners Education Campaign.⁸⁰

After 1976, Lazarus seized the opportunity to fulfil her high school pledge “to make a contribution” to society. She became deeply involved in youth activism, serving as a founding member and project coordinator of the Ashport Youth Club (1982-1984). In this role, Lazarus focused on political mobilisation, civic education, organising matric winter schools, and advancing environmental awareness and non-racialism through multi-racial camps.⁸¹ Similarly, Durban resident, and activist Narsee, formed the Durban Central Residents Association (DCRA). This body was established to oppose the forced removal of residents from the Warwick Avenue Triangle in central Durban. The State sought to clear the area, home largely to non-white communities, to designate it for white residential use. The DCRA successfully challenged these plans. It also confronted exploitative rental practices, where many families in flats were subjected to excessive rents by unscrupulous landlords.⁸²

Civic organisations spearheaded the political consciousness of Indian women across the class spectrum: the factory workers, housewives, mothers, teachers, university students, high school learners, and labourers. They played a pivotal role in mobilising around ‘bread and butter’ issues that affected the community, such as rent campaigns, high food prices, and poor education. Their activism was grounded in their maternal identities, particularly as mothers, and frustrations with a system that robbed their children of their dignity and a future, and voiced their grievances, “The spectre of hungry mouths to feed, to any mother, particularly, would certainly not provide any frivolity”;⁸³ “They are killing our children. Why

⁷⁸ Dhaya Pillay, 6 April 2009, Durban, KwaZulu-Natal; GLDC, UKZN, WC, Dhaya Pillay, Interview. 16 October 2002; “Voices of Resistance”, Oral History Project, University of Durban-Westville, pp.14-16.

⁷⁹ The Release Mandela Campaign, launched in 1980, was a major international and domestic initiative aimed at freeing Nelson Mandela from imprisonment.

⁸⁰ Activists fought for prisoner education, especially those on Robben Island.

⁸¹ Alison Mary Lazarus, Personal interview by author. 6 December 2010, Durban.

⁸² Hersheela Narsee, Email message to author. 6 December 2010

⁸³ K Naidoo, *Class, consciousness and organisation: Indian political resistance in Durban, South Africa, 1979-1996*, (available at https://sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/archive_files/Class%2C%20Consciousness%20and%20Organisation%20Indian%20Political%20Resistance%20in%20Durban%20

don't they come with bombs and do it quicker".⁸⁴ Many who had previously been apolitical, became active, leading meetings, attending protests and rallies, and signing petitions. Sari-clad women from Indian townships such as Chatsworth and Phoenix were visible at these events, holding placards and joining Coloured and African women in mobilising around the DHAC slogan, "Houses at rents that people can afford."⁸⁵

Post 1976, trade union militancy also intensified, with women central to their activism. By 1985, they made up a third of the paid workforce, concentrated in the garment, textile, and food-processing sectors. Union membership surged in the 1980s, aided by state-sanctioned registration intended to contain unrest, but instead enabled rapid organisation. Workers formed federations committed to non-racialism and solidarity against apartheid, culminating in the creation of Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) and in 1985, its merger into the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Others included the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU), the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers' Union, later renamed the South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers' Union (SACCAWU). Unrest, driven in large part by women, spread across Johannesburg, Durban, Port Elizabeth, and Cape Town, taking the form of strikes, boycotts, and stay-aways.⁸⁶ For example, Narsee supported SACCAWU in its campaign for better wages and conditions at Game stores in Durban, and endorsed a targeted consumer boycott against exploitative labour practices. While putting up boycott posters in Warwick Avenue, Narsee was arrested by the police. Detained overnight, she was interrogated for hours before being released following legal intervention by activist Zac Yacoob. Narsee's activism also led to the confiscation of her passport in the 1980s, restricting her international engagement until it was restored in 1989.⁸⁷

Women's grassroots activism and trade unionism following the Uprising of 1976, led to the formation of powerful non-racial regional women's organisations. FEDSAW, which had become defunct in the 1960s due to constant banning and arrests of its members, re-emerged in the 1980s. Ex-FEDSAW members in the Western Cape formed the United

South%20Africa%201979-1996%20by%20Kumi%20Naidoo.pdf as accessed on 10 February 2026).

⁸⁴ K Naidoo, *Class, consciousness and organisation...*, p.63.

⁸⁵ Natal Indian Congress, *90 Fighting Years 1894-1984 Natal Indian Congress*, (Durban, Art Printing Press, 1984), pp. 38-41.

⁸⁶ Z Magubane, "Attitudes towards feminism among women in the ANC, 1950-1990: A theoretical re-interpretation", In *Road to democracy*, South African Democracy Education Trust, vol. 4, Part 2, (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2006), pp. 975-1033.

⁸⁷ Hersheela Narsee, Email message to author. 6 December 2010
K Naidoo, *Class, consciousness and organisation...*, p. 63.

Women's Organisation (UWO). UWO launched campaigns against rents, food, and bus fare increases, poor housing, and police brutality against children. Others included the Port Elizabeth Women's Organisation (PEWO) and the Port Alfred Women's Organisation (PAWO). In Natal, NOW, and the UDF, the latter a mass collation of anti-apartheid political parties, of student groups, youth congresses, civic associations, religious groups, and trade unions, became the key vehicles for anti-apartheid resistance.⁸⁸ These political and organisational structures provided Indian women with an opportunity not only to intensify their activism, but also to strengthen non-racial solidarity ties with women across all races in the fight against apartheid. For example, Narsee, Vidhu Vedalaker, Shamim Meer, Pregs Govender, and Maggie Govender, amongst others, worked alongside activists in NOW such as Phumzile Mlambo, Nozizwe Madlala, Victoria Mxenge, Maiketso Thipe, Thandi Sigodi, Jacky Leach, Lillian Gabriel, and Jean Faibairn.⁸⁹ As members of NOW, Indian women worked across racially divided, poverty-stricken communities in Lamontville, KwaMashu, Chesterville, Umlazi, Inanda, Claremont, KwaMashu, Umlazi, and Chatsworth, setting up branches and working groups.⁹⁰ NOW's campaign for better housing, maternity, and child-care benefits, not only addressed common maternal and material struggles, it also enabled Indian women to gain better insights into the socio-economic realities of grassroots communities in Natal, particularly the plight of women and children in the rural areas.⁹¹ NOW played a critical role in Natal's political struggles of the 1980s. During this period, when many political leaders were banned or detained, NOW provided political leadership in Natal and spearheaded several UDF campaigns in their absence.⁹²

Equally significant is how, in the aftermath of the 1976 riots, there was a greater shift in the reconfiguration of gender roles, to some extent, within the Indian communities. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, heightened political activism saw an increase in Indian women, particularly university students, some radicalised, who became more vocal and visible, stepping into leadership and organisational roles. For example, the NIC, NOW, and the UDF were to play a critical role in spearheading Narsee's political activism. For example, she was elected secretary of NOW in 1987. Narsee recalls her role within the NIC and how she had to grapple with being affiliated with an organisation that described itself as 'Indian',

⁸⁸ Killie Campbell Africana Library (KCAL), NOW, KCM 98/61/1/76.

⁸⁹ KCAL, NOW, Membership List, KCM 98/61/8/38.

⁹⁰ KCAL, NOW, KCM 98/61/1/76.

⁹¹ Hersheela Narsee, Telephonic Interview by author. 11 November 2010.

⁹² Hersheela Narsee, Telephonic Interview by author. 11 November 2010.

*As a political organisation, one of the tasks of NIC and one of our tasks then is to conscientise our communities where we ... came from. So the area where I live [Durban Central] ...we have in the NIC area committee so that any issue that comes up our task is essentially to educate and conscientise people about this ... so for example, during 1984 there was a Tricameral election so we...went door to door to all the homes, to all the people we spoke to them about it [to vote against the Tricameral elections], we held mass meetings on it....*⁹³

*Whilst the NIC was an Indian political organisation...NIC was also part and parcel of the civic organisations and was affiliated to the UDF ... it was very difficult to take up day-to-day issues affecting people and... people would respond more easily to a community organisation rather than a political organisation....*⁹⁴

Moreover, political activism also empowered Indian women to become more critical of their gendered roles within the home in the 1970s. Women began to raise questions about their status, both within the domestic and political spheres. Hersheela recalls how she became conscious of sexism within her own family as a young girl in the 1970s, “..in the home situation when you see that your brother doesn’t participate in the kitchen chores or anything like that...you feel something wrong unconsciously...”⁹⁵ These sexist attitudes were also pervasive within political organisations such as the ANC, NIC, and the UDF and attempts to redress them were side-lined, with the belief that political liberation would inevitably bring gender liberation.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, organisations such as NOW sought to shift women’s issues from the periphery to the centre of liberation struggles. For example, Narsee noted that NOW was guided by two specific aims, to combat racial and gender oppression, “One of... encouraging women to participate in the struggle for national liberation on the one hand, and also to encourage women to assert ... themselves within the national liberation organisations... take up issues that affect women directly and which other organisations ... do not really take up...”⁹⁷

⁹³ Hersheela Narsee, Interview by Diana Russell, South Africa, 1987, Diana Russell Personal Collection (available at https://search.alexanderstreet.com/preview/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cvideo_work%7C3383423 as accessed on 19 February 2020).

⁹⁴ Hersheela Narsee, Interview by Diana Russell, South Africa, 1987.

⁹⁵ Hersheela Narsee, Interview by Diana Russell, South Africa, 1987.

⁹⁶ S Hassim, “The limits of popular democracy: Women’s organisations, feminism and the UDF”, *Transformation*, 51, 2003, pp. 48-73; S Hassim, *Women’s organisations and democracy in South Africa contesting authority* (Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2006), pp. 69-75; APC, UKZN, Nozizwe Madlala, Interview. 18 September 1991.

⁹⁷ Hersheela Narsee, Interview by Diana Russell, South Africa, 1987.

In addition, civic organisations and grassroots activism provided Indian women with an opportunity, to some extent, to “get women thinking about their role, not only on the struggle, their role at home.. they were oppressed.”⁹⁸ It facilitated the mushrooming of women’s organisations, which provided spaces for conversations and activism around gender issues to “get women conscientised”.⁹⁹ For example, the Merebank Women’s Organisation (MWA) was established in the early 1980s, where very few women were engaged in community or political activism. Activist, Ramkissoon, recalls how grassroots activism sought to create political and gender awareness among women, in Merebank,

So we began working on activities ...one of them was the Netball Association. We used to have Road Groups and then we worked in Minitown because that is where the Rate Payers had a finger you know well we had a lot of influence there. People began to trust us so we got the women from Minitown involved and we started off kitchen gardens you know, little, the little land in front of these one or two-bedroom houses. We planted things like dhania (coriander), puthina (mint) and thyme and little things ... and then of course we spoke to them about the way they were oppressed.....every year we had a spring walk around September, ...the objective was get to women out of their houses and we walked about three kilometres in Merebank and that was phenomenal because we used to get women from all walks of life all ages..¹⁰⁰

The MWA also inspired young Indian high school learners who joined in their activities. The MWA was also involved in fund raising through jumble sales, collecting old clothes, and forging affiliated links with NOW and women from the predominantly Coloured township of Wentworth.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

The Soweto Uprising of 1976 was indeed a turning point in South African liberation history. For Indian women, it acted as a moral and political re-awakening. Shared oppression, both political and gendered, fostered non-racial solidarity through collective mobilisation. The long-term consequences of the 1976 Uprising for Indian women were most noticeable in their activism through community structures, national coalitions, and grassroots movements. Their political consciousness evolved and led to a rethinking of their identity,

⁹⁸ GLDC, UKZN, Interview, Janey Juggernath Ramkissoon. 10 September 2002, “Voices of Resistance”, Oral History Project, University of Durban-Westville, p.15.

⁹⁹ Janey Juggernath Ramkissoon, Interview. 10 September 2002, p. 15.

¹⁰⁰ Janey Juggernath Ramkissoon, Interview. 10 September 2002, pp. 57-58.

¹⁰¹ Janey Juggernath Ramkissoon, Interview. 10 September 2002, pp. 57-59.

from being 'Indian' to embracing a broader South African identity linked to race, gender, and class oppression. Thus, the Uprising did not merely spark protest, it catalysed a new generation of activists: Indian women. In the narratives of South African liberation history, Indian women emerged not as peripheral supporters, but as active agents in the making of a democratic South Africa.¹⁰²

¹⁰² *The Leader*, "NIC Rejects 'Black Label'", 24 December 1971; *Sechaba*, "Soweto Anniversary", vol. 11, Fourth Quarter, 1977; Dhaya Pillay, Interview. 16 October 2002, pp. 20-21.