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March 12 1997 at 05:17AM

By Professor Kader Asmal

Most South Africans are immensely proud of what our president termed the "small miracle" which brought about legitimate government in our country even if the problems of renewal sometimes obscure the vast sweep of change.

But if miracles are to be seen as supernatural intervention, "miracle" is not the apt word for the lack of racial bitterness on the part of the oppressed. It was more a matter of hard work by mortals than of miraculous intervention by the gods.

At a time when minority white governments were marching increasingly out of step with humanity, banging the tribal drum, the African National Congress was busy with the long process of forging bonds among the different ethnic groups, a process which has been going on for most of this century.

One of the landmarks of this process was the historic agreement between the leaders of the African National Congress and the Transvaal and Natal Indian Congresses exactly half a century ago.

The Three Doctors' Pact, as it is known, was signed on March 9 1947 and was a milestone on the path of non-racialism. It was a formal acknowledgement of the increasingly close relationship between the ANC, led by Dr A B Xuma, the TIC, led by Dr Yusuf Dadoo, and the NIC, led by Dr Monty Naicker.

We are not very good at celebrating anniversaries which signpost our path to democracy; this one must not pass unnoticed.

In other countries in Africa, Indian minorities were reluctant to throw in their lot with the majority, often siding with the colonial authorities. Indeed, this was a tendency which had to be fought in South Africa in the 1940s, and again in the 1980s when a minority decided to take part in the infamous tricameral parliament, and political reprobates in the House of Delegates were rightly ostracised internally and internationally; indeed,

India declared the "delegates" prohibited immigrants.

It is a tribute both to the farsightedness of outstanding South African leadership, and also to the guidance of those at the helm of the freedom struggle in India, including Mahatma Gandhi himself, that the decision was made to collaborate and later to fight with the oppressed rather than with oppressor.

It was this pact which gave me, as a boy in Stanger, Natal, and people of my generation, a sense of what it is to be a South African living, as I was, so close to the revered ANC president, Albert Luthuli, in every sense of the word.

It was one of the first times, anywhere, that a minority made common cause with an oppressed majority.

There were setbacks. Durban experienced terrible race riots in 1949 when at least 50 Indians and 87 Africans were killed. What is remarkable, however, is not that so many died (and many Africans were in fact killed by police bullets) but that after such a terrible bloodletting there was no recurrence.

One reason for this must surely be the increasing collaboration between Africans and Indians during the preceding period. Xuma had worked closely with Dadoo in various efforts, and the pact formalised this relationship, and is worth quoting in part.

"This joint meeting declares its sincerest conviction that for the future progress, goodwill, good race relations, and for the building of a united, greater and free South Africa, full franchise rights must be extended to all sections of the South African people."

The meeting, apart from the franchise question, called on citizens to support equal economic and industrial rights; recognition of African trade unions; removal of land restrictions; provision of adequate housing; free and compulsory education; freedom of movement; and abolition of measures such as pass laws against Africans and provincial barriers against Indians. It called for the removal of all discriminatory and oppressive legislation.

In 1947, this was heady stuff. Indian South Africans had already, in 1946, rejected Smuts' offer of representation on a communal basis in parliament, because "all the citizens of the country were not encouraged to regard themselves as South Africans with a common destiny". They had also participated in anti-pass campaigns.

But the formal signing of this agreement prepared the ground for the great Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign of the 1950s, and joint resistance to apartheid.

The 1940s set the scene for much that was to come. The emerging ANC Youth

League members, including Nelson Mandela, urged that the time was ripe for new ideas and means of struggle. The leadership of the Indian National Congresses also changed at this time.

Significantly, 1946 saw the first United Nations resolution on South Africa, and the first diplomatic and economic sanctions imposed by the Indian government.

High tribute is due to the international role played by India, and indeed Pakistan, in the opposition to apartheid; and the sacrifices made.

Throughout the 1950s, for instance, Prime Minister Pandit Nehru continued to urge Africans of Indian origin to consider themselves part of Africa, and to make common cause with the anti-colonial struggle. Indeed, until the great anti-colonial struggle of the 1960s gave birth to independent African nations, India was the effective leader of the world crusade to overthrow apartheid.

Today, relations between India and South Africa have resumed, and both countries are enjoying the fruits of that early collaboration. President Mandela captured the essence of the relationship when he said that India and South Africa were "poised to build a unique and special partnership a partnership forged in the crucible of history, common cultural attributes and common struggle".

We in South Africa have successfully averted the ethnic and cultural chaos that is revisiting large parts of the world. Past efforts to cement our people into one nation, in which the Three Doctors' Pact earned such an honourable place, help to explain why.

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