

The Necessity of Non-Racism: Doctor Yusuf Dadoo Today

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I

We are living through a race-obsessed period in a race-obsessed country. This obsession comes out in everyday conversations and permeates academic analysis. In these perverse times Indian fresh produce traders need to have the meat taken from their mouths, and have to *hamba* home, back to Bombay; black workers are made to drink their piss, recorded on camera by white students, whites, in their presence, have to be humiliated as *abelungu* and blacks behind closed doors as kaffirs. Studies find the University system riddled with it.

It cannot be otherwise, we hear. It is to be expected says any common sense. It is necessarily so, given the structural features of Apartheid society; it is a reflection of the primary contradiction in the national democratic revolution; the struggle is essentially black versus white, black African against whites and against pretending minorities.

It does not help that Andile Mngxitama naturalises race and Devan Pillay rejects it or that Comrade Nzimande makes it appear as natural and a reflection of the primary but not the determinant contradiction in South Africa's national democratic revolution.

Blessed are those who do not speak English or do not speak isiZulu in KwaZulu-Natal or anyone of the homegrown languages including Afrikaans and *tsotsitaal* everywhere, because where the street meets the beat, race is and has become all. The grammar of racism demands new discursive practises. There is no space to reproduce what is being said or how it is being said, here.

Is non-racialism then a foolhardy voluntarism? Should we be celebrating Doc Dadoo at all? Can we argue for the *necessity* of non-racism as well?

II

Doc Yusuf Dadoo has left a significant mark on South Africa's political history, both, as a thinker and as an activist but his take on race and racism is at odds with what engulfs us today. He argued that over and above the institutional props it provided for a colonial capitalism it was a serious social pathology- both an unnecessary and unnatural state of feeling, thinking or relating.

His castigation of what he called "white arrogance" and "black chauvinism" (in his tribute to Moses Kotane) would reverberate as a piece of arcane liberal ranting these days. It would not make the side-columns of any of our media.

It is frightening that we can be celebrating the man, his importance to the struggle for a democratic and a socialist South Africa- so well served by biographies of Joe Slovo, Essop Pahad and Chris Van Wyk, without taking what he stood for seriously. In the words of Slovo, Doc was, "essentially a man of duty and not privilege; a revolutionary who gave and who expected nothing for himself in return". I can add little to this story. I never knew Dadoo, always known of Dadoo and people who knew Dadoo; but like many others in the education life of the labour movement I had to explicate what he stood for. What I want to

do is to pay tribute to at least what the man said and his importance in an area I am engaged in - the integrity of a non-racial and socialist labour movement.

Trying to do that will immediately raise resistance by the current generation. So be it. It is true that much of what he had to say was deeply contextual and it is intimately connected to the shifts in Indian politics and social struggles in South Africa, a terrain that Frene Ginwala's and Essop Pahad's PhD work tries to sketch out with care – but Dadoo has not been graced yet with the kind of biographical work that Oliver Tambo, Bram Fisher and Thabo Mbeki have enjoyed so that the intricate little steps that contextualise each argument are missing.

This is significant because he was the key intellectual that moved thinking from the pluralist and multi-racial discourses of the 1930s and 1940s to arrive at the necessary unity of all the oppressed and the non-racial character of national and class struggles- a thought that only became a material force at first in the Freedom Charter but more significantly at the Morogoro Conference where membership to the ANC was opened for all. Again as Joe Slovo insisted: that “diversity, he understood, was no obstacle to unity, indeed it could enrich the South African nation in the making”.

His thinking was shaped at the point where two currents met: a revived Gandhinism with its militancy as an imperative of struggle. True, he was in constant communication with Gandhi in 1939 and visited him in 1947. It was from the Mahatma's pen that the first admonition came that: “the future is not with the so-called white race if they keep themselves in purdah” (p.385, 1947). “But he went further-than the Gandhi”, Slovo argued, “He saw more clearly than the young Gandhi that the fate of all the black oppressed is indivisible.”

However, this general invocation became a pervasive argument and a morality- unlike the oppressor's racism- the other was neither surplus nor a thing, a chattel or an enslave-able something to be used. The oppressed people's thinking had to be uncontaminated of / from racism and it had to strive for a synthesis not in the coloniser's terms but on its own.

But if Dadoo stood firmly within the anti-colonial tradition broadly and within the local Indian current it is its meeting point with another that makes his contribution vital. It is vital to return to the late 1930s and to relook at “Non-European unity” in the context of the SACP's 1928 “Native Republic Thesis” with its call for “an independent native South African Republic as a stage towards a workers' and peasants' republic with full and equal rights for all races, Black, Coloured and White” (p.360, Tribute to Moses Kotane)

It is between these two home-grown forms of thinking- a Gandhian and a Marxist-Leninist yase Afrika Borwa, grown at an historical moment of rising fascism internationally, of Afrikaner mobilisation against Jan Smuts locally, of a Comintern uncertain of the correct international approach to Hitlerian aggression and the colonial question, that a defiance and militancy against further acts of segregation, “Ghetto Acts” and Apartheid stricture that notions like “internal colonialism” or “colonialism of a special type” took root.

Dadoo himself (at least in the documents gathered by “ES Reddy” for Madiba Press) gives himself very little theoretical credit- he constantly defers to Gandhi, to Kotane, and later to Michael Harmel for key formulations. What emerges in the collection is more his action side - the leader of the nationalist bloc in the Transvaal Indian Congress, of the Non-European

United Front and his challenge to the Indian population not only to work together but also to stand together in the liberation struggle. His greatest regret was that he did not write a book.

Whether this was symbolic as in the Doctors' Pact of 1947, two years before the murderous rioting in Durban, to the consolidation of non-racial trade unions, especially the ones that were to constitute SACTU by the 1950s. Like Bram Fisher, the key turning point was 1939 when he joined the CPSA- this coincides with his increasing non-racial argument. One must remember that the ANC itself was in flux and that the relationship between the Youth League and the Communists was not particularly pleasant.

However, the key document and one that is ascribed to him, is the one of October 1973, titled- "*South Africa- the Time of Challenge*" where his understanding of non-racialism gets its clearest expression as a critique of the Black Consciousness Movement.

"Within the ranks of those who express the slogan [of black consciousness- AS]" he argued, "in addition to honest and determined patriots there may be found those who would seek to achieve merely the advancement of privileged strata while leaving the masses where they were before: to displace the Black working class from the leading role which it has rightly assumed in generations of bitter struggle; or to submerge the emerging African nation with its own languages, culture and tradition, into an amorphous movement whose identity is based merely on skin colour." (p.276)

However necessary a psychological and cultural renaissance might have been, it did produce an explosion of writing, performance, and art. The focus on an "amorphous" movement and an identity on skin colour was untenable. The "nation" part of the national democratic revolution was not about "race" but about the removal and eradication of racial domination so that the oppressed might realise freedom and equality **unshackled** by race. Like any human, he might have been wrong but if we are to honour Dadoo, we must be clear of what we are honouring.

For him, the "key methodological and socio-political principle of a Marxist-Leninist approach lies in the indivisible connection between the national question and the solution of the antagonistic class contradictions between the exploiters and the exploited" (p.295). In his 1978-authored "*SA- Revolution on an Upgrade*" he expands on the Party's distinctions between nation, race and class, the thesis of internal colonialism and the importance of race and the horrors of race in the country. I will not deal with the theory of the Party here but rather focus on the form and content of non-racialism he espoused.

III

Non-racist thinking was mandatory around class organisation and more specifically, the organisation of trade unions: despite job discrimination and differential access to the labour market, Dadoo insisted that in principle such organisations had to be non-racial in principle, even if in reality they were in their majority African. So had to be the organisation of the political vanguard of the working class, the Communist Party: non-racial.

It gets more difficult, though, as a broader phenomenon- how does one develop a non-racial/post-racial/anti-racist consciousness and disposition if everything is designed to be splintered on racial and/or ethnic grounds. His answer is simple: it is through the dictates of reason, morality and praxis.

The most advanced reasoning was possible through historical materialism's ability to demonstrate the impermanence of structures and patterns of domination- of slavery, of the forms of thinking that constructed race and racial domination and land dispossession in the emerging world capitalist system: in the history of chattel slavery itself and indenture- in the emergence of colonial forms and later of so-called scientific racism. Fascism during his early years was precisely a product of such an historical emergence. There is no way if one accepts that these are contingent phenomena, a product of domination they cannot constitute modalities of thinking.

Such grounding in historical materialism is seen as irrelevant among many post-modern and post-colonial theorists. It is seen with total suspicion by Afro-centric philosophers or theorists who are trying to argue for a black epistemology and ontology- and have been quite effective in silencing or marginalising Marxist analysis from most Universities in the country.

If reason involved study, reading and mental effort- a serious strain on hard-pressed working people, moral convictions demanded a harder sacrifice: a break with all traditions and a preservation of what could be used in a new context marked by equality.

This had to be understood, as an emergence of a secular belief in the equality of all- here, Gandhianism, secularist trends in Islam and Christianity were important for Dadoo despite historical materialism. Cultures and traditions had in them all the caring and solidaristic elements for a substantive equality- that is why for him the "amorphous" skin-colour simplistic definition of nationhood was a mistake. Therefore, caste-systems, customary authorities, hereditary rulership were earthly and never divine forms of domination. Such an idea of equality was as foreign to Europe as it was to Africa, India or China. Similarly, democracy was as much Yoruba, Zulu as much as it could have been said to be Greek. It had to be fought for everywhere. Within such moral secularism, "racing" the other is impossible.

Finally, he strongly believed in exemplary action by all... for all- to be seen to be in a struggle across the colour-line was vitally important. It was through struggles against unjust laws and against exploitation that a consciousness of a common national destiny and a consciousness of class was to emerge.

Was this a product of a peculiar time or does any of this survive today? Is it possible to hold onto such forms of thinking these days? If we believe not, then why are we honouring Dadoo- if we believe yes, how do we explain the intensification of race-talk, otherings and marginalisations at a time when the institutions of racial domination have been dismantled? The answers will not be found in Doc Dadoo but in all of us taking up the mantle of thinking and acting.

IV

Dadoo was not there to witness the collapse of the Berlin Wall and to witness the rejection by Russian and Eastern European people, the social systems he so much admired. By passing on in 1983, he was not there to assess what happened to the liberation movements he had also admired and worked with, MPLA, Frelimo and the ZANU/ZAPU formations. When he departed, he did so in the midst of growing resistance in South Africa.

We must also avoid the mistake of propelling him to respond to many contemporary debates: what would have he said about Joe Slovo's key paper, "*Has Socialism Failed*" or the more

recent *Bua Komanisi* document – would he have been a democratic socialist or a strict Marxist-Leninist. Where would he have stood in the Polokwane divide? What would he have said about the SACP now and having just read the salvo against the “Cronin-Nzimande faction” authored by Satgar and Zita? How would he have responded to the current politics of the working-class and social movements would have remained a quandary? What is certain at least in the things he said and stood for, the racism of a new rising right-wing populism that externalises Indians would have upset him.

We are re-reading Dadoo in the midst of a peculiar second stage- there is an African petty bourgeoisie on its road to class power, towards restless and endless accumulation, towards forms of commodity fetishism unimagined by Marx or Fanon, a structure of greed that is relentless in its reproduction- believing without any historical consciousness or social understanding that all would skip a class to constitute a vast all-inclusive African bourgeoisie. Much of the cacophony is because such an imagined road is meeting with severe structural limits.

Such a tension can produce comedy and tragedy – it can always blame Xhosas, Zulus, Indians, Coloureds, Whites, AmaKwerekwere for its woes.

I think it is important to re-read Dadoo and become quasi-Dadooists. As socialists, even if we differ on many points of theory, even if we note that no race ought to have a monopoly of the right to exploit others, we have to face it, that the struggle has not been just about that right, but about the rights of those exploited, oppressed and excluded. If we owe any allegiance to his ideas, we have to ask again in the year 2009 - who is being exploited, oppressed and excluded today?

Can non-racism be necessary?

Not unless the correlation between race and the poverty and exploitation is socio-economically removed from social experience. I emphasise this because it is easy to remove it discursively.

Nevertheless, as inequality has its necessary presupposition in notions of equality, so does race and racial inequality have a presupposition in notions (not *a* notion) of non-racism and a common humanitas. There are languages through which to speak about race that are not drenched by it. To articulate them given the intensity of race-talk or its opposite, silence, will not be easy. It is the task of intellectuals - not is it now - for hard work and for freedom. Freedom for social equality and from discrimination and intolerance?

ENDNOTES

The only available collection of Dadoo's writings was put together by ES Reddy and published by Madiba Press. All direct quotes are from that volume.

Available on-line from the ANC and SACP sites are Jo Slovo's "Tribute" and Essop Pahad's which first appeared in the "African Communist" in 1979 to mark Dadoo's 70th birthday.

The biographies in question are Luli Callinicos's (Tambo), Stephen Clingman (Bram Fischer) and Mark Gevisser's (Mbeki). Chris Van Wyk's is a short bio of Dadoo for a popular audience.

Frene Ginwala, 'Class, Consciousness and Control: Indian South Africans, 1860-1946' (D.Phil., Oxford, 1976); Essop Pahad, 'The Development of Indian Political Movements in South Africa, 1924-1946' (Ph.D., Univ. of Sussex, 1972)

Broader politics see, Tom Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (Johannesburg, 1983), and,

Peter Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa: The African National Congress, 1912-1952* (London, 1970).

On SACTU Ken Luckhardt and Brenda Wall, *Organise or Starve*

The recent volume edited by Vishwas Satgar and Langa Zita, *New Frontiers for Socialism in the 21st Century*. Johannesburg:COPAC, 2009.

The debate alluded to, Mngxitama, Mapadimeng, Pillay was in the *Business Day*; Nzimande's response was in the latest *Umsebenzi*.