

Remembering Krishna Rabilal by Roy Chetty

Remembering Krishna Rabilal, recipient (posthumous) of the Order of Mendi for Bravery in Gold, awarded by the South African president, President Zuma in 2011

Today [31 January 2021] is the 40th death anniversary of Krishna Rabilal and his fellow liberation martyrs who were killed on 30 January 1981 in Matola, Mozambique by a South African death squad.

Krishna first shot to prominence in Merebank, south of Durban, Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal - KZN) when, in 1970, he obtained a 'B' symbol in Mathematics in his matriculation year – the highest Mathematics symbol ever achieved by a student then at Merebank High School. However, he was not allowed to enrol at university as he had not passed the compulsory Afrikaans matriculation subject. The quota-pass rate and the racial system were applied ruthlessly at all levels of education.

Jobs were also hard to come by in 1971. Most afternoons would find Krish (as he was popularly known) seated in the Merebank public library, surrounded by students seeking his assistance with Mathematics problems. Krish was a very soft-spoken, patient teacher. I observed his popularity in the library. We were not friends then as he had been a year ahead at school.

The year 1971 saw a political awakening among some Merebank youth, several still in high school. It was a year of civic and political meetings, with the youth attending the various public meetings protesting the 10th anniversary of the apartheid republic and supporting the growing campaign for 'clemency for political prisoners. The Natal Indian Congress (NIC) was being revived - a branch was established in Merebank; the South African Students Organisation (SASO), the Black Consciousness university student organisation was strengthening, especially at Alan Taylor Residence – the University of Natal Medical School's Black Section (UNB) which was walking distance from Merebank. The political ferment continued into 1972 and thereafter. Many of the youth were elected onto the council of the local ratepayers' association, following a call by the chairperson, Mr M R Moodley, for 'new blood to come in' and assist with mobilising community support for the legal action against the Durban City Council regarding the 'final selling price of council homes'.

The radicalised youth were beginning to coalesce into groups. One such was around the class of 1970 with Kambadesan Govender (Coastal), Munmohan Juggernath (Spider), Satish Thirubeni, Krishna Rabilal (Krish), Vis Pillay and Roy Chetty publishing the 'Sentinel' community newsletter on less than a shoestring budget.

Sometime in 1972, Krish had begun working for Roberts Construction as a cost clerk. The site offices were the usual prefab structures on the construction sites. Clerks were often shunted, as the need arose, among the various construction sites at the AECl plant (Umbogintwini), Sugar Terminal (the third silo was being built at Maydon Wharf) and the new Greyville railway station. Not long thereafter Krish 'organised' a job at the Greyville construction site for Vis (Ivan) Pillay.

In early 1974, Krish also 'organised' a job for me at the AECI site in Umbogintwini. I was transferred to the Maydon Wharf site by midyear, where Krish was then stationed. Krish was a very valued cost clerk at Roberts. Chadwick, the site- manager at the Maydon Wharf project who had to report to his bullying regional financial manager, was wholly dependent on Krish for the site costings and reports. Chadwick was at a terrible loss on the days Krish was not around. Working with Krish at Maydon Wharf was very pleasant. We looked forward to our lunch break when we would cut across to the Victoria Embankment / Albert Park area or sit on the wharf watching the harbour activities around us.

Those were not the days of generous sick and holiday leave for clerks. Around September 1974, Krish and I decided to 'duck' work for a few days and travel with Rishi Singh to Cape Town. Rishi had access to the family VW Beetle, and both Rishi and I were on a mission to visit our girlfriends (who we married at the end of that year). A visibly relieved Chadwick greeted Krish on our return to work. No questions were asked.

By 1973 the South African Police's Special Branch (SB) had begun to monitor political radicalism in Merebank. The youth were under surveillance from the SBs as well as members of the local constabulary and informers. Throughout the country, activists were being arrested, detained, tortured and imprisoned on Robben Island.

Some of us decided to adopt a dual strategy of clandestine and open activism. In 1974, our grouplet of Vis, Krish and I rented an outbuilding in lower Sambalpur Road, Merebank (which was off our known beaten path) as a secret base. We used the place to design posters, banners and leaflets. The landlord-family must have wondered why we did not furnish and live in the place – anyway it was easy money for them.

That year the local bus company raised the bus fares. If memory serves me well the fare had doubled from 5 cents to 10 cents. Sensing that the leadership of the ratepayers' association was dragging its heels on tackling the issue, the youth decided to mobilise the community directly and organised a public meeting at the Raj Mahal Hotel Hall in Merebank. A huge banner was painted at our base, with large lettering emblazoned in red: 'WAR DECLARED ON BUS OWNERS'. The banner was draped early morning at the main bus stop in Dharwar Road for the attention of the worker commuters.

The large gathering resolved to form the Merebank Bus Passengers Association (MBPA) and elected Krish Rabibal secretary. The meeting also resolved to organise a bus boycott should the bus owners be intransigent, encouraging commuters, where possible, to take the trains. As organisers, we were buoyed that the elected committee included the militant trade unionist, Aunty Joyce (from lower Raj Mahal Road), Pastor Singh (from Bhuj Road), and Mr Thirubeni (Satish's father). We suspected that Mr Thirubeni was communist-leaning. He always dressed in a white shirt and red tie, even at home. We visited him often as his enthusiasm, radical outlook and easy manner drew us to him.

Within days of the mass meeting, the bus owners agreed to meet with the association. They pleaded loss-making but agreed to consult more and provide a user-friendly service. The MBPA nevertheless continued to be an agitational body. Several commuters walked the distance to and from the train station (daily) as the fare increases had hit them severely.

The group spent almost every evening and weekend together, frequenting each others' homes. We were all fortunate to have tolerant and hospitable mothers. Krish was a devoted son, and he was very fond of his brothers. His face used to light up whenever his little brothers were around, teasing and playing with them.

The Krish, I knew, was a gentle revolutionary, the gentlest of the gentle. He lived a chaste life, never smoked or imbibed liquor. I am not even aware of him ever having had any romantic attachment. Rare qualities for a revolutionary, even in those days!

Vis, Krish and I met again in Botswana in September 1977. They had jumped the fence and were in transit to the African National Congress (ANC) up north. We spent about two days in Serowe, Botswana. I was not able to persuade them to stay.

In the two-years since my departure political work in Durban had matured to a much deeper underground level with the return of several ex-Robben Islanders and the unprecedented Soweto and township uprisings. Vis and Krish were committed strongly to the underground ANC / South African Communist Party (SACP) network internally and externally.

References:

- Roy Chetty, 30 January 2021 (Facebook post)
- Chetty, R. (2022). Email to SAHO, 15 May 2022