

A case of “pragmatic ethnicity”?: The Natal Indian Congress in the 1970s

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[FIRST DRAFT - WORK-IN-PROGRESS: NOT TO BE QUOTED]

The political terrain changed considerably through the 1960s as apartheid consolidated its iron grip. The heady days of the 1940s and 1950s when the trade union movement was powerful, had been eroded as Indian workers in particular were brought into formal bargaining structures. The Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), such a vital school for the production of trade union organisers, was banned, and the South African Congress of Trades Unions (SACTU), while not banned, was hunted out of overt influence. The break-up of old Indian neighbourhoods by the Group Areas Act had also meant the loss of local level leaderships and networks.

The Congress movement was further decimated by the repression that followed the banning of the African National Congress (ANC) and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) in 1960. Over the next few years, through a series of bannings, house arrests, and listings of individuals, as well as widespread imprisonment and torture, the state began to brutally and systematically crush internal resistance. The ANC and PAC were forced underground and the proscription on open protest led to the adoption of the armed struggle by both organisations. The NIC was not banned, but key individuals were rendered ineffective in various ways. Some who joined the ANC’s armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, like Billy Nair and Ebrahim Ebrahim, were soon arrested and would languish on Robben Island for the next decade and more; M.P. Naicker, H.A. Naidoo, and George Ponnen were in exile; while stalwarts like Dr Monty Naicker and I.C. Meer were banned or listed. Those who were listed as “communists” could not be quoted and certainly could not participate in any political activity.

At the same time that it was crushing opposition to apartheid, the government’s confidence and assurance was boosted by the economic boom of the 1960s which saw a doubling of foreign investment while immigration resulted in the white population increasing by almost fifty percent. Increasingly secure, the government began instituting policies to enforce segregation between Black and white. Between 1960 and 1985 over three million Africans were forcibly removed to especially created Homelands (“Bantustans”) while Indians and Coloureds were relocated to townships.

While Africans were to become citizens of homelands, the National Party (NP) government, whose election manifesto of 1948 had stated that Indians were a foreign element who would be repatriated, created a Department of Indian Affairs in 1961. This was acknowledgement of the *fait accompli* that Indians were part of the permanent population. A National Indian Council was formed in 1963 to make recommendations to government about matters affecting Indians. The Council was re-established as the South African Indian Council (SAIC) in 1965. In 1968 the SAIC became a statutory body with elected and nominated members.

While critical of these developments, the NIC, struggling to survive under the tentacles of a repressive state, failed to mount a serious challenge to the department. Ela Gandhi recalls that politically the 1960s were

really dark years when we felt complete disillusionment. The bannings took place in 1963, the arrests took place within 3 years and there was a deep sort of gloom and unhappiness. There was a lot of fear in the community.... There was this whole scare for communism and it was very orchestrated from the government. People were afraid because they [government] ... could detain you without reason, ban you without reason. People didn’t know what was legal and what was illegal and that fear of being banned or being arrested was there because of the uncertainty.

It is in this context that the NIC was revived. The situation was not totally bleak. There was some upswing in local resistance. The ANC had consolidated itself in exile by the later 1960s, the Basil D’

Oliveira affairs and its ramifications had boosted the morale of Black people in South Africa, the Black Consciousness Movement was emerging, and there were intermittent worker protests. Most of this was outside the purview of the ANC. The NIC, however, was different to these new forms of protest in that it harked back to the protest politics of the pre-1960s era. The revival of the NIC was the most overt link to the ANC and the Freedom Charter and helped put the charterists in the public domain once again. However, as discussed below this came with a myriad of controversial issues, some of which overlapped. After examining the context in which the NIC was revived, this paper will concentrate on two issues which dominated debate in the 1970s viz. ethnicity (retaining its “Indian” name and orientation) and participation in the government created SAIC.

Revival of the NIC

As the SAIC began to take shape there were fears among NIC stalwarts that conservative voices would dominate discourse amongst Indians and alienate them from the wider struggle. At the Bolton Hall in Durban on 25 June 1971 a committee was formed to pursue the project of reviving the NIC. Mewa Ramgobin was chairman while the likes of George Sewpersadh, Dr. Dilly Naidoo, Ela Gandhi, S.P. Pachy, B.D. Maharaj, Ramlall Ramesar, D. Bundoo, M.R. Moodley, N.N. Naicker, and Bill Reddy were on the committee. Dr “Jerry” Coovadia recalled that at this time, the NIC ‘was the only game in town.’ His point was that with trade unions dormant and the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in its nascent stage, revival of the NIC was the most viable option. Ramgobin explained the decision to revive the NIC:

The NIC, which was a component of the Congress Alliance, was not banned but had been dormant and moribund, a harsher term would be defunct, but let us say that because of banning orders of individuals for ten years that organization did not exist. With the introduction of government institutions like the SAIC, the likes of us took a very active position to say ... it is now time for us to reflect on the possibilities of reviving the NIC. Within two weeks of the closure of the “Commission of Clemency” in June 1971, I phoned a few friends and asked them to have lunch with me at Phoenix, and there was consensus that we should revive the NIC. We enlarged the grouping to include the trade unions, civic organizations, business persons, professional people.... We decided to take this idea to the community and ask for a mandate.

The mass meeting at which the ad hoc committee was formed took place at the Bolton Hall in June 1971. Ramgobin recalled that BC members like Steve Biko and white trade unionists like Dr Richard Turner were present at the meeting where ‘we got a unanimous mandate from the community to revive the Congress. Within thirty days, with the co-operation of the community that committee was successful in establishing 29 branches, from Stanger, to Port Shepstone, to Newcastle.’ The question of who this “community” was beggars some analysis. In the initial stages, as Ela Gandhi suggests above, it was confined mainly to professionals, some business people and students. Further, Ramgobin’s assertion that there was ‘unanimous’ support is only correct when you exclude the opposition from the BCM minority at the meeting, which is discussed below.

The process of reviving the NIC was hard work. Dilly Naidoo recalled going around Natal to inform the public and to test reaction:

We used to organise meetings in Newcastle, Ladysmith, Stanger, Port Shepstone and so on, and there was Omar Badsha and myself, Mewa [Ramgobin], [George] Sewpersadh, and Jerry [Coovadia] and Farouk [Meer], and others. But inevitably we had to work, so we’ll have our meetings in the evenings [and] on the way back we put the lights on and we’re making our press statements, the guys are dictating, writing the press statements, tell them what a big number of people we had and that kind of thing, just to get things across.

The committee decided to relaunch the NIC at a convention at the Phoenix Settlement on 2 October 1971. The date coincided with Gandhi’s birthday. This was symbolic because Gandhi was a founding member of the NIC and founder of the settlement (Bhana, 1997: 117). Two weeks before the conference, however, Ramgobin was slapped with another five-year ban, this time with a banning order, which prohibited him from participating. Ramgobin was replaced as president by George Sewpersadh who, in turn, would be banned in 1973. When Sewpersadh was banned, he was replaced

by M.J. Naidoo. Sewpersadh would take up the presidency of the NIC when his banning order expired in 1978.

At Bolton Hall, where the first public meeting had taken place, BCM adherents had protested that the revival of the NIC was reinforcing an ethnic and racial divisions. It is that division that the next part of the paper examines.

Race

The NIC was not revived in a vacuum. In the political hiatus of the 1960s, the powerful new ideology of Black Consciousness emerged as a new voice. Initially a philosophical movement rather than an active political programme, BC filled the vacuum created by the banning of the ANC and PAC. BC originated among university students who were influenced by developments in Black theology in the USA. They were frustrated by white domination of the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) and in 1969 split to establish the all-black South African Students' Organisation (SASO) under the presidency Seve Biko, a student from the segregated medical school at the University of Natal. Biko argued that Black liberation had to be both mental and physical and he called on Black people to run their own organizations rather than rely on white liberals. Strini Moodley and Saths Cooper were two of the BCM's most visible faces in Durban. While conceding that there was a political vacuum, they opposed the establishment of racial and ethnic organisations.

According to Strini Moodley, the 'Indian Congress and your Coloured Congress, all of these ethnic organisations were terrified of us, primarily because we didn't bring Indians, Africans and Coloureds together, we brought "Black" people together. That was one of the most powerful moments in the history of this country.' Jerry Coovadia countered that

for us in the NIC - at least most of us - it was not fear of [BC ideology] but that it was a totally false perception of the roots of the freedom struggle in South Africa, based on borrowed language from the US, foreign to the conviction that paths to democracy must include all "racial" groups or else the end product could not be fully non-racial or democratic, and would be the antithesis of all the great socialist and "liberal human rights" philosophies into which we had been attracted.

At the Bolton Hall, protest by BC members included hand-held posters and vocal disagreements at the rejuvenation of an ethnic organization rather than a Black organization. Ela Gandhi recalled that 'all the students came there to say "think black and not Indian".' NIC members refuted criticism on the grounds that their decision to revive the NIC was a strategic one based on realities on the ground. Farouk Meer, for example, argued:

They said that by reviving an ethnic organization we were reviving ethnic divisions and this was counter to the whole concept of non-racialism that we, in fact, were propagating. And our answer to that was very simple: this is nothing more than a strategy. The NIC was not fighting exclusively for Indian rights, it was not fighting for an Indian Utopia. It was mobilising one particular sector of the community and moving them towards a broader South Africa, a broader non-racialism.

Ramgobin also stressed that reviving the NIC was the most practical option:

By then we had been separated in ghettos. By 1971, I as an individual could not operate in Kwa Mashu, nor could a person from Kwa Mashu operate freely, as an African, in so-called Indian areas. The NIC didn't preclude the need for a political organization to mobilize people against apartheid. There was no basic disagreement on this issue outside of the question of tactics - whether to mobilize Indians in an Indian organization or Africans in an African organization. On the balance of forces operative on us, it was decided that we should go for the organization of the people with a historical organization.

According Jerry Coovadia, when the mandate was given to launch the NIC, it was agreed to hold discussions with the BC. Instead of resolving differences, 'differences became even more pronounced.' The conclusion reached by the majority of NIC members was that the 'BCM regarded BC as an end in itself, whereas the NIC believed that 'BC was a strategy or a means to an end - a way to raise consciousness. But there was a need was to find a way to mobilize the masses and practically

this meant working in the different racially based areas. Nevertheless we often worked together with other racial groups, drawing from the student movement and other activists.' Farouk Meer, who was also an executive member of the NIC, conceded that

perhaps we might have misunderstood the BC philosophy, at the time.... Although I heard Biko speak, I didn't have one-on-one interaction. The one-on-one interaction was through people like Saths Cooper and Strini Moodley. And the way they were promoting BC, it came across as a racist ideology - no whites should be in the organisation ... even if he's a person who believes in non-racialism. We saw it as catering exclusively for so-called Blacks as opposed to the Congress philosophy which was an all-embracing philosophy, which says look, believe in non-racialism.

Even though they opposed the establishment of an ethnic organisation, Saths Cooper and Strini Moodley were initially part of the NIC. The September 1971 *SASO Newsletter*, in reporting on this meeting, was ambiguous. As Karis and Gerhart (1997: 45) point out, the newsletter had a dual message. It insisted that the mandate of the meeting was to work for a people's congress while also 'work[ing] towards the consolidation of the Indian people ... who are self-reliant and proud of their culture, heritage and their colour.' Cooper, in fact, was the first vice-president of the NIC. They eventually broke away to form the Black People's Convention (BPC) to provide a political body organized along BC principles. Relations between the NIC and BCM gradually became strained. According to Moodley, they initially wanted to 'work with the NIC primarily because we wanted to change the way in which they were thinking.' However, they became upset when the NIC failed, in Moodley's words, to comprehend their message and labelled them 'as nothing more than the PAC.' This charge was made by Ramesar. When the NIC refused a demand from SASO to retract the statement, Saths Cooper resigned from the NIC executive in June 1972 (Bhana, 1997: 118).

These difference intensified when, according to Moodley, 'ANC-supporting people called a Black Renaissance Convention in which they wanted the BCM to redefine itself. It is from that point on that you began to see that the ANC was not going to take kindly to the BCM.' Moodley was referring to the convention at Hammanskraal from 13-16 December 1974 which was attended by the likes of Dr Allen Boesak, the Rev. John Thorne, President of the South African Council of Churches, the Rev. Stan Mogoba, Professor Fatima Meer and others seen to be sympathetic to the ANC (Karis and Carter, 1997: 533-545). Despite the intensity of these differences and debates, activists on both sides emphasised that their personal relations remained friendly. Farouk Meer, for example, spoke at the funeral of Steve Biko in King Williams Town in September 1977.

Criticism of an "Indian" Congress was not confined to BC members. Academics Singh and Vawda (1988: 16) wrote that 'discourses which jumble together intra-community concerns and trans-community commitments may produce the effect that the "Indian" as an ethnically constituted political subject remains intact.' Several Congress stalwarts were robust in refuting such arguments. Billy Nair, for example, told Julie Frederickse that it was very difficult to achieve non-racialism under apartheid. Even at the factory floor level, he pointed out, that 'workers have their prejudices. [Do you] actually suggest that the moment the worker leaves the factory floor level, he maintains his non-racial attitudes? No, far from it ... As long as they move into a wider racial set up which is not destroyed, you're going to be back at square one.'

Old Congress stalwart M.D. Naidoo also dismissed the notion that a separate organization was racist:

The content of racism is racial discrimination where one group which exercises power uses that power to gain advantages and to exploit other race groups. It doesn't mean I don't like you because I'm white and you are Black, your like and my dislike, that's not racism. If people of a particular kind get together because they find it more convenient for them to mobilize themselves, but the objectives for which they are working are identical with a similar group of a different kind - that's not racism. There must be a content, a meaning to racism.... It's not much use for an Indian who can barely speak the language to go out to the rural areas and talk to Africans who'd see him in terms of the prejudices that the apartheid regime has promoted. He will not have that empathy with him. To organize them, they need one of their own, that's the reality.

Even some within the NIC were uncomfortable with the name. As early as 2 October 1971, the Durban Central Branch submitted a memorandum to the convention for the revival of the NIC to change its name to the 'People's Congress'. The NIC's provincial congress decided to retain the name by 32 votes to 30 (Dhillon, 1999: 45). At the July 1973 NIC provincial conference in Pietermaritzburg there was a proposal to change the name to South African People's Conference. A subcommittee comprising of A.S. Chetty, Ela Ramgobin (nee Gandhi), R. Paparam, Mannie Jacobs, A.H. Randeree, D. Beharie, Bala Mudaly, and M.J. Naidoo was appointed to investigate the issue (Bhana, 1997: 119). However, despite the debate "Indian" was retained. According to Ela Gandhi, ultimately, the decisive factor in favour of retaining the name was the link to history: 'it was felt that the link that NIC had to both Gandhiji and to the Congress alliance and the Freedom Charter was important and should not be lost by changing the name.'

Class

Beginning in 1973 there was a rapid growth of the trade union movement which would culminate in the formation of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) in April 1979. FOSATU's membership increased from 70,000 in 1979 to 320,000 in 1983. Yet, according to Singh and Vawda (1988: 14), the NIC's 'discourse for most of the 1970s ignored the structural existence of the working class and the existence of a struggling labour movement with non-racial and democratic principles based on the strength of its shop floor organisation.' Kumi Naidoo (1997) made a similar point when he argued that there was a vast gap between the NIC's middle-class, mainly male leadership and the working-classes. Among Indian workers, he went on to say, the NIC had 'no support worth the name ... and tended to issue pious statements instead of doing anything of a practical nature.' He described the NIC prior to the 1980s as 'relatively stagnant, in a largely reactive mode, and mainly issued press statements. There was a lack of grassroots mobilisation, and progressive political consciousness amongst Indians was low...'

The NIC leadership lacked working class representation. Julie Frederickse put this to M.D. Naidoo who agreed but refuted the suggestion that this compromised the agenda of the NIC:

The objective of the Congress movement today is the overthrow of the apartheid regime and replace it with a non-racial democracy, and therefore it is a broad enough movement.... [People] may point to Billy Nair and say: "Look at Billy Nair - not only a communist, belong to Umkhonto we Sizwe, and a trade union leader." What does that mean? Does that convert the ANC into a trade union organization? The NIC has people - Sewpersadh is a lawyer, my brother M.J. is a lawyer - sure - Paul David is a lawyer - there's a number of lawyers there - Jerry Coovadia is a doctor. So what?

The issues taken up by the NIC, members pointed out, were not limited to "middle class" concerns. D.K. Singh and Jerry Coovadia, for example, addressed a mass meeting in Chatsworth on 22 September 1972 which was attended by 6,000 people who were protesting about transport (*Leader* 29 September 1972); during the industrial strikes of 1973, the NIC took up the grievances of some workers with employers; when the Victoria Street Market burnt down, they took up the issue of new market space with the city council; and when Tin Town was flooded in 1976 they helped organise relief (Bhana, 1997: 120-121). These same individuals within the NIC, Jerry Coovadia pointed out, later formed anti-apartheid health organisations such as the National Medical and Dental Association (NAMDA) and the Progressive Primary Health Care Organisation (PPHC), whose struggle for health for all were based on a National Health System which, he stated, 'was far in advance of any other progressive formulation by any other political body, and is a forerunner of the NHI of the present ANC government.'

Government structures: to participate or not to participate

One of the major dilemmas facing the NIC during this period was whether to participate in government created structures. The government had set up a twenty-five person statutory SAIC in 1968 to make recommendations to the government about matters affecting Indians. In 1974 membership was increased to thirty with half the members elected by Indians. The SAIC became fully

elective in 1979. The government also created local affairs committees (LACs) in 1963. By the early 1970s there were two Indian town boards (Verulam and Isipingo) and fifteen LACs. The unambiguous message from government was that it would only listen to bodies that it had created.

For a long while the NIC was undecided about whether or not to participate in the SAIC. The debate began in earnest in 1972, a year after the government made provision for the election of five members to the SAIC in 1972. While the executive saw the SAIC as an extension of the apartheid policy of divide and rule, and as such boycotted it, there was a view that the SAIC could be used as a catalyst for change. M.J. Naidoo, as president, suggested at the NIC's 1974 conference that they should consider exploiting the 'safe' but 'rotten' platform provided by the SAIC to 'air their grievances.' Those who did so outside these structures, he argued, were banned and therefore rendered ineffective. M.J. Naidoo emphasised that he was not calling for a change in policy but tactics since those who were involved in the SAIC were coming to be seen as "leaders" of the community while the NIC was losing ground. Vice president D.K. Singh, however, argued that since the conference had resolved to open membership to all race groups, participation in racially exclusive organisations would be 'indefensible.' The matter was put to a vote and it was decided by a slim majority of 22 to 17 votes to reject participation (*Leader*, 27 September 1974).

Failure to reach consensus on the issue led one newspaper to describe the NIC in 1975 as being in a state of suspended animation... For some time now the NIC has not made a press statement nor has the NIC done anything. Pronouncements on Indian Affairs of a radical nature have come from one or two members of the community in their own right... Some members of the NIC are now seriously of the view that the NIC should be dissolved. From a practical point of view this is not likely to make a difference to the political set-up of the community (*Leader*, 27 June 1975).

While this was a strong indictment of the NIC it reflected the difficulties that the NIC was experiencing in rebuilding support. Bannings, imprisonment, and exile had created a leadership vacuum and a new generation was trying to win the trust of the masses and clarify its political understanding and strategies. Participation in government-created bodies remained a source of tension and the NIC convened an emergency meeting in June 1975, where Advocate Hassen Mall mediated, to articulate a clear position on the issue 'once and for all.' After lengthy debate it was agreed to have nothing to do with the SAIC and to ostracise those who stood for elections (*Leader*, 27 June 1975).

By the time that the NIC held its annual conference in March 1976, Ramesar, the General Secretary, made it clear that the NIC would not 'waste any of its time discussing its position vis-à-vis the LAC's and SAIC.' But the issue was far from dead. M.J. Naidoo responded:

Although I am opposed to political bodies created by the government I must confess that the leaders who are being generated by the government are growing in stature and it will soon be immaterial whether they first started off as creations of the State while against this Black leaders of high principles, not wanting to damage the image of "correctness" attributed to their conduct, are stagnating in prolonged inactivity and will soon fade away into the limbo of forgotten things. And when I view the State created bodies from this angle the need for participation is clear.... (*Leader*, 12 March 1976).

The headline of the report on the conference 'NIC – In Search of Direction' captured the dilemma that the NIC was facing. As one reporter explained, the NIC was caught between principle and pragmatism, and existed in 'a twilight world of occasional talk separated by lengthy periods of inaction.' Put starkly, the two approaches were to 'be pragmatic, work within the system, proclaim principles, but lay them aside and get involved in the day-to-day problems of the community' or 'nail principles to the mast, then withdraw like a tortoise into its shell, and let those who do not carry the community have a free platform.' Despite M.J. Naidoo's arguments, the house voted again by a slim majority not to work within the system. This led the reporter to suggest that the NIC knew what it did not want to do, but not what it wanted to do (*Leader*, 19 March 1976).

Following the 1976 conference the NIC approached its former president Monty Naicker to lend support for an Anti-SAIC campaign. Though he had virtually retired from active politics, he agreed to do so and the NIC formed an Anti-South African Indian Council Committee in November 1977. It went by the acronym ASC with Monty Naicker as chairman, Dr. Goonam as treasurer, M.J. Naidoo as vice-president, and A.H. Randeree as secretary. The clock was turned back three decades when the ASC stood for Anti-Segregation Council and the NIC, led then by Monty Naicker and Dr Goonam, unseated conservative factions within the NIC at the October 1945 elections. Indians, according to Dr. Goonam, were being asked to elect representatives to the SAIC

who themselves had no representation... Their function will be to serve the Nationalist Government as an intelligence agency into the Indian people and to stuff up their mouths with a dummy. ... Indians are being offered the right to vote for a wholly powerless body, alienated from parliament and without any influence. The generality of Indians see it as nothing, and in rejecting it, they reject "nothing" (*Leader*, 11 November 1977).

The first meeting of the ASC was held on 26 November 1977 at the Kajee Hall where the likes of Monty Naicker, Dr. Goonam, Jerry Coovadia, Rabi Bugwandeen, and Dr. Y. Variawa, chairman of the Transvaal Action Committee, shared the platform (*Leader*, 2 December 1977). There was a second meeting on 11 December 1977 at David Landau Community Centre in Asherville where Monty Naicker shared the platform with educationist Dr. A.D. Lazarus who said that he was 'not fooled by the government's phoney councils. If I am a South African citizen then why am I not given equal rights as my white counterparts?' The ASC and NIC issued a statement that the SAIC 'rubber stamps government plans and passes it on to a voteless and voiceless people' (*Leader*, 16 December 1977). But just as Monty Naicker's comeback was gathering momentum he took ill and died on 12 January 1978.

The issue of participating in the SAIC continued to linger until 1979 when Thumba Pillay, Pravin Gordhan, and I.C. Meer met with the ANC in London. Mac Maharaj, in a 2003 interview with Pdraig O' Malley, said that he organised this in his capacity as Secretary of the ANC's internal wing. The ANC's national executive discussed participation in the SAIC in early 1979 and settled on rejectionist participation, that is, to get candidates elected and then not serve on the body. The division within the NIC, in Mac Maharaj's words, was 'becoming acrimonious'. He identified key people on each side of this debate - Thumba Pillay was in the forefront of the group favouring a boycott, while Pravin Gordhan was seen to lead the faction favouring rejectionist participation. Maharaj arranged for Thumba and Pravin, accompanied by Roy Padayachie, to visit him in London. Neither side knew that the other would also be in London. I.C. Meer was already in London visiting his son.

Maharaj met with Dadoo and Aziz Pahad in a planning session and then met each group separately to 'engage in a fundamental discussion starting from basic premises.' After almost a week of discussions, Dadoo chaired a meeting attended by all three groups as well as Aziz Pahad, Mac Maharaj, and Frene Ginwala. While the ANC NEC had agreed on rejectionist participation, Dadoo himself favoured a boycott. According to Maharaj, 'Dr Dadoo says, "It appears to me that it will be more divisive to go for rejectionist participation than boycott. There are too many people on the boycott side who are going to be unbending and besides, as a tactic, it makes sense.' While I.C. Meer and Thumba Pillay agreed, Pravin 'debated but eventually agreed' they drafted a resolution to this effect, which was signed by Dadoo and Maharaj.

Yousuf Vawda made two important observations about the London meeting. The first is that this should not be seen as the NIC "toeing" the ANC line. He felt that the political arguments for participation were not effectively countered [by the ANC]. In my view the singular contribution of the ANC in that debate was the appeal to unity, which resulted in all points of view closing ranks around an anti- SAIC participation position.' The second comment made by Vawda is that the pre- and post-1976 phases in the debate about participation should not be conflated as they

were of a qualitatively different nature. Both were highly repressive periods, yet the debates were of a distinct character. In the early period, there was very little organisation at the mass level. Leaders were proposing participation out of reasons of fear (safe platform to speak out), visibility

(not being eclipsed by conservative leaders) and the like. The 1979 discourse, on the other hand, was informed by significant national and local events: the Soweto uprising, the experience of activists conducting community-based campaigns on civic and other issues, and the skills that emerged from building successful and mass-based community structures. These campaigns were of necessity local, and did not overtly challenge the political regime. The point of departure for this later discourse was of a strategic and tactical nature – how to increase political consciousness and extend the mass base through engagement in the political sphere, utilising state-sponsored institutions to achieve these objectives. For many of us, the debate was not about participation per se, but about exercising those strategic and tactical initiatives – a point lost on most commentators. This partly explains why the protagonists of the participation debate were, not surprisingly, among the most effective advocates and campaigners of the Anti-SAIC and Anti-Tricam campaigns.

The NIC formed an anti-SAIC committee and in October 1979 held an anti-SAIC convention. A similar body was formed in the Transvaal. They succeeded in the mission of ensuring low voter turnout during the election on 4 November 1981. The government had made voter registration compulsory and 297,040 of an eligible 350,000 voters registered. Just ten percent of registered voters, however, cast their vote (Bhana, 1997: 123).

In deciding whether to participate or not, the NIC had to take into account its contestation for support with those who were embracing state-sponsored bodies as well as its role in the broader Black struggle for liberation. With the ANC banned, the NIC was not only reflective of the views of the Indian community but a public demonstration that the Congress Alliance and its vision of a new South Africa encapsulated in the Freedom Charter was alive. In the end the attraction to use state structures to confront the state was trumped by the NIC's symbolic role as a living memory of Congress politics that swayed the organisation not to enter the portals of state created bodies

Rebuilding support

These debates took place in a context where the NIC was trying to rebuild its organisational structures and draw in new members. Ela Gandhi noted when the NIC was revived 'there was enthusiasm mostly students and professional and business people [but] the masses of the people were not initially involved.' The mass of Indians had their own problems as key areas of NIC support were destroyed. The working class residents of Magazine Barracks and Cato Manor were moved in the main to Chatsworth; the people of Tin Town in Springfield were moved to Phoenix, and the destruction of Clairwood, one of the strongest bases of NIC support, had begun. In these townships there was little infrastructure or organic community leadership.

The NIC's September 1974 was addressed by the likes of Chief Mangosutho Buthezi, Fatima Meer, Norman Middleton, Hassan Howa, Dr. RAM Saloojee, Frederick Van Zyl Slabbert, and Professor Barend van Niekerk (*Leader*, 9 August 1974). The line-up of speakers is indicative of the effect of repression on the NIC's leadership. Many of its leaders could not address the congress because of bannings while the NIC was trying to map out its direction and programme of action. Speakers included a mixture of white liberals, Black leaders who (later) sought to participate in government structures, and firebrand activists committed to non-collaborationist politics.

The revived NIC did not immediately capture the imagination of the community. NIC General Secretary Ramilal Ramesar told reporters prior to the 1974 conference that the challenge was to find ways to 'shake off the general apathy prevalent in the Indian political scene' which he attributed to the 'substantial amount of fear of the Government because of the massive power it wields.' He saw a light on the horizon: 'The action taken by the workers and students is a clear indication that the tide of freedom cannot be checked' (*Leader*, 20 September 1974). Aside from the apathy and fear that Ramesar refers to, the destruction of old structures and networks also had a debilitating effect on the NIC. Whatever the reason, as Karis and Gerhart points out (1997: 46), until the late 1970s, 'subject to bannings of persons and meetings, lacking a treasury and a voice in the press, seeking to engage people who were fearful of the regime's retaliation, the NIC did not achieve mass membership nor was it able to implement any ambitious plan of action.'

In reflecting on support for the NIC in the 1970s, Farouk Meer felt that the post-revival phase could be broken up into two phases:

When we were revived in 1971, I think we were nothing more than a protest voice, raising issues from time to time. We were certainly not mass-based. We did not lead any massive campaigns. So we met on a regular basis, we chartered the various issues that needed to be taken up, and we took up those issues largely in the form of petitions or memorandums or press statements. So it was nothing more than a flag-carrying organisation to say, "you know, we are here." Then we got an injection of younger people [who] were really outstanding people - people like Praveen Gordhan, Yunus Mohamed, Zac Yacoob, and others who had already begun working at a community level. And when they came into the organisation, we then went through the second phase and that is we then became more of a mass-based organisation. We began taking up bread and butter issues.

From the late 1970s the NIC became involved in "bread and butter" in the townships. This included issues around service delivery and in particular housing, with the Chatsworth Housing Action Committee and Phoenix Working Committee good examples of civic organisations that increased the mass support for the NIC. Alliances across racial lines followed with the formation of the Durban Housing Action Committee. Also important was the emergence of "home grown" civic activists and students who began to make their mark in the NIC – such as Roy Padayachie, Maggie Govender, and Charm Govender. Education was another key issue. The four months long student boycott of 1980 in particular involved entire communities and increased the visibility and involvement of the NIC, and helped to build a mass organisation through popular resistance.

The changing context by the end of the 1970s also helped to kindle political consciousness among the masses. This included the Soweto Revolt of 1976, decolonisation of Angola and Mozambique in 1975, and economic slowdown from the mid-1970s which made the apartheid military state financially unsustainable. The NIC received impetus in the 1980s with the Release Mandela Campaign (1980), the anti-Republic Day Festival (1981), the anti-SAIC campaign (1981), the education boycotts of 1980 and 1981, the Wilson Rowntree boycott (1981), the Release Mandela Campaign (1980), and the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1983 and its million signature campaign (1984), the sustained campaign against the Tricameral Dispensation, the launch of COSATU (1985), the State of Emergency, and the tenth anniversary of the Soweto Rebellion (1986). The anti-SAIC campaign in particular, Jerry Coovadia pointed out, was one that 'that had unique features. More than 94 percent stayed away, which is something of an achievement and testimony to a carefully planned mass mobilization, similar to the mobilization of the Coloured people in the Cape.

Conclusions

Following its revival in 1971 the NIC was engaged in a struggle with the government for the "hearts and minds" of Indian people in South Africa. The organisation experienced a number of teething problems and spent several years seeking to consolidate its position in a context where many former leaders were rendered ineffective, there was increased government repression, the growth of the BCM and trades unions, and the student movement was increasingly strident. Yousuf Vawda felt that the NIC's earliest challenge was to 'make sense of what it meant to propagate and practice non-racialism in a deeply divided and racist society, and rebuild connection with a broader constituency', hence the need to retain the name and essence of the organisation. Given the context in which the NIC was operating he believes that the 'observations made by Singh, Vawda, etc are somewhat ahistorical, in that they appear to ignore the notion that the political consciousness of the actors in these events, as indeed of the broader community, was informed by the particular political and social reality of Indians at the time.' Although 'Indian' was dropped from membership clause of the NIC in 1974, membership remained Indian. Jerry Coovadia felt that while the NIC 'remained essentially Indian and couldn't attract any wider support naturally ... it was an important prelude, an important training ground for the later development of the UDF, which was genuinely multi-racial.'

The NIC's orientation changed over the decade. Ela Gandhi noted a gradual shift to involve the masses as 'bread and butter issues in respect of civics and housing action committees were started,' a

process that certainly threw up many grassroots leaders including women, who were in the forefront of the demonstrations.’ There was also recognition that the NIC could not operate in isolation from the wider struggle. Ramesar, in his November 1978 secretarial report, wrote that ‘the more affluent classes cannot separate themselves from the rest of the Black people’ (Karis and Gerhart, 1997: 46). Yousuf Vawda, reflecting on his involvement in the NIC over three decades ago, feels that retrospective criticism of the NIC is ahistorical:

If there is one thing many of us learned during the struggle, it is that those who were actively involved in struggles of the people, who dared to get their hands dirtied, who were prepared to take both the risks of inviting state repression, as well as the wrath of comrades by asking the difficult questions about organisation, debating its character, and experimenting with strategic and tactical questions which challenged and extended our ideas, were the ones who invited criticism. The armchair is a safe and comfortable location, but seldom gets anywhere!

While large numbers of Indians were drawn into the struggle in the 1980s this has not translated into support for the ANC. This is due to such factors as a decline in mass participation from the mid to late-1980s as a result of information censorship measures under the state of emergency regulations and the murder, torture, and imprisonment of activists, which contributed to the weakening of political consciousness. Also contributing to unease among Indians was the 1985 racial violence in Inanda and the legacy of 1949. Establishment politicians like Amichand Rajbansi, on the other hand, have thrived. Hansen suggests that the political involvement of Indians moved from the national stage prior to 1960 to the local community by the 1970s as political action diminished countrywide under apartheid repression. Post Soweto-1976, he argues,

the vast majority of Indians embraced the notion that the community was indeed their actual horizon for any political action. An earlier striving for freedom had been replaced by a striving for autonomy – for a freedom without sovereign rights to decide on one’s individual and collective body. Autonomy means recognition of difference, even recognition of distinct abilities, a form of freedom but without sovereignty as a central aspiration (Hansen 2012: 294).

When this was put to a former activist, the reaction was ‘true – partly - the venality of the ANC itself cannot escape attribution for Indian disappointment and loss of trust and membership.’

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