

# A tribute to Yusuf Dadoo

By Joe Slovo

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**This tribute was presented as part of a panel discussion on the life and times of Dr Yusuf Dadoo, in the course of the University of the Witwatersrand, September Spring Festival**

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**T**he times of Yusuf Dadoo are well documented, and the main thrust of my short input will be about Yusuf Dadoo himself. The breadth of his contribution was highlighted in a rather heated and, to what might seem to some, a rather odd debate. It was a debate on what words we should put on the head-stone of his grave. We eventually hit on the

words: 'Fighter for national liberation, socialism and world peace.'

The choice of words for Yusuf's headstone was not easy. In fact, it occasioned much debate, and the reason is plain. How do you carve everything Yusuf was into a piece of stone? Could we, indeed, have a grave-stone large enough to do justice to the many layers which made up his many-sided contributions. To scan the whole panorama of his life's endeavours would have needed more than a grave-stone; it would have needed a mountainside!

Those of us who had the privilege of knowing Yusuf well, can imagine that if he could have had a say in his own epitaph, the one addition he would perhaps have insisted upon would have been the words 'simple musket-bearer'. For, above all, this is how he saw himself.

Comrade Yusuf was essentially a man of duty and not privilege; a revolutionary who gave and who expected nothing for himself in return. Indeed he was a musket-bearer who was always ready to be in front - for duty and not for position or honours. And when deserved honours were heaped upon him, they left him genuinely startled and almost embarrassed. He was a most modest person.

This eldest son of a wealthy merchant left no estate of property or other material possessions. A qualified medical doctor, he always spurned the wealth he could so easily have had. He combined in himself the same qualities of abnegation of worldly possessions of a Gandhi or a Trevor Huddleston. And in the process he left the community in which he was brought up and all the dominated people a most rich legacy. In the years since his death, the seeds he helped to plant and to water for well over 40 years of devoted political activism have begun to sprout their foliage.

Included in the testament which Yusuf signed on the day he died was a short reflection on whether his life merited a biography. He said: 'Over many years friends and comrades have urged that I write my memoirs. However, I did not pay much attention to such requests, thinking that my life's work was not that significant. But today, on reflection, I regret that I did not comply with their wishes. I realise that, correctly written, such a book could bring out three crucial developments linking together three motivating ideas of struggle. **Firstly**, the regeneration of the militancy of the political struggle among Indian people after my return from London. **Secondly**, as part of this process, the growth of consciousness for the urgent need for unity with the majority of the oppressed, the African people, which led to unity in action of all oppressed and democratic forces; and **thirdly**, the development of class consciousness during these struggles as an integral part, **in fact the key**, to creating a free, socialist South Africa.'

In each of these areas, in close on 50

## The life of Dadoo

**Yusuf Dadoo was born in Krugersdorp in 1909. After attending school in South Africa and India, he qualified as a doctor in Britain. He returned to South Africa in 1936, and joined the Communist Party in 1939. He served for many years on the party's leadership. He was elected president of the Transvaal Indian Congress in 1945, and president of the South African Indian Congress in 1950. Yusuf Dadoo (or Mota or Doc as he was popularly known) died in exile in London in 1983. He lies buried just a few feet away from the grave of Karl Marx in Highgate Cemetery.**

years of political activism, Yusuf won positions in our history which, in combination, are perhaps unique. He reinjected into the Indian community the Gandhi-like spirit of pride and defiance, and became this community's foremost national leader. But he went further than the Gandhi of the earlier days, he saw more clearly than the young Gandhi that the fate of all the black oppressed is indivisible. And through his endless drive for unity in action between all the dominated peoples, he became one of the foremost heads of all the the black oppressed. In song and speech his name rang out with the Luthulis, the JB Marks's and other national liberation leaders, and not just among Indians. What is more, he never bought his national popularity at the expense of hiding the very driving force of his political life, a devotion to internationalism, to socialism as the ultimate foundation for true freedom and liberation. He was a proud communist and this devotion informed everything he did as a revolutionary nationalist.

Hours before his death he dictated a message to the Central Committee of the SACP which was meeting the following day. In it he said: 'Today, almost as never before, the South African workers are on the march. In this field a great responsibility rests on our Party. We are the revolutionary Party of the working class, whose clear role is that of the vanguard in the fight for socialism. The working class, in essence the black working class in our country, is the pivotal force in the struggle for a revolutionary overthrow of the entire apartheid system. As such our Party must place its main focus and emphasis on organising, uniting and giving clear guidance to this class, which forms the backbone of our struggle. Included in this task is assessing our strength and weakness

in the trade union movement as a whole, assessing (re-defining if necessary) the role of SACTU, and ensuring our future working in this vital field meets the demands of the time.'

His principled refusal to hide his ultimate commitments presents something of an enigma since it seemed in no way to detract from the regard - sometimes bordering on worship - in which he was held by his immediate community. It was not then and is even less so today, an easy mix. He stemmed from a community which, with all its racial wounds, nonetheless suffered a lesser degree of discrimination than the African majority. It was a community in which insecure commercial vested interests, which were attained through individual initiative and imagination, had to be jealously guarded. In addition, it was a minority community filled with the uncertainty of being hemmed in between two major forces, with a degree of some African grass-roots resentment (stoked up by regime policy) against the traders' role in their exploitation. (This found horrific expression in the 1948 Natal massacre).

But Yusuf, more than any other Indian leader, became the beacon of hope and the beacon of growing acceptance that, at the end of the day, the fate of all blacks was a common one. And, in relation to the Indian community, what made this possible was not just his unending political drive to achieve unity, but perhaps even more so in the way he was perceived as a result of his personal example. Like Gandhi before him, he eroded the understandable impotence felt by an apprehensive minority. Moving away from the received orthodoxy of what is really meant by 'revolutionary' struggle, he absorbed one of the indigenous traditions of our own realities - the Gandhite

concept of defiance, of refusal to collaborate even at the risk of incarceration. And he was among the first to offer himself. The 1946 Defiance Campaign against Smuts' anti-Indian laws not only helped to inject a renewed sense of self-regard in the Indian community, but was also a harbinger of the new militancy which spread through the ranks of all the black oppressed.

I recall, on the lighter side, an exchange between Yusuf Dadoo and Buirski, who was a Party veteran from the 1920s. And comrade Buirski poked fun at this 'Gandhite deviation' by describing the campaign as 'squatting on a plot'. Yusuf replied: 'The comrade does not have to squat on his plot: he owns it.'

### Embraced MK

But Dadoo went beyond Gandhi, and when even the little remaining room to manoeuvre was blocked, he embraced with enthusiasm the creation of MK.

Yusuf Dadoo had another seminal quality which helped soften the reaction of those in his community who, because of their economic status, were nervous about his unhidden commitment to a socialist future. He was a passionate internationalist, but equally passionate in his pride and regard for his cultural roots.

He had the most undeviating respect for his community's languages and religious traditions. He saw no conflict there.

Diversity, he understood, was no obstacle to unity, indeed it could enrich the South African nation in the making.

This explains his insistence while in exile in London to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. (I'm not sure whether any other Chairper-

son of a Communist Party can claim the title of Haj!) I remember meeting him on his return to Heathrow airport in London, head shaven, kettle in hand and white robe.

It was with the same genuine respect for his people's beliefs that he expressed the wish to ensure that Muslim rites would also take place at his funeral ceremony.

In summary, there are few figures in our history to match Yusuf Dadoo's grasp, in practice, of the very complex relationship in our country between national struggle and class struggle. His contribution was not in the sphere of theoretical

treatises, but in the practice of struggle and the personal example of his whole life-style.

When we landed in Cape Town for the Groote Schuur Talks in May 1990, Yusuf Dadoo was one of those at the very top of my mind. If only he had lived to see how far we had advanced in the centuries-old struggle to destroy this evil system.

But even though he was fated not to live to the inevitable future of a free South Africa, he truly lived to make it possible.

There is an important lesson in all this, especially at this moment, and especially for those in the Indian community who are today being so assiduously wooed by the National Party which, together with previous white minority ruling parties, kept them as ghetto people for more than a century.

I am confident that the example that Yusuf Dadoo has given will play a very fundamental role in ensuring that those who have been sitting on top do not succeed in weaning those in this community away from their natural allies — their fellow South Africans in the struggle for a true democracy. ★

**'If only Doc had lived to see how far we had advanced in the centuries-old struggle to destroy this evil system'**