Chota Motala: A Biography of Political Activism in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands


If you drive through Pietermaritzburg on the main N3 highway you will inevitably drive under a large interchange with the sign Dr Chota Motala Road. Few people in Pietermaritzburg, and indeed South Africa (SA), know about the man behind the name. This book sets the record straight. Written by Goolam Vahed, who is professor of history at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, it begins with the upbringing of Chota Motala in Dundee, Northern Natal, and his subsequent education at a Sastri college in Durban before going to study medicine in India. After qualifying at the Grant Medical School in Bombay he returned to SA, where he opened a general practice in Pietermaritzburg.

Motala’s political awakening occurred while he was in India, during the resistance to British rule, and when he returned to SA he started his political activism against the Nationalist government, which resulted in his being banned as well as imprisoned three times. The first time was for treason in 1956. After his case was eventually dismissed he continued his activities, acting as a ‘bridge’ between the political parties that were active in Natal at the time as well as working as a general practitioner. His actions lead to his second imprisonment in the Pietermaritzburg Old Jail in 1960 during the State of Emergency, where he was held for 5 months.

During this time the Motala house in Boom Street became a stop-over for activists such as Nelson Mandela, Ahmed Kathrada and Walter Sisulu. Mandela, who was on the run and was then known as the ‘black pimpernel’, once visited them disguised as an old man. Motala’s wife Rabia answered the door, and thinking it was a patient asked him to wait on the veranda while she called the doctor. Apparently Mandela was thrilled that his disguise had worked so well.

Motala, who was undeterred by bannings and police harassment, continued to organise protests and resistance movements, which lead to his third arrest and imprisonment in 1986 during another State of Emergency.

This book describes Motala’s many activities in the resistance movements and also weaves into his life story the broader history of SA during this time. It is gratifying to have the work of a colleague and humanitarian, who devoted his life to both his medical practice and political activism, recognised and recorded in this way.

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