

***Suleiman M. Nana. A Biographical and Historical Record of his Life and Times. Written and compiled by Ahmed Essop.***<sup>1</sup>

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The history of the liberation struggle in South Africa is filled with heroes. Countless men and women, both famous and unknown, have given up their lives, wealth, and freedoms, for the basic human rights that we enjoy, nay, take for granted, today. According to Ahmed Essop, Suleiman M. Nana was one such man.

His new book is a glossy production, befitting both its subject and purpose. Commissioned to write it by the Suleiman Nana Memorial Trust, he undertook five years of disciplined, dedicated, and meticulous research, in order to put together a warm, respectful, and extremely dignified volume, on a disciplined, dedicated, and meticulous man.

It deals with Suleiman M. Nana's life, and hones in on the latter's activities as Secretary of the Transvaal Indian Congress during his period of tenure between 1933 and his untimely death at the age of 38, in 1944. It not only serves as a historical record of the plight of Indians in racist South Africa during the first half of the twentieth century, and the efforts of Mr. Nana to ameliorate their hardships during his eleven years in office as the secretary of the TIC, but it also highlights the genesis of all anti Indian legislation in South Africa, and how what had begun for the purpose of the preservation of White material interests, degenerated (or "evolved") into full-blown racial prejudice.

Ahmed Essop has provided us in the book, with a list of 64 repressive and discriminatory anti-Indian legislation passed between the years 1885 to 1941, and this was even before the Nationalists had assumed power in 1948! From Law 3 of 1885 (Transvaal) to The Asiatics (Transvaal Land and Trading) Act, 1941, an overwhelming array of racist laws that reveal without doubt that the Indians, like the other Black races in South Africa, were a race equally “more sinned against than sinning”. The root cause of this systematic attempt to “destroy” the Indians was an anonymous group of Whites who belonged to the then Chamber of Commerce of South Africa, and who had felt threatened by the indefatigable business prowess of the Indians. It was this anonymous group who had applied to the ruling powers to pass laws to effectively repress Indians, to prevent them from engaging in entrepreneurial opportunities, in the hope that this would thereby remove the threat that they had posed to White economic interests. Like all decent White governments prior to 1994, any request to preserve White interests was seized upon with enthusiastic zeal, and racist laws were passed with an alacrity that defied the imagination, and contributed to the swelling of White pride in no small measure. Suleiman Nana therefore, functioned in an era before Apartheid was institutionalised, when the racist ideology was being creatively developed on an ad hoc basis by testicular teams of tacit Nazis.

The book is therefore, a fitting tribute to a self-contained paradox: a man who was simultaneously forceful and unassuming, who was totally devoid of vanity, and was therefore lacking in what has in modern and post-modern times, come to be known as

“showmanship”, a quality that has been increasingly associated with insincerity, for obvious reasons. In the context of South African politics he did not seek glory for himself but justice for his people: he was therefore, like all true leaders, simultaneously background and foreground, sound and silence.

The book is not a biography in the traditional sense of the word. Instead of telling us what Mr. Nana did, Ahmed Essop has afforded us the opportunity to explore for ourselves by reading at first-hand, extracts of transcripts of memoranda, and court records, inserted into the book. Photographs, drawings, and newspaper articles, in addition, are scattered throughout its pages, thereby providing the reader with a rich feast of opportunity for exploration and discovery. It has an experiential dimension and may therefore be considered as an innovation in biographical technique. “Let the facts speak for themselves”, Essop seems to say throughout the book. Therefore, reading the book is like entering an exotic museum, filled with the most wondrous artifacts, which entice you to linger and inspect them one by one. In between each “exhibit” Essop’s commentary appears as an unobtrusive theatrical light, and focusses our attention on the nuances of each item. His commentary also serves as a continuity device, and contributes significantly to the cohesion of the book, and most importantly, gives it its unity. For example:

“The newspaper articles on the following pages give an insight into the prejudice of Whites against the presence of Indians in South Africa; the attitude of Indians to restrictive legislation, and the achievement of an Indian businessman despite the

restrictions and difficulties imposed by the rulers.” Comments such as these are placed by the author at strategic points in the text, and contribute to the development of the biographical narrative in an entirely surreptitious manner.

When one considers that Suleiman Nana did not go beyond Standard Six in his academic career, but was subsequently highly praised by his distinguished contemporaries (such as Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr and Leslie Blackwell) for his intellectual brilliance and lucidity, one is amazed that he did not use his remarkable gifts for his own personal gain, but had instead, dedicated them to the service of the Indian community. His in-depth knowledge of all anti-Indian legislation passed at the time was unrivalled. His legal arguments as presented in his memoranda were powerful and in the main resulted in success. He had a photographic memory and he used this to good effect whenever necessary. His command of the English language was astounding. For example, in his prefatory remarks in his memorandum to the Broome Commission, he wrote:

“We have consistently expressed our opposition to discriminatory and differential legislation affecting Asiatic land tenure in this Province, and will continue to agitate in a constitutional manner for the removal of this disabling legislation.”

Suleiman Nana is a representative of the early phase of the struggle. He eschewed violence. He operated at a time when the powers were prepared to some degree to listen to rational argument, and were prepared to make concessions when necessary. His mode of resistance therefore, confined itself to the sphere of rational discourse. He would

“agitate in a constitutional manner”. His Memorandum to the Murray Commission is presented almost in its entirety and displays remarkable verbal virtuosity, logical consistency, and legal acumen. Anyone reading it without knowing who the author was would not be blamed for assuming that it could have been the work of some outstanding Senior Counsel or other. Extracts from his Memorandum to the Broome Commission are also presented in the book for the sake of completeness.

In his diligence, Essop has also furnished us with an example of Nana’s prowess as a cross-examiner. Whites could not be cross-examined by “Non-Whites” at the time, but Nana was afforded the “privilege” of doing so by the powers that were. The absurdity of the racist agenda prevalent during those years becomes more pronounced when one considers it from the context and perspective of a post-colonial “free” South Africa. These pages make for entertaining and informative reading and display at the same time the breadth of Nana’s knowledge and wisdom. In Essop’s words: “Throughout the records of the cross-examinations one perceives the intellect of a man fully informed of the past and the present, able to speak authoritatively and display courtesy.”

It is important to remember that the Transvaal Indian Congress functioned without a constitution at the time. This meant that although it was an organization specifically representing the interests of Indians in the Transvaal (like its counterparts in Natal and the Cape), it did not have clear-cut objectives nor did it have any guidelines for a *modus operandi* when dealing with the South African government and its various structures. Actions of the TIC were mainly limited to representations, petitions, and interviews, with

relevant officials who were either responsible for laws prejudicial to Indians or who had had the necessary influence to amend or stay such laws, thus providing Transvaal Indians with the necessary interim relief. The broad, unarticulated strategy of the then TIC was therefore, that of peaceful negotiation. Moreover, these negotiations were conducted on an ad hoc basis, and as Essop reveals in his book, in order to be effective, necessitated developing long-standing relationships with key role-players within the then South African government. Radical, militant action against the powers that were, was therefore, not considered as an option.

The arrival of Dr. Dadoo in South Africa in 1936 soon changed matters. Dr. Dadoo, an avowed Marxist, proposed a militant stance, and wished to revert to the adoption of passive resistance as a method of effecting change within South Africa. This caused a deep rift within the TIC, and culminated in the elections held at Wemmer Pan in 1943. Nana's stance was that passive resistance was highly inappropriate at the time, in view of the fact that specific structures were in place to facilitate the making of representations to various officials of the government, some of whom *were* prepared to lend a sincere ear to such representations. Dr. Dadoo did not agree. The election therefore, was fought in order to obtain a mandate to determine which resistance strategy the TIC should in fact, adopt. The conservatives won by a narrow margin, but it was clear that the road ahead would never be the same again. In 1944 Suleiman M. Nana died at the slender age of 38 from cancer, and Dr. Dadoo thereafter assumed the role of leader of the Transvaal Indians. The strategy for resistance would now change and, as we all know, would change again, and again thereafter, in the broader context of South African politics.

We who are living on this side of 1994, looking back with hindsight into the long and turbulent history of South Africa, can now assert the following self-evident truth with the utmost certainty: that the history of the liberation struggle of the oppressed people of South Africa was essentially an evolutionary process, bedecked with conspicuous milestones that represent specific phases of that struggle: very much like an airport runway at night, illuminated by beacons, bright specks of light, guiding and enabling all incoming planes to land safely. Suleiman M. Nana was one such milestone and bright speck of light in this history.

For those keen on researching further the origins and roots of anti Indian prejudice in South Africa, Ahmed Essop's book is a good starting point.

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<sup>1</sup> Essop, Ahmed. 2002. *Suleiman Mohamed Nana – Biographical and Historical Record of His Life and Times*. Johannesburg: S. M. Nana Memorial Trust.