

M K Gandhi Library

by

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Named after Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, The M K Gandhi Library (situated at 140 Queen Street) was officially opened on 10 September 1921 - at a time when the provision of public library services to Indians was sorely neglected. The library was the vision of Parsee Rustomjee, a retailer and merchant from India who settled in South Africa. He set up the Trust in memory of his wife, Shrimati Bai Jerbai. The Bai Jerbai Rustomjee Trust, as it was called, controls the running of the library and the Parsee Rustomjee Hall, which is part of the library.

Some notable trustees over the years were Mr Amod Jhaveri, Parsee Rustomjee, Sorabjee Rustomjee, Hermann Kallenbach, R K Khan, A H West and Manilal Gandhi. In turn, The Library Committee comprised of executive members, notably, Amod Jhaveri, V. Lawrence, Sorabjee Rustomjee, A J Choonoo amongst others. The first librarian was Mr Essop Babu and Mr A M Kotwal.

The motivation for its establishment was that it should “enhance the social, moral, intellectual and political upliftment” of the Indian community. Since its inception the library was used mainly for study, a place where one could sit and read and did not lend out any books to users, many of whom were Indians living in and around Durban - adults, students and the general public. To encourage women to use the library it was decided in 1931 that Fridays (between 3pm and 5pm) was reserved for the exclusive use by women but the program was not very successful even though the rule remained for some time.

Of the many prominent visitors to the Library, Srinivasa Sastri, Sir Radhakrishna, George Bernard Shaw, Professor Theale and Dr Keppel of the Carnegie Trust are worthy of mention.

The Parsee Rustomjee Hall attracted various people, institutions and organizations for the purposes of meetings, public lectures and social functions - hence the use by Trade Unions, Indian Teachers Association, Debating societies, the Indian War Memorial Committee, Hindu Tamil Institute as well as the Natal Indian Congress, the Communist Party and the South African Indian Congress. It was veritably “the hub of social and political activity”.

The library consists of various number of books, periodicals, magazines and vast collection of vernacular newspapers from overseas. The collection is rich on history (including Indian), politics, religion, language, tradition and culture, English literature, travel, commerce and houses many books in the various vernacular languages. Some notable books include, the Indian problem by C F Andrews, The History of British India, Imperial Gazetteer of India, Castes and Tribes of Southern India and many others.

Today, the library has undergone transformation and most of these books which are of an invaluable archival nature, is housed at the Documentation Centre, UDW. The changing needs and demands have necessitated that the Library changes with the times, yet the walls still remind us of the rich history of this landmark building which had very humble beginnings -- even though the library now enters a new era providing services to all races alike.