

Natal Midlands Black Sash

NALINI NAIDOO Interviewed by Mary Kleinenberg
on Monday 19 August 2013

Interview for the records of the Alan Paton Centre, University of KwaZulu Natal.

Nalini: I am Nalini Naidoo being interviewed by Mary Kleinenberg and today is Monday 19 August, 2013.

Mary: Thank you Nalini. Would you like to say something about yourself, something about your background?

Nalini: I am from Pietermaritzburg. I grew up in Pietermaritzburg, I was born here, and lived here all my life. When I matriculated in 1973 I decided I wanted to study journalism and I was encouraged by my English teacher. The only journalism school then was the Rhodes Journalism School, but at that time there was a system of separate universities for separate race groups and if you belonged to the Indian race group you had to go to the University of Durban Westville. But, if you wanted to study a course that was not offered there, you could apply for special permission from the Minister of Interior which is what I did. I applied for special permission, and it came late in 1974 so I went to Rhodes just after the first term in 1974. I had to go late because I didn't want to miss the opportunity because it would have meant applying for another permit and I wasn't sure if I would get it. And the University was very gracious and they said I could do fewer courses and I could come along, so I went in '74.

While I was here I didn't know about the Black Sash. I learnt about the Black Sash when I was at Rhodes and in Grahamstown. In my first year I was one of two black students on the entire campus and so you naturally gravitated to the lefty students because you knew you had a home there and were more comfortable, so all my friends were people in NUSAS. I had been quite active in the Catholic Youth Group and the Justice and Peace Group so I joined CATSOC when I went there and the other group of really, really good friends were students from the Jewish Society. Those were the groupings that accepted you, and they became my friends. From being with people in the left, at that time, in the Eastern Cape, the Black Conscious Movement was very strong so I got to know quite a few of the people in the local township which was wonderful because I had some very good friends there.

At that time, in the Eastern Cape, the forced removals were going on, and the whole Ciskei, Transkei division, and people were being moved, so one of the projects we got involved in was working with displaced communities. That's how I got involved working with the Black Sash because the Black Sash in Grahamstown was very involved in working with communities that were being moved.

Mary: Did you know Rosemary Smith?

Nalini: Yes, she ran the Black Sash office with Priscilla Hall.

Nalini: I knew Priscilla better than I knew Rosemary. It was through one of my friends, Guy Burger, who used to volunteer at the Black Sash office on a Saturday. He knew Rosemary Smith very well and she asked him for more students so he gathered a couple of us around. That's how I used to go to the Black Sash Advice Office in Grahamstown and volunteer on a Saturday.

Mary: That's great.

Nalini: So, when I came back to 'Maritzburg, I had studied in Grahamstown for about four years. In my final year the whole issue of displaced communities was so huge, and we saw the suffering and we went out. One of the projects that we raised funds for was to work with the displaced community in an area called Thornhill, and at that stage I was reluctant to come back. I loved living in the Eastern Cape, I must admit. I took a job with a community based organisation called Delta, an NGO, specifically focussed on working with the displaced community at Thornhill. Part of the time was spent living with the community, and that was in '77. By '78 I knew that I had to find a job, and the reason I came back home was that my sister was ready to go to university. One of the ways we helped each other is that when my brother was working he helped to support me at university, so when I finished I needed to help my sister, so that's why I came back to 'Maritzburg. The other thing is that while I was a student, during all my holidays, I worked at the Witness. Richard Stein was the editor and he was wonderful and I had this open invitation to come and work here every holiday. So when I was finished and ready to come back he said, 'Come, there is a job for you.'

Mary: So you have been at the Witness since '78.

Nalini: In fact since '74, because I worked here every July and December holiday. But I left in '84 for a while, but from the seventies to '84 I worked here. So when I came back I saw myself as an activist, so I knew that I had to get involved in activist circles. One of the things I did was make the link with the Black Sash here. I can't remember, I think I looked the phone number up, but I can't remember if I got a contact detail in Grahamstown. I am a bit hazy, but I know I did actively come and look for the Black Sash here. I came and said, listen, to whoever's name I was given to contact, I used to help at the Advice Office in Grahamstown on a Saturday and I'm quite willing to come and help out here. So that's how I got involved, but I can't remember who I spoke to. They said yes, yes, come along, and so I got onto the Saturday morning rosta. When I came I have got a funny feeling that the office was at one of the Churches, I don't know if it was St Saviours?

Mary: The office moved from Thomas Street where the trade union was to St Saviours – in about '79.

Nalini: The way I remember it that's possible, but I have a funny feeling that my first few Saturdays weren't in Thomas Street. Was there another office before it moved to Thomas Street?

Mary: No, I think it started sharing an office with the trade union in Thomas Street, and then moved to St Saviours.

Nalini: But, did they not have an office either in Printing Office Street, near Race Relations, or at one of the other churches before Thomas Street?

Mary: I don't think so.

Nalini: OK, I just have a vague memory, and I am a bit hazy about that, but I somehow thought I was somewhere else. Maybe you are right, it was from Thomas St to St Saviours, because I remember both. Basically, when I joined the office must have been in Thomas Street and I remember at that stage, Fatima Carrim would be able to help you here, because Fatima worked there from '73. When the trade union movement started in Durban from the wages commission, when Jeanette Curtis and all of them were involved, that's when they made contact here with people like Norman Middleton and Willie and John Makhathini, and they opened an office here in 'Maritzburg, and that must have been the Thomas Street office. Ouma Badsha used to come down to help, so Fatima would probably know when the Black Sash came to the Thomas Street office.

(An extract from History online:

In the early 1970s, he (Badsha) was one of the small but influential group of activists instrumental in reviving the progressive trade union movement. He was involved in the establishment of the Trade Union Advisory and Co-ordinating Council (TUACC), which was the forerunner of COSATU. He was also responsible for organising Chemical Workers Industrial Union and served as the Union's first secretary in 1974.)

I used to help out on a couple of Saturdays when I was still a student working at the Witness, but when I came to join the Witness full time in about '78 I got onto the rosta and at that time it was FOSATU, it wasn't COSATU. Jay Naidoo had just come to 'Maritzburg and there was another chap Jits? Patel and Willie was there.

Mary: Willie?

Nalini: I am not a hundred percent sure, was it Willie Munroe? Norman Middleton was there, Willie and James, I can get your their surnames, they were part of the old trade union council and they got involved, and they were running the trade unions here. The Durban people had spoken to them and they had agreed that they would get branches going here. That's when the Sweet and Allied Union was started in 'Maritzburg and a couple of others trade unions.

Basically, it was an extremely busy office, very busy. You had Victoria Nyide in one office, this union in another office, and there would be meetings going on, and people were in and out. A lot of the issues were labour-related issues.

Mary: Was this in the Black Sash office and the unions?

Nalini: Both, and I think that is possibly why the Black Sash was invited to be in that office because so many of the problems were labour related, there were lots and lots of labour related issues.

Mary: I found, digging around in papers, that you wrote a weekly report for the Black Sash.

Nalini: Yes, we did. We decided there were so many cases and we didn't know what was happening, and how does the next person pick up the issue, so yes, I did. But I don't think I was the only one, I think others who could have written it as well. I remember my friend from Rhodes, Dan Pretorius, she came to work as a night-sub at the Witness so I got her involved in the Black Sash movement as well, to help at the Advice Office. She helped at the Advice Office, but then went off to help the unions. I know I wrote a report and Dan wrote a report.

Mary: Nalini, I also found that in about '79 the committee thanked you for writing the weekly reports and asked you to join the Black Sash which you politely declined. I'd like you to say why.

Nalini: You know, I think it was to do with the politics of the time. I saw myself as an activist and I was involved in a whole cross section of activities. At that time, even at Rhodes, the Black Sash was seen as a sort of white organisation, and while I loved the work, and admired the work, it was just the whole image of the organisation, so I didn't think it would be suitable to join. That was part of the reason, but the other part was that we were so busy at the time and I remember that FOSATU was getting stronger and stronger, there were few activists, and they were making more and more demands. There was the Simba boycott and the Fattis and Monis boycott. There was a lot happening. I think it was on two levels, the level of the perception of the Black Sash at the time, and the other was that there was so much else going on.

Mary: Can you remember what the relationship between the Black Sash and the union was?

Nalini: Oh, it was a wonderful relationship, it was lovely; that office was such a hive of activity. We would all arrive there, and there was a wonderful rapport, you know. The unions accepted all of us as part and parcel of the whole place and there was this wonderful vibe, a wonderful buzz. I think it suited the unions because it also gave them an in, because somebody would come to join the union and they would have a problem so the union would then, immediately, refer the person to the Black Sash and the Black Sash would write the letters. So it was a good symbiotic relationship because by helping people solve their problems the workers saw the union as being helpful, not realising that it was the Black Sash solving their problems. It worked very nicely, a very noisy office; it used to be packed. On a Saturday morning, you got there early, it was packed, everybody seemed to know if you have a problem come here. We were always busy, and some very firm friendships were formed, we all got on so well. There was John Makhathini, and some really close bonds were forged there.

Mary: What more do you know about John Makhathini? Pat Merrett used to talk about him.

Nalini: John Makhathini was an old trade union from the SACTU, South African... (Congress of Trade Unions), the union that was banned, the one Harry Gwala started. He was part of that old trade union that was alienated to the Congress movement and the ANC, and I think he spent time in detention, but he was a very well respected union member that everybody knew in Maritzburg, and people looked up to him. He was highly regarded, highly respected, and he was in charge of that Thomas St office, so anything we needed to organise we negotiated with him.

Mary: You have answered many of my questions while talking. Do you remember any of the other people you worked with in the Black Sash office besides Mrs Nyide?

Nalini: Juliet Armstrong, Joan Kerchhoff, Marie Dyer.

Mary: When you first started was Jane Voss still there?

Nalini: I think she had just about left because I think it was Jane who had links with the people in Durban and organised the Advice Office. Yes, I recall Jane, but our time hardly overlapped. Pat Merrett - that's how I got to know Pat so well, and such firm friendships started there. Pat and I became very good friends. And even the cross-over with people from the union as well, we all became good friends.

Mary: When did you stop working in the Advice Office?

Nalini: I think I must have been there for about two years, and then our work load here (The Natal Witness) grew very heavy and I had to work on Saturdays and that's why I left.

Mary: And you were also involved in other things – you didn't just stop your activism.

Nalini: Oh no. and basically what was happening then was that we had links with the ANC underground movement and they needed you to do things, and they said, don't have such a high public profile, so that was also part of the reason. I maintained my links, I couldn't work in the Advice Office, but still helped FOSATU quite a bit with their pamphleteering, campaigns and standing outside the factories.

Mary: A last question - thank you, you have filled in lots of gaps. Do you think that the Black Sash Advice offices have made a difference?

Nalini: Absolutely, absolutely, I can't tell you how much. I wish there were photographs of that office. It was such a hive of activity, it was like the nerve centre of 'Maritzburg and everybody knew about it, and it was busy, busy, busy. It fulfilled such an important need at that time when workers were really, really being treated badly and really being exploited, and for me part of the struggle, and part of where we were, is because of the important role that the Black Sash played. So often we look at the bigger things, we look at the UDF and the big marches, but the Black Sash in its little way of writing those letters to employees, they were such empowering experiences for the workers, and gave them such a sense of dignity and fighting back. I think that was one of the reasons why I got involved with the Advice Office was because I really, really saw how important their role was. I come from a Black Consciousness background because when we were in school it was the black consciousness people who conscientized us, they used to run projects and drama groups in school. One of the things we learnt in the black consciousness movement is the importance of empowering people and people doing things for themselves, and how the little things count. It's the issues down at grassroots and community level, and that's the lesson I have carried with me throughout my life, so that's why it was so easy to get involved with the Black Sash in Grahamstown because I think, at that time, they were

doing some of the most important work that nobody else was doing. That's why when I came here it was one of the first links that I made. I think that FOSATU and COSATU, I don't know about anywhere else, but in 'Maritzburg, owes its bases to the Black Sash having its office there because, by helping workers with their every-day problems, the image of the fledgling union and what it could do was advanced. I am sure a lot of those people who came with their worker queries ended up going and joining the union. So, for me, the work of the Black Sash was unprecedented, so I am so glad you are writing this book because it needs to be said. It's how much the little things count, and I loved those letters we wrote to the employees and the employees actually took it seriously because they used to respond. There was a sense of satisfaction that you have solved it.

Mary: I agree that the little things were important, but the big Black Sash campaigns depended on the information that was coming from people on the ground, from the Advice Offices. That's where the Black Sash got its credibility, it really was involved with ordinary people every day.

Nalini: Absolutely, you could spot the trends and know what was happening. There was a big campaign about UIF. I think the records will end up being a treasure trove of what was going on in those days, and what was happening. We even dealt with domestic worker issues, and that was so important, because nobody else did. And I think that all that working in the Black Sash office shaped me because all my life the lessons I learnt there is how much these little actions count, and how empowering it is. So, what it did for 'Maritzburg and what it did for FOSATU – FOSATU actually owes a debt of gratitude to the Black Sash. I think for a lot of us we owe our personal growth to the Black Sash.

Mary: Thank you very much, Nalini.

Mary: Nalini, you wanted to say something about Mrs Nyide.

Nalini: Ya, thank you so much, I'm so sorry I didn't say this earlier, but I of things I really, really must say to pay tribute to Busi Nyide because I think she was the back-bone of that office. She had a wonderful way with people who came in: she made them feel at ease; she was very understanding; so she helped to establish that rapport. There was an element of trust immediately established and people felt that we were there to help them. So, I think without her, I don't think the office would have established such an important and vital link with the community. She was wonderful, really, really wonderful and, I think the success of the 'Maritzburg office owed a lot to her.

Mary: Thank you. I agree with you, she was a very wise woman.

Nalini: Yes, she could spot people who were shamming and those that needed help.

Mary: Thanks again, Nalini.