

A.K.M. DOCRAT LIBRARY & MEDIA CENTRE

FRIDAY 17 April 2009 - 6 pm

Hartley Road - Primary School.

Guest speaker:

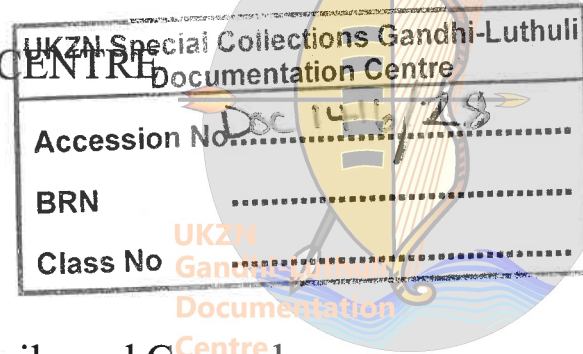
Distinguished guests – AKM's friends, family and Comrades, welcome!

AKM was my friend, comrade, confidant and teacher. Many of you can attest to the fact that he was a complex man – a kind, caring, intellectual human being who did not suffer fools lightly.

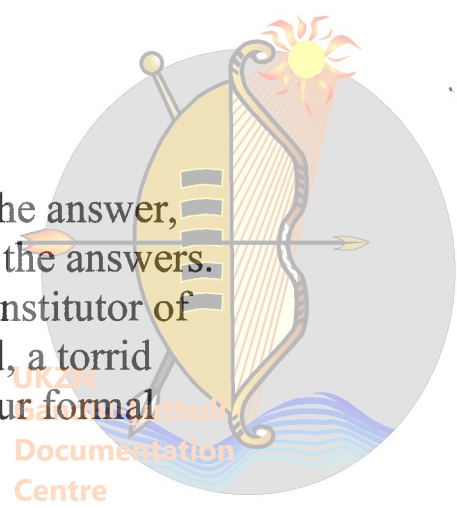
When we returned on Saturday (21/3) from the launch of my last book in Chatsworth, my daughter Sukhthi, said, "Don't forget to tell them about Docrat's gifts to me. Every Tuesday two pieces of Nestle's chocolates were placed on my pillow, when the pigs changed his 24 hours House Arrest to 22 hours. Has anyone in that audience made a similar gift? It is without comparison Mum". At the time she was merely one month old. I was surprised that she remembered. But it's a story that has been told many times all over the world and has never failed to astound our friends and comrades. My two sons Sahdhan and Sha, who ate the two pieces have taken that story and more to their graves.

Those who believe that religion of different persuasions has the preserve on 'love thy neighbour as thyself', must know that the only religious ceremony Doc was present at, without being party to the decision, was his own funeral. Very few can match his humanity! He continues from his grave – we are here at this media centre experiencing the humanity of an atheist!

The small red button on his safari suit told he was a Communist and a very proud one at that! He bought and sold books to live and was the most avid reader I have known. I could call him at anytime to answer a question that bothered me.



He would have a ready answer. If he did not know the answer, he would find it. Give you a book or two to look up the answers. He was a great teacher. He gave Dr Mabel Palmer, institutor of the Non-European section of the University of Natal, a torrid two weeks and eventually left. He had a standard four formal education!



The account of Doc in my book, Footprints in Grey Street was written while he was alive. He scrutinized it with a fine tooth comb and after correction, approved it heartily. He authorized its publication. Since it is out of print and I cannot afford a second print I have copied and laminated it for display in this centre. We threw out the verbiage and he authorised this, his story. Of course there is more, much more but not vetted by him.

Those who know Doc will know that he was a rare phenomenon!

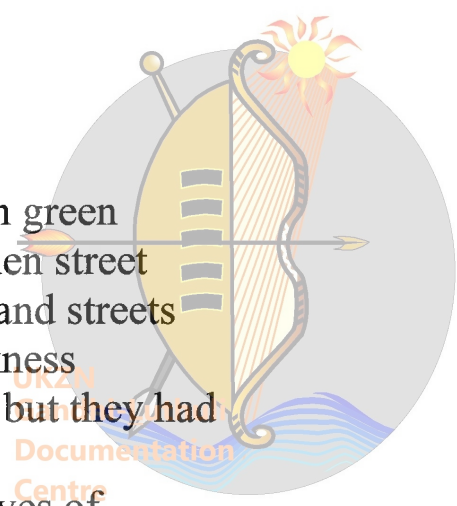
He was fastidious about 'authentic' facts. Double speak, spin doctoring had no space in his life!

How did it happen? He gave me a transcript of an interview organized by Natal University. They had despatched two PhD students to parley with him. With Doc laughing at the lack of historical facts of his interrogators, and they not understanding Doc's speech, it was a mess. I tried redoing the transcript, but it was beyond rescue. These students did not know what the NIC was! The account approved by Doc is in my book!

I have done easier jobs before! What a task master he was?

How well do you get to know anyone in a lifetime? My Thatha, holding my grandma's diamond earring, said, 'You only see the portion lit up by the light. The rest, much larger is in the dark.' So the authorised account is a mere portion.

Talking about a diamond, I might as well tell you about his other story that told of the British Raj's occupation of Burma.



The temple near his parental home was studded with green stones – emerald I think. It lit up the whole area, when street lights had not put in an appearance, if indeed roads and streets were defined. But when the British left Burma, darkness descended in the area. No, not from their departure, but they had filched all the stones from the temple.

What great examples they have bequeathed our thieves of today?

If you think that Doc and I had a hunky-dory relationship, perish the thought! There were two occasions – I call them 6d (sixpence) and 5 cents.

With the British Raj in occupation in India and South Africa the currency inflicted on its conquered was the British pound. I forget how it worked but a penny was the smallest coin – 6d was the next coin. I must have paid him 6d pence short for a book. Well he screamed from Delhi Café in Grey to the pub on the opposite side, asking me to pay. You will never know the embarrassment!

Post 1960 when the metric system took root, I paid him 5 cents short. Again in Grey Street opposite Mr Jhetam's shop. He punished me again with his verbal abuse. Mr Jhetam embarrassed beyond description paid Docrat the 5 cents? The bugger accepted it!

Why, I have never fathomed – he was at my home many nights and on a Saturday he played bridge till the newspapers came onto the streets at dawn. At times there were 6 banned people playing bridge. He never paid for tea, milk and sugar, but brought us Chana (chick peas) - loads of the burnt offering!

When he was detained for five months during the state of emergency in 1960, we made the biggest boob! My brother Deva and I cleaned up the flat. The kitchen and toilet was easy to clean despite not treated to Vim and a hard brush for years.

But the books and papers took days! As attorneys we knew about files and filing systems, but nothing that pleased our archivist comrade. He never forgave us and reminded us again and again, like a cow chewing its cud.

He had one of those great friendships with the AC Meer family. Their neighbour at Etna Buildings, the Kolia's confirmed this. He had dinner with the family every Thursday evening. He suffered the death of AC and soon thereafter AC's son Haroon, but had a standing invitation to Thursday dinner with Salem (AC's youngest son) and family. They worshipped him!

If I remember correctly he had tea with Feizal Motala on Thursday afternoons. On other afternoons he had tea with Farouk Khan and picked up Newspapers from Osborne Street.

His other great love was Theo Kloppenberg (the anti-death penalty icon) whom he met at the library attached to the American Embassy - of all places? When I asked why, he assured me it was very safe there.

Was Docrat a rich man? Those attending this elite function might be persuaded that he was well endowed. His first wife in 1943 died of Tuberculosis – that is a disease of the poor. I am not sure when the Docrat Trust came into existence, and after a torrid exchange of letters, the Trust paid the rent of his flat at Flat 1, Nirmal Court, 78 Victoria Street. The flat was at the end of a passage that was a public urinal, belonging to another philanthropist.

When Doc with his banning orders was restricted, his time to sell his books was also restricted. We undertook the sale of his books, to ensure that he had enough money to buy food, pay his telephone, lights etc.



Those days were hell, and you have to remember that I was banned, house arrested with three children and a husband on Robben Island for 5 years, was not easy.

After 17 years of exile, on my return, he asked me to accompany him to Stanger Street to make application for an old age pension. It was traumatic in the extreme to deal with the bureaucracy of the pensions department. Both of us tore up our application papers and left. He was so angry, that the invitation to tea did not quell. He loved his tea!

Soon thereafter the Special pensions arrived with a globular sum that accompanied the monthly pension payments. It is possibly that globular sum that has brought us here today. That sum has made possible my book publishing venture.

So unlike Blair of Paul Scott's article in the Independent on Saturday a few weeks ago, Doc did not buy into the vulgar ostentatious living of the rich.

He was a teacher of great integrity, he lived with great dignity, he contributed his energies to the exacting policies of the Natal Indian Congress the Communist Party and the Freedom Charter; the debates in the Liberal Study Group led to literacy classes in Magazine Barracks, campaigning for more schools, assisting with organisation of Municipal workers.

Post the depression of the 1930's, Doc learnt from India and later SA the organisation of unorganised workers and the role of the ruling elite and so much more. You have to read his authorised story to get to know the mettle that was Doc. A mere portion!

All of you have stories to tell, and you should find the time to record them.



I am so proud to have worked in the trenches of the struggle with Doc and to have experienced a rare integrity so absent in the national life of our country today.

I hope those who will work in this project will add to the integrity of Doc whose precious name it bears.

Those angry that no street bears the name of Doc in the present name-changes, that keep angry letter writers to the daily press in Durban busy, must remember that Doc deserved more than a street name.

Perhaps, Flat 1, Nirmal Court, 78 Victoria Street, Durban, must be cleaned up, proper provision of daily cleaned toilets for those who travel daily to work from great distances, the legacy of apartheid. Many will clamour to put up his name on that building.

Thank you

Phyllis Naidoo
For – 17 April 2009.

