

The story of Nana Sita and the Group Areas Act

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Nana Sita (1898–1969) is best known for being the secretary of the Transvaal Indian Congress and for his leadership in the passive resistance movement for which he was incarcerated three times. This article focusses specifically on three more times he was sentenced to hard labour for refusing to submit to the Group Areas Act and to leave his (business and) house at 382 Van Der Hoff Street in Hercules, Pretoria. The main sources for telling the story of Nana Sita's resistance are interviews with his 93-year-old daughter, a chapter written on him by E.S. Reddy and other unpublished material placed at the author's disposal by Maniben Sita herself. The focus of the article will be on the religious arguments against the Group Areas Act put forward by Nana Sita himself in his defense during his final trial in 1967.

Contribution: Historical thought and source interpretation are not limited to historic texts but include social memory in the endeavour of faith seeking understanding. People of faith in South Africa can only come to grips with reality by engaging with the stories of the past, like that of Nana Sita.

Keywords: Nana Sita; Maniben Sita; Group Areas Act; Indians in South Africa; Transvaal Indian Congress.

Introduction

Finding Nana Sita Street

Driving on the M1 highway from Johannesburg to Pretoria, the administrative capital of South Africa, one enters Pretoria through Kgosi Mampuru Street. Immediately on entering the city, one finds on the left Kgosi Mampuru Management Area, previously known as Pretoria Central Prison. During apartheid, the regime kept their opponents (such as Steve Biko) locked up in Mampuru Management Area. After 1994, perpetrators of apartheid crimes (such as Eugene de Kock) have been imprisoned there. Some of them (such as Janusz Valus) are still there. Right across the road – ironically but appropriately – is Freedom Park where the freedom fighters for a democratic South Africa are honoured.

Three streets down Kgosi Mampuru Street one crosses Nana Sita Street.

Turning right into Nana Sita Street, the next crossing will be at Sophie de Bruyn Street. This is Central Pretoria, the streets of which are decorated with the names of famous liberation heroes and heroines. Sophie de Bruyn (1938–) is well known for being one of the four women walking in front of the famous Women's March on 09 August 1956 to the Union Buildings. The aim was to protest against the pass laws for black women.

But who was Nana Sita?

Finding Nana Sita in publications

Nana Sita is to be remembered for his participation in the Indian passive resistance movement of the 1940s, as a political activist against the apartheid laws throughout the mid-twentieth century and especially for his defiance of the Group Areas Act during the 1960s for which he was sentenced to hard labour in prison three times.

There is a scarcity of published material on Nana Sita. This is not because of a lack of importance, as the street named after him in Pretoria central business district (CBD) testifies. Mandela (1994) in his *Long walk to freedom*, refers to Nana Sita with high appreciation for his participation in the African-Indian march to the magistrate's offices in Boksburg in 1952:

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But the guiding spirit of the demonstrators was Nana Sita who, despite his arthritis, was moving amongst the demonstrators in high spirits, slapping them on the back and bolstering their confidence with his own. (p. 121)

Mandela (1994) furthermore gave this heart-rending description of Nana Sita being incarcerated for defying the Group Areas Act:

Not long after Walter (Sisulu) left, I was walking to the prison hospital with Sobukwe when I spotted Nana Sita in the courtyard about twenty-five yards away. Sita, the distinguished Indian campaigner who had led our defiance at Boksburg in 1952, had just been convicted by a Pretoria magistrate for refusing to vacate his house- the house he had lived in for more than forty years – which was in a neighbourhood that had been proclaimed ‘white’ in terms of the Group Areas Act. He was hunched over, and the fact that he was barefoot despite an acute arthritic condition made me uncomfortable in my own sandals. I wanted to go over to greet him, but we were marching under the eyes of half a dozen warders. (p. 324)

E.S. Reddy (b 1924) wrote a nine page chapter in his book *Gandhiji's Vision of a Free South Africa* entitled ‘Nana Sita: Gandhian Resister in South Africa’ to honour the influence exercised by Gandhi on Nana Sita. This will contribute to the reconstruction to Nana Sita’s life in the next section of this article.

One of the aims of this article, then, is to fill the gap in published material on Nana Sita, albeit to a limited extent, using oral and unpublished sources, which I was fortunate to obtain in 2019, mainly from his daughter, Maniben Sita. However, as the author is a religion researcher, the second and main aim of the article will be to examine Nana Sita’s religious pronouncements against apartheid, which, incidentally, reached beyond his commitment to Hinduism.

Finding Nana Sita at the start of the Indian resistance movement in South Africa

Suraj Yengde, in a recent article (September 2020) entitled ‘Indians in Apartheid South Africa: class, compromise and controversy in the era of the Group Areas Act, 1952–1962’, gives background to the local Indian struggle against the Group Areas Act – although he mentions Nana Sita only once and in brackets. Suraj’s aim was to fill a gap where the ‘historiography of the South African Indian movement has somehow not paid desired attention to the role of Group Areas Act activism in shaping modern South African identity politics’ (Yengde 2020:77). This blends with the aim of this article. Where Yengde concentrates on Lenasia in Johannesburg, this article focusses on Nana Sita and Pretoria.

Yengde (2020:76) pointed to the relation between India gaining independence in 1947 and the National Party government coming to power in South Africa in 1948, the latter leading to the breakdown of relations between the Indian and South African governments. This, in turn, led to Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964), the first Prime Minister of

India (and father of the Indira Gandhi, the third and only female Prime Minister of India), to encourage Indians in South Africa to fight their battle without Indian government support. ‘This statement created a level of self-reliance and political maturity in Indian activism in South Africa’, with the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC) playing a pivotal role in promoting and organising protest against the Group Areas Act. ‘The... TIC framed their protest around Gandhi’s ideals of passive resistance’ eventually reclaiming a local Indian identity.

The present article will now move towards recovering the memory of Nana Sita in the leadership of the TIC against the background of these introductory remarks on the Transvaal Indian Congress as ‘one of the leading organisations that protested against every anti-Indian activity imposed by the apartheid government in South Africa’.

Finding Nana Sita in memory

I accidentally ‘crossed paths’ with (the memory of) Nana Sita – who died 50 years ago in 1969 – when Jaynie Dawood contacted me early in 2019 through Unisa Press. She is writing the history of the Indians in Pretoria for possible publication through Unisa Press. In order to obtain external funding, she was interested in registering this project through the Research Institute for Theology and Religion where I am a research professor. When asked about Nana Sita, she turned out to be a close friend of his daughter, Maniben Sita, now 94 years old, having been born on 24 December 1926. Jaynie Dawood arranged a series of interviews for me with Maniben Sita, the first of which was on 18 June 2019 in Maniben’s house in Laudium, the traditional Indian township of Pretoria. On 31 July 2019, I picked Maniben up from her Laudium house to go on a pilgrimage to 382 Van der Hoff Street, Hercules, where she lived as a child with her father Nana Sita. This was the house from which he refused to be evicted and went to prison thrice. This is counted as the second ‘interview’. A third interview took place in the house in Laudium on 26 December 2019, 2 days after she turned 93. Maniben has since, after a fall in her house, been admitted into frail care and no interviews with her are allowed.

Presenting Nana Sita in structure

The first part of this article describes the life of Nana Sita, using the interviews with Maniben Sita and a short interview with Nana Sita’s grandchild, Roshni Bhoolia, who was present at the second interview. Further sources are unpublished documents written by Maniben Sita herself and by E.S. Reddy on the life of Nana Sita, which Maniben gave to me on loan. I have since acquired the published version of E.S. Reddy’s chapter on Nana Sita in his 1995 book.

The second and main part of the article will be a content analysis of the ‘Statement by Nana Sita at his trial under the Group Areas Act’ and the religious references he made in this document when, for the third time, he was on trial for

violating the Group Areas Act by not leaving his house at 382 Van der Hoff Avenue in Hercules, an area declared for the exclusive habitation of white people.

The life of Nana Sita and his defiance of the Group Areas Act

The life of Nana Sita from family memory

I was not sure what to expect when on 18 June 2019 I entered the yard of Maniben Sita's humble house in Laudium with Jaynie Dawood. A blue car was standing beneath a zinc canopy next to the house and Jaynie indicated that Maniben had been driving it until 'recently'. Jaynie also pointed to the flowers in the garden and said that, until 'recently', Maniben was very proud of her garden.

How was this well-known freedom fighter, honoured *inter alia* with an Ahmed Kathrada Excellence in Leadership Award in 2018 for her fight against apartheid and specifically against the Group Areas Act, going to receive me? Being a resistance fighter myself, I nevertheless appear to be white, not an Afrikaner but Afrikaans-speaking.

It took the 92 year old a whilst to open the door. I was greeted warmly. At first Maniben thought that I belonged to the family of Rentia Landman, whom Maniben indicated was a good friend of hers. I was surprised at this, because I knew Rentia as a charming personality, but somebody who has established herself in rather right-winged local politics. It turned out that Maniben and Rentia both served on the Centurion City Council from 1995 to 2000, Maniben as ANC member and Rentia first for the National Party and then for the Freedom Front Plus. There they became friends – and eventually house friends – in spite of the political distance between them. On 02 January 2020 I paid an informal visit to Rentia Landman, who is not a family member but lives a few blocks from where I am living. I visited her with the aim of asking her how this friendship between her and Maniben works. Rentia confirmed my first impression of Maniben as that of a person inviting everybody, regardless of race or political party. Soon after this visit, Rentia paid her last visit as friend to Maniben in her Laudium house, before Maniben was admitted into frail care.

Maniben was in relatively good health when I saw her the first time. She did not hear well, although, but then also it was not necessary to ask many questions. Firstly, she pointed out a photograph, hanging prominently in the sitting room, of her father, Nana Sita and his wife Pem and their seven children (and a nephew), which was taken in 1951 when he took them to India. In the photograph Maniben appears on the left as a graceful young woman, of 25 years old. Maniben consequently gave a clear and concise overview of her father's life from a family member point of view. Then she gave me copies of unpublished and published works written on or by her father, which I used as sources in this article. She let me take pictures of her with pictures of her father and his family and of her numerous awards. Then, she made tea for

me and served with cookies. She wanted to give some of the fruit Jaynie gave her, to me to take home, but Jaynie and I convinced her otherwise.

During this visit, Sita (2000) gave me a copy of a beautifully illustrated vegetarian cook book she wrote, *Give me vegetables*, as well as a booklet issued at her reception of the Mahatma Gandhi International Award for Reconciliation. This may well represent two aspects of her life: that of a publishable chef of vegetarian and Indian dishes and a renowned politician. This award was given to her by the Gandhi Development Trust in 2011. In the booklet appears a short biography of Maniben. It mentions that she qualified as a teacher in 1957 with a BA degree. In the interview (on 18 June 2019) Maniben specifically mentioned that her father, Nana Sita, let all three of his daughters study, which was not typical in those times and that all three of them became teachers. Maniben herself taught in the Junior School in Marabastad for four and a half years (interview 18 June 2019). The booklet further tells that she organised a group of women into the Indian Women's Support League during the Passive Resistance Campaign, and that she was arrested twice, that is, during 1946 and 1947. She was sentenced in 1952 to 3 months in Pretoria Central Prison, which is known today as Kgosi Mampuru Correctional Centre, situated in Kgosi Mampuru Street that crosses the modern day Nana Sita Street mentioned in the introduction. She was sentenced for occupying a bench reserved for whites in defiance of the apartheid laws of the day. In an article by Rudzani Matshidi in the *Pretoria News* on 11 September 2017 on the celebration of Maniben's 90th birthday at Freedom Park, he relates how she sat outside the polling station in Laudium during the August 1984 elections, silent but dressed in black to indicate the illegitimacy of the elections. She was detained and sent to Diepkloof Prison where she spent 87 days in solitary confinement. She was indeed her father's child. Her niece, Roshni Bhoolia (interview 26 December 2019) furthermore tells that Maniben gave her kidney to her brother in 1974 when she was 48 years old, doubling her father who was said to be a staunch family man.

The sources of this part of the article on Nana Sita's life from a family point of view, then, are:

1. an unpublished manuscript with the heading 'Nana Sita' written and signed (in front of me) by Maniben Sita and dated 1989
2. interviews with Maniben Sita in her Laudium house on 18 June 2019 and 26 December 2019, including a 'pilgrimage' on 31 July 2019
3. an interview with Nana Sita's granddaughter, Roshni Bhoolia, on 26 December 2019 at Maniben's house.

Nana Sita: Biographical information

Nana Sita was born in 1898 in Bhula-Falia in the Gujarat province of India. Some of his children and grandchildren still bear the surname of Bhoolia. The village is now called Bhaga-Rama (Roshni Bhoolia, interviewed 26 December 2019).

In 1900, Nana Sita's mother died when he was only 2 years old. He received home schooling from his stepmother in the village where there were no schools. He progressed to Standard 5 in the vernacular (Maniben Sita, interview 18 June 2019), later showing great skills in expressing himself in English. In January 1912, when Nana was 13 years old, he was sent to South Africa with his uncle. His father had already left for South Africa in 1907 and was running a shop in Benoni at the time (Sita 1989:1).

The young Nana Sita stayed with Mr. J.P. Vyas to study book-keeping at his firm. During this time Mahatma Gandhi, and his secretary Mr. D.F. Andrews, came to stay for 2 months in Mr. Vyas' house. They came to discuss the £3 poll tax inflicted on Indians by General Smuts (Sita 1989:2).

Nana was deeply influenced by Gandhi's lifestyle and eventually also by his insights into politics. The 14-year-old Nana himself prepared Gandhi's 'bed' at night, which was a blanket on the uneven stones of the verandah outside, with Gandhi sleeping on one side with the blanket folded over him, his head on a wooden block. Nana prepared them salad from the nearby market, whilst observing their simple eating habits, not eating meat, neither smoking nor drinking. Also, the young Nana could listen to discussions on local and Indian, politics between Gandhi, Andrews and Vyas. Nana also went to the Asiatic Bazaar where Gandhi gave talks during his stay in Pretoria (Sita 1989:2).

In 1918, when Nana was 20, he started his own business in Prinsloo Street, a block away from Mr Vyas's house, more or less where the South African Reserve Bank building is standing today, later relocating to Boom Street in the Asiatic Bazaar (Sita 1989:2).

In 1922 Nana returned to India to get married to Pemi (1901–1980). In 1932, their eldest child was born in Pretoria as were the other six children.

During his stay in India, Nana Sita experienced in person the Swadeshi Movement launched by Gandhi against British imperialism. The British would import cotton from India and after manufacturing it into cloth would sell it at seven times the price back to India. In 1972, when Maniben visited India, Nana's aunt told her that Nana took her aunt's sari which was made of foreign cloth, and threw it into a bonfire near his childhood town, thus participating, albeit in a small way, in India's liberation struggle (Sita 1989:2).

In late 1922, Nana Sita returned to South Africa, and in 1923 he opened a branch of his business in Hercules. As this was a rented property, they moved in 1931 (seven years later) to their own property 400 m away – to 382 Van der Hoff Street, Hercules. This property is still standing. This is the property that Nana Sita refused to leave and for which he was sent to prison three times in terms of the Group Areas Act. This is also the property which Maniben Sita and I visited on 31 July 2019. This is also where the last three of the seven children were born. One was born on the rented property, and the first

three (including Maniben) were born on the property of Nana Sita's uncle and aunt in Boom Street, near the Khoja Mosque, where they often went into hiding with their mother Pemi (Sita 1989:3).

Nana Sita: Personal habits

Nana Sita was simple in his habits, believing in 'plain living and high thinking', minimal clothing and minimalistic home furniture. Even his diet was simple, he never complained about his wife's food. He only expected that it must have been freshly prepared. All this was highly influenced by Gandhi (Sita 1989:3).

He meticulously rose at 06:00, had a bath and said his prayers. Then he listened to the 07:00 news bulletin, and had his breakfast, which was a cup of milo and a sandwich. He then went to the shop that was in front of the house. His wife and son served the customers, and he would only leave reading his morning paper when the shop found busy. At 10:00 he ate porridge or fruit. He engaged in political talk with people, especially salesmen, who entered the shop. They discussed the unjust laws of the country and when policemen passed the shop with African black men handcuffed – usually for pass offences, he was especially upset. After 1946, however, he was seldom in the shop because of public work (Sita 1989:3).

At 13:00 Nana Sita had his lunch and spent the rest of the day helping in the shop, reading books and magazines and listening to the radio till 21:30, when he retired for the evening. He especially read books on or by Gandhi and the history of India. Great was his joy when India became free; deep was his sorrow when Gandhi was assassinated (Sita 1989:3–4).

Nana Sita: Political career

Nana Sita's political career started in 1928 when he became the secretary of the Pretoria Indian Congress, through which he strove tirelessly to solve the problems of Indians in Pretoria. The Pretoria Congress supported political prisoners, mourned the deaths of Indian activists local and abroad and was a branch of the Transvaal Indian Congress. It strengthened the latter in Pretoria during the Passive resistance Campaign of 1946–1947, as well as in the Defiance Campaign of 1953 (Sita 1989:4).

Nana Sita worked for freedom with the great men and women of his time, *inter alia*, Chief Albert Luthuli, Father Trevor Huddleston, Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Ahmed Kathrada, Joe Slovo, Ruth First and others from whom he gained not only political insight but also grew spiritually. He joined in their vision for freedom that was later verbalised in the Freedom Charter of 1955. His own outstanding characteristics were honesty and truthfulness, with a deep sympathy towards those who suffered politically and people even trusted him with their domestic problems (Sita 1989:5–6).

During his political career, a period of 41 years between 1928 and 1969, Nana Sita was an executive member of the following organisations:

- Pretoria Indian Congress (secretary)
- Transvaal Indian Congress (president from 1949 to 1952 when he was banned by the South African Government)
- Pretoria Hindu Seva Samaj
- Transvaal Hindu Seva Samaj
- Pretoria Koll Hithwarthak Mandal
- Transvaal Koll Hithwarthak Mandal (Sita 1989:7).

Nana Sita: Incarceration for contravening the Group Areas Act

This part of Nana Sita's story is most relevant to our topic: the seven times which he was incarcerated, of which three were for contravening the Group Areas Act.

- In 1946 and 1947, he was twice imprisoned during the Passive Resistance Campaign that resisted 'The Indian Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act'. This Act prevented Indians from owning or occupying land outside areas that were designated for them. Each time his sentence was 1 month (Sita 1989:8).
- In 1952 he was imprisoned for breaking the Curfew Regulations laid down by the government when the South African Indian Congress, the ANC and the Coloured People's Organisation joined hands to fight against the Group Areas Act that restricted racial groups to designated areas. He received a 3 months' sentence for leading a group of 52 men into action in Boksburg outside the curfew times (Sita 1989:8).
- In 1960, after the Sharpeville massacre, he was detained indefinitely with hundreds of other anti-apartheid comrades, but released when an influenza epidemic killed 19 of his fellow inmates. The family was shocked to see their father in a state of near death at his release (Sita 1989:8).
- During the 1960s, he was imprisoned three times for refusing to leave his home at 382 Van der Hoff Street in Hercules, an area designated for whites, and went to live in Laudium, assigned to Indians, thus contravening the Group Areas Act.
 - In December 1962, he was sentenced to 3 months imprisonment
 - In April 1963, he was sentenced to 6 months imprisonment of which he served four
 - In August 1967, he was sentenced to 6 months imprisonment of which he had to serve four. This was 2 years before his death in December 1969.

During his imprisonments his family, especially his wife Pem, experienced great stress. Sita (1989:9) wrote how her mother on several occasions developed hypertension, bled profusely through the nose and had to stay in bed 3 weeks at a time, her children fearing for her life.

Nana Sita: Last days and memories

Sita (1989:10) remembered the honours bestowed on her father as the foremost representative of Gandhi in South

Africa, in which capacity he was, *inter alia*, asked to sign the Freedom Charter (26 June 1955) in Kliptown, Soweto.

Sita (1989:10) described Nana Sita's last days in a heart rending way. On 07 September 1969 he attended the wedding of the son of his lifelong friend and comrade, Mr. G. Krishnan. This was his last public appearance, after which he returned home critically ill with kidney failure. He stayed in bed for 27 days, singing religious songs and reciting poems. From 04 October, he was in and out of hospital. For those who visited him, it seems that he had a strong wish to talk about the Group Areas Act. His last conversation with Maniben was on this on Sunday, 21 December. On Monday he had a heart attack because of kidney failure. He died at 01:00 on Tuesday morning 23 December 1969. His wife was with him during the entire time.

Nana Sita's body was brought to Pretoria in the early hours of Tuesday morning, and he was cremated at 15:00 the same day. His funeral took place from 382 Van der Hoff Street in Hercules, where he lived for 31 years and from which the government could not remove him in spite of sending him to prison thrice. A service was also held for him in St Paul's Cathedral, London.

The life of Nana Sita as political activist

E.S. Reddy, in his book *Gandhiji's Vision of a Free South Africa* (1995), dedicated a chapter to Nana Sita as the one who 'kept the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi alive in South Africa' (Reddy 1995:121) through his 'determined non-violence resistance' as was advocated and practised by Gandhi (Reddy 1995:127).

Reddy gives a gripping account of Nana Sita's 'non-violent defiance' throughout his political life. Important to note for our topic is Reddy's descriptions of how Nana Sita referred to Nanabhai Reddy in terms of endearment – who defied the Group Areas Act by refusing to leave his home in the white-designated area of Hercules in Pretoria. Every time he was sentenced to prison, he refused to pay the fine as an alternative and went to prison in spite of his poor health.

On 07 August 1967, the 69-year-old Nana Sita was again sentenced to 6 months imprisonment or a fine of R200 for refusing to leave his home in Hercules and be relocated to Laudium. This proved to be the last time of his imprisonment. He refused to pay the fine, and it was during this time that Mandela, quoted here, saw him barefooted in prison, suffering heavily from arthritis.

Soon after, on April 8, 1968, Nanabhai and Pemi were forcibly ejected from home and Government officials dumped their belongings on the sidewalk. But they returned to the home and Nanabhai never complied with the order until he died in December 1969... (T)he resistance of Nanabhai was not in vain. It showed that non-violent defiance need not be abandoned even at a time of massive repression or armed confrontation. It inspired people in efforts to overcome frustrations and apathy. The Indian Congress, which had become dormant, was resuscitated in later years and helped to build the powerful Unite Democratic Front. (Reddy 1995:127)

Background to his defence

On 07 August 1967, Nana Sita went on trial in the Pretoria Regional Court for the third time for contravening the Group Areas Act by remaining in his house at 382 Van der Hoff Street in Hercules. He asked to read a statement to the court, which was opposed by the Public Protector but allowed by Judge B.V. Olivier. After he read the statement, no witnesses were allowed and he was sentenced immediately to 6 months imprisonment or a R200 fine, the first of which he accepted.

Eventually his statement was published in booklet form and sold for 25 cents. I obtained a copy from Maniben Sita. Nana Sita, who published this himself, said on the inside page that he was publishing his statement because of its 'importance to fellow Indians and (because it is) of interest to lovers of **democracy and freedom**' (my accentuation, Sita 1967:ii).

Written in impeccable English, the last two pages of the booklet are most relevant to our topic. Here Nana Sita concludes his argument against the human rights violations of the Group Areas Act with religious argumentation. Being a staunch Hindu himself, these religious arguments show a remarkable inclusivity and a mixture of 'social gospel' discourse that goes far beyond a singular commitment to Gandhi.

Sita (1989:4) listed her father's favourite books – during a time when few houses had books – such as Gandhi's autobiography, *The History of the Indian National Congress*; P.C. Ray's *Scientific Experiments*; Tagore Gitanjali's, *Shastri Speaks*, A Biography of Abul Kalam Azad, A Biography of Subhas Chandra Bose, several biographies of Gandhi; Kalidas' Shankuntala and Nehru's autobiography, *The Unity of India*, *The Discovery of India*, *Glimpses of World History*, *Nehru's Letters from a Father to his Daughter – Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) being the first Prime Minister of independent India*. Although this list has a distinctively Indian flavour, Maniben constantly describes her father as reading widely on local and international politics. But what were his religious sources?

These seem not to be identified specifically. In the following four religious arguments that can be identified from his statement to Court on 15 August 1967, an effort will be made to place them in the context of the time and hypotheses will be offered as to their affiliations and sources.

Four religious arguments

'Religious' arguments on human dignity

In all the years of my adult life, I have passionately believed in the universal ideals of **human brotherhood and social justice** and am deeply sensitive to any inroads into these ideals. Apartheid refuses to recognise **human dignity** and brands its victims as sub-human. It denounces all known canons of ethics as propounded by the World's Great Religions and Philosophies; it refuses to recognise human rights as propounded in the Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations. (my accentuation, Sita 1967:13)

Nana Sita's first religious argument against apartheid (and the strongest pillar on which it rested, which is the Group Areas Act) was that it denied 'all known canons of ethics' as propounded by the world's greatest religions and philosophies. It is not certain whether he is referring to a specific book or to his knowledge of the world's religions (and philosophies) in general. He could be referring to SB Frost's 1943 publication of *The sacred writings of the world's great religions* (ixtheo.de), which *inter alia* contains multiple annotations on the sacred writings of the Hindus. Whatever his source was, he seems to have been well-read, and inclusively so, on religious ethics which were, at his time, obviously integrated with the political discourse on 'human dignity'. This discourse was fed by the second source referenced in the given pericope, namely the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR), a historic document that was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948 in Paris, France. The declaration consists of 30 articles affirming an individual's rights, and was the first step in the process of formulating the International Bill of Human Rights, which was completed in 1966, a year before the Nana Sita wrote the given pericope in his defence against the Group Areas Act. The Declaration was not primarily inspired by religious ethics, but after referring to the ethics of the world's religions, Nana Sita's argument here reflects especially the first two articles of the Declaration as if human dignity and rights are religious values:

Article 1: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of **brotherhood**.

Article 2: Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which the person belongs, whether it be independent, non-self-governing, or under any other limitation of sovereignty (Universal Declaration of Human Rights 2015, my accentuation).

Apart from the fact that Sita seems to make a connection between religious ethics and human rights, the most amazing feature of his argumentation here is that he uses sources that are massively inclusive. This would not have been carried out without him being aware that he was addressing at least two audiences: the apartheid regime and its judge on the one hand and on the other the anti-apartheid activists who were to read his booklet. For both of them, he had an inclusive argument based on the ethics of all the major world religions, and on the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* which, as the name indicated, was based on universal values for human dignity.

Criticism of the concept of 'God's chosen people'

Shorn of verbiage the Apartheid Policy as enforced through the Group Areas Act is nothing but a bare faced expression of a desire to dominate, oppress and exploit the non-Europeans and to subject them to perpetual servitude of the White Man who claim to be God's chosen people, the Master Race, the Herrenvolk,

a concept which plunged the world into a holocaust which was defeated at the cost of millions of lives. Is the world going to be made to witness the same holocaust by perpetuating the concept of the Master Race theory? (Sita 1967:13)

Nana Sita's description of the Afrikaners' self-conception as 'Herrenvolk' and their identification with the Nazis is the first one in terms of anti-apartheid rhetoric. Afrikaners seeing themselves as God's chosen people obviously was a strong anti-apartheid discourse in Sita's time, but the written expression thereof is early.

In 1983, André du Toit published an article entitled 'No Chosen People: The Myth of the Calvinist Origins of Afrikaner Nationalism and Racial Ideology' in *The American Historical Review*. In this article Du Toit (1983:925) indicated that the early nomadic Afrikaners viewed themselves 'like Israel, as a Chosen People with a divine mission', using mainly the Old Testament in their identification. This self-conception as the Chosen People, Du Toit (1983:926) further explained, 'must be understood in the context of the Calvinist theological tradition of predestination and the elect'. Eventually, Du Toit (1983:927) said, 'the ideology of a Chosen People functioned to legitimate racial inequality and oppression'. The popular belief amongst Afrikaners that they were the Chosen People justified them in conquering and subordinating blacks.

This is exactly how Nana Sita explains his situation of oppression and dispossession, and how he, and many others, became the victims of this ideology.

Old religious language in new political skins

I would say that the cruel treatment meted out to Indians by the enforcement of the said Act is **a crime against humanity and a sin against God**. One day the framers of the Group Areas Act will stand before a much higher Authority than the South African Parliament, for the misery, the unhappiness and the humiliation it caused to the victims of the Act. **May God Almighty forgive them for their trespass**. (Sita 1967:13, C. Landman's emphasis)

It was a characteristic of the language of the Liberation Theologies of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s to blend religious language into political expressions of justice and freedom. It is indeed remarkable to see Nana Sita doing this in the 1960s.

The expression 'crime against humanity' has its recent origin in court cases from 1947 onwards in which crimes committed during the Second World War, which ended in 1945 were heard. This is well described by Joseph Dautricourt in an article dating back to 1949 entitled 'Crime against Humanity: European Views on its Conception and its future'. Here Nana Sita used the expression of 'crime against humanity' to designate the Group Areas Act as equal to a war crime.

It is furthermore noteworthy how he changed a pietistic, ethical expression, 'a sin against God' into a political expression to evaluate the Group Areas Act. In the *Herald* of

1856, J.N. Andrews published an article 'The use of Tobacco: a Sin against God', and forever afterwards, and especially amongst Afrikaners who displayed a pronounced preference for pietism, 'sin against God' was used to refer to an ethical indiscretion that struck God right in the face. This now is used by Nana Sita to judge the Group Areas Act as a sin against God himself.

'May God Almighty forgive them their trespass is, of course, a direct reference to Jesus' words on the cross related in Luke 23:34: 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing'. This, of course, Nana Sita directly aimed at his white Christian audience and judge.

Ultimately it is difficult to determine what Nana Sita's sources for his religio-political arguments as expressed in his address to the court in 1967 were. He would have been informed by the Freedom Charter of 1955 of which he was a signatory on behalf of the South African Indian Congress. The charter's language of brotherhood and equality and its emphasis that 'everyone shall have the right to live where they choose' would of course be appealing to Nana Sita. But the Freedom Charter was not an outright religious declaration. The most famous and prominent religious document of the 1960s was the Cottesloe Declaration (1960), which was rejected by the Afrikaans churches, but even as a 'liberal' document lags far behind the Freedom Charter in still talking about 'bantus' and 'non-whites'. Religious expressions of liberation and freedom were restricted in the South Africa of Nana Sita's time. And yet he was able to drive it as a political argument in his court cases where he was convicted of transgressing the Group Areas act. He was indeed ahead of his time.

Resistance as 'Sacred Duty'

I stand before you for flouting the provisions of the Group Areas Act, which for the reasons stated above, my conscience does not allow me to comply with. Therefore in obedience to the higher authority of conscience I have decided not to meekly submit to the provisions of the Act. **Being a follower of Mahatma Gandhi's doctrine of 'Satyagraha' (Passive Resistance) based on truth, love and non-violence** I consider it **my sacred duty** to resist injustice and oppression and in doing so am prepared to bear the full brunt of the law and am willing to face the consequence thereof. (Sita 1967:13, C. Landman's emphasis)

If you find me guilty of the offence for which I am standing before you I shall willingly and joyfully suffer whatever sentence you may deem to pass on me as my suffering will be nothing compared to the suffering of my people under the Act. **If my suffering in the cause of the noble principles of truth, justice and humanity could arouse the conscience of White South Africa then I shall not have strived in vain.**

I am 69 years of age, suffering with chronic ailment of Arthritis but I do not plead in mitigation. I ask for no lenience. I am ready for the sentence. (Sita 1967:14, C. Landman's emphasis)

Finally, Nana Sita returns to his roots in his last (political and religious) argument before the court. He acknowledges his

dependency on 'Mahatma Gandhi's doctrine of "Satyagraha" (Passive Resistance) based on truth, love and non-violence', calling it his 'sacred duty' to passively fight for these values in South Africa. Satyagraha (Wikipedia), a term developed by Mahatma Gandhi, is a combination of *satya* (truth) and *agraha* (polite insistence). The idea of non-violence resistance had a profound influence on Nelson Mandela in his anti-apartheid struggle. There is even a book written by Mohandas K. Gandhi ([1928]2003), a relative of Mahatma Gandhi, entitled *Satyagraha in South Africa*.

Mahatma Gandhi himself gave religious content to Satyagraha by listing as one of its essential rules 'a living faith in God' (Wikipedia). This understanding of Satyagraha, it seems, empowered Nana Sita to call it his 'sacred duty' to fight non-violently for truth, accepting imprisonment as a consequence.

Here Nana Sita is speaking to his Indian audience, but yet again in an inclusive way. In a time when exclusivity reigned in all its ugly faces, especially in the Group Areas Act, Nana Sita succeeded in inviting all races and all religions to join him in his religious and political journey against apartheid.

Conclusion

Maniben Sita was known for her orange sari in which she, in dangerous circumstances, spoke out in public against, *inter alia*, the Group Areas Act. Orange, she told me, is the colour of fire. You must burn your negative qualities in the fire. Orange is the colour of the rays of the sun. It gives life to everything. You must be strong like the rays of the sun and do positive work.

In this, she followed in the footsteps of her father, Nana Sita, who was imprisoned three times for disobeying the Group Areas Act, following the path of non-violent resistance which he described in a religious-political way in his address to the court at his last hearing on 15 August 1967.

In this article we discussed the contents and possible sources for his four religious-political arguments against the Group Areas Act.

1. The Group Areas Act is unethical in compromising human dignity as understood by all the world's major religions
2. The Group Areas Act is executed by people who wrongly see themselves as chosen by God to oppress and dispossess people of colour
3. The Group Areas Act is a systemic sin against God
4. The Group Areas Act is to be fought non-violently but with severe determination as Mahatma Gandhi (and later Nelson Mandela) did as a sacred duty to be performed by all.

The article gives due acknowledgement to Nana Sita in being ahead of his time in his published version of religious-political discoursing against apartheid, and in the inclusivity of mind that he displayed.

The article hypothesises on the sources that influenced Nana Sita in his thinking, but suggests that, rather than trying to identify his sources, he should be seen as a source himself for what the religious-political arguments of his time were or, rather, what his specific contribution to this discourse was.

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