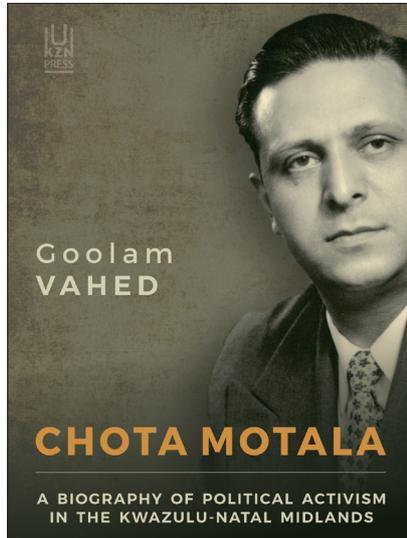


## BOOK REVIEW



### **Chota Motala: A Biography of Political Activism in the KwaZulu- Natal Midlands**

By Goolam Vahed. Pietermaritzburg:  
University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2018.  
300 pages. ISBN 978 1 86914 382 4

If you drive through Pietermaritzburg on  
the main N3 highway you will inevitably

drive under a large interchange with the  
sign Dr Chota Motala Road. Few people in  
Pietermaritzburg, and indeed South Africa  
(SA), know about the man behind the name.  
This book sets the record straight. Written by  
Goolam Vahed, who is professor of history at  
the University of KwaZulu-Natal, it begins  
with the upbringing of Chota Motala in  
Dundee, Northern Natal, and his subsequent  
education at a Sastri college in Durban before  
going to study medicine in India. After  
qualifying at the Grant Medical School in  
Bombay he returned to SA, where he opened  
a general practice in Pietermaritzburg.

Motala's political awakening occurred  
while he was in India, during the resistance  
to British rule, and when he returned to  
SA he started his political activism against  
the Nationalist government, which resulted  
in his being banned as well as imprisoned  
three times. The first time was for treason  
in 1956. After his case was eventually  
dismissed he continued his activities, acting  
as a 'bridge' between the political parties  
that were active in Natal at the time as well  
as working as a general practitioner. His  
actions lead to his second imprisonment in  
the Pietermaritzburg Old Jail in 1960 during  
the State of Emergency, where he was held  
for 5 months.

During this time the Motala house in Boom  
Street became a stop-over for activists such  
as Nelson Mandela, Ahmed Kathrada and  
Walter Sisulu. Mandela, who was on the run  
and was then known as the 'black pimpnel',  
once visited them disguised as an old man.  
Motala's wife Rabia answered the door, and  
thinking it was a patient asked him to wait  
on the veranda while she called the doctor.  
Apparently Mandela was thrilled that his  
disguise had worked so well.

Motala, who was undeterred by bannings  
and police harassment, continued to  
organise protests and resistance move-  
ments, which lead to his third arrest and  
imprisonment in 1986 during another State  
of Emergency.

This book describes Motala's many activi-  
ties in the resistance movements and also  
weaves into his life story the broader history  
of SA during this time. It is gratifying to have  
the work of a colleague and humanitarian,  
who devoted his life to both his medical  
practice and political activism, recognised  
and recorded in this way.

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