


# Theological and religious exploration of an Indian indentured descendant— Dr Betty Govinden

**Author:**Kogielam K. Archary<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Research Institute for  
Theology and Religion,  
College of Human Sciences,  
University of South Africa,  
Pretoria, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**

Kogielam K. Archary,  
sariefoundation@gmail.com

**Dates:**

Received: 05 Dec. 2024

Accepted: 19 Mar. 2025

Published: 25 June 2025

**How to cite this article:**

Archary, K.K., 2025,  
'Theological and religious  
exploration of an Indian  
indentured descendant—  
Dr Betty Govinden', *Verbum  
et Ecclesia* 46(3), a3408.  
[https://doi.org/10.4102/  
ve.v46i3.3408](https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v46i3.3408)

**Copyright:**

© 2025. The Author.  
Licensee: AOSIS. This work  
is licensed under the  
Creative Commons  
Attribution License.

This article reflects on and records significant aspects of the life of the 80-year-old Dr Devarakshanam (Betty) Govinden. Emphases of this research are on the last 50 years, focusing on her life in terms of religion, particularly her theological contribution to South African society, especially through the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. In terms of religious heritage, Govinden was born a Christian of indentured Indian ancestry. This study provides insights, knowledge, and information on 50 years of church orthodoxy in South Africa from the perspective of an Indian female theologian, focusing on the interdisciplinary field of Christianity, theology, and religion. Information was gathered through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with Dr Govinden, exploring her theological and religious journey as a descendant of Indian indentured labourers. Key themes included: (1) her experiences from early childhood, adolescence, and student life; (2) the influence of her parents; (3) her path to becoming a theologian and significant moments in her life as both a Christian and theologian; and (4) her perspective on the South African community as a religious community over the past 50 years. Additionally, select publications of Govinden were used as sources to gain insights on her views on the church. Analysis of the information gathered was conducted in an unmediated manner, and relevant themes emerged.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** The research contributes to the body of knowledge and information on 50 years of church orthodoxy in South Africa, with the aim of presenting the research results with a focus on Christian theology and religion. This research uses the role and contribution of Dr Devarakshanam (Betty) Govinden, an Indian indentured labourer descendant, as a framework for analysis and discussion.

**Keywords:** oral history; theological; religion; Indian indentured labourer descendant; church; women theologians; Dr Devarakshanam (Betty) Govinden; Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.

## Introduction

### Aim

The aim of this article is to chronicle the theological and religious exploration of an Indian indentured labourer descendant, Dr Devarakshanam (Betty) Govinden, particularly her theological contribution to South African society, especially through the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (henceforth the Circle).

## Research rationale

This article is framed within the context of religion and theology, examining developments over the past 50 years in South Africa. It focuses on the experiences of a descendant of Indian indentured labourers who arrived at the Port of Natal from India. The questions posed to Dr Govinden aim to explore how she has influenced religion and theology, as well as how religion and theology have shaped her life and work.

## Research questions

The research questions that guided this study are listed hereunder:

- How did your parents influence you toward a Christian lifestyle during your childhood and teenage years?

**Note:** The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Fifty years of theological and religion research: The history of the Research Institute for Theology and Religion at the University of South Africa (1975–2025)', under the expert guidance of guest editor Professor Emeritus Christina Landman.

**Read online:**

Scan this QR  
code with your  
smart phone or  
mobile device  
to read online.

- What was your involvement in the church, and how were your university experiences shaped by your Christian beliefs? What led you to become a theologian, and what are some of the key highlights of your life, both as a Christian and as a theologian?
- How would you describe the South African community as a religious community over the past 50 years?

## Background

Dr Devarakshanam Govinden (hereafter referred to as Govinden) has authored several books, chapters, academic articles, opinion pieces, journal papers, and many other writings where she focused on women, gender, feminism, literature, indentured Indian history, and religion. Govinden is an acclaimed academic, researcher, and poet and is the holder of many more titles. She was born in 1944 in Kearsney near Stanger on the North Coast of KwaZulu-Natal. Her father was a Hindu at birth but as a young man, he converted to Christianity and attended the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) Church in Kearsney, on the north coast of KwaZulu-Natal. Her parents spoke Hindi, one of the major Indian languages. Govinden's mother was born into a Christian family, yet Govinden was given a Telugu name, Devarakshanam. Her parents had a Christian wedding, and her mother proudly draped her white saree over the right shoulder. Traditionally, Telugu women draped their sarees over the right shoulder, while Tamil women draped their sarees over the left shoulder. The dress style differentiated Tamil from Telugu, both being linguistic groups from the south of India.

As background to the research, a selection of publications was also used as source material. In these documents, Govinden is featured either as a trustworthy writer, consistent contributor, dependable interviewee, or an unwavering subject. These publications are discussed in the section titled 'Literature review', where she expresses her views on the church, theology, and religion.

As a young child of Indian indentured ancestors, Govinden grew up in a Christian home and attended church on a weekly basis with her family. Alongside school, the church played a pivotal role in Govinden's life. She was shaped by it and has had a lifelong relationship with the church and Christianity. One of the tasks of theology is comprehension, which signifies 'understanding what is believed'. As a child and consequently as an adult, what shaped Govinden's comprehension of the church and then her comprehension of theology is discussed in this article. Another task of theology is construction, which involves the building or development of appropriate theological language. Women in the church can have a constructive voice, which among other things, speaks about political and gender activism. Whether Govinden was informed or coerced to become involved in activism, and how this engagement relates to appropriate theological language, is also investigated. This exploration is conducted within the ambit of theological and religious enquiries through interviews with Govinden, a descendant of Indian indentured labourers.

## Literature review

The participant in this study, Dr Govinden, wears many hats. Over the last seven decades of her life, she was an excellent student and secured a bursary to study at the University of Durban-Westville in the 1950s. She became a teacher and later progressed to a lecturer. Her key arguments and writing revolve around literature, feminism, gender issues, indentureship legacies, and religion. Common themes, debates, and gaps across different sources are identified, and their relevance to this study is shared. By connecting her insights to other scholars, Govinden's work contributes to theology, feminist thought, and South African religious history. In 2018, she presented a lecture to postgraduate history students on Women and History at Howard College at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. She encouraged students to ask broad questions about the way history as a subject in the humanities is constructed and institutionalised. Coming from an English literature background, she deliberately deployed examples that showed the intersection and slippage between history and literature to encourage the exploration of a more malleable and contentious view of what might constitute history. She presented the paper *Women Doing History Differently* (2018), where she wrote:

This article is presented as a working exemplar of how one might work tangentially, with the deployment of diverse case studies, in order to promote scrutiny of traditional, formulaic views in the teaching and learning of a particular discipline. This is not to flatten distinctions, but to encourage critical thinking about the borders and fences we erect around and within disciplines. This contribution has two main purposes specifically for teaching and learning. Stylistically, by retaining the direct presentation mode that I used originally, I question the indirect, reported, journal writing mode that we normally adhere to when speaking about teaching and learning. Secondly, through the use of a particular example, I am prompting a reconsideration of the disciplines we teach, in terms of its received construction, content, and methodology. Even where critical innovation has occurred, there is always room for pushing the [new] boundaries. (pp. 30–46)

Govinden is also a lay preacher, and Redding (2016) argues that:

Rural South African women's importance as spiritual actors in the period from the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries stemmed from their ability to embrace hybrid spiritual identities that corresponded closely to the lived reality of African rural life, and that by embracing those identities, women expanded their roles as social healers. Professing a belief in Christianity did not prevent individuals from practicing as diviners, nor did it prevent Christians from consulting diviners to determine the causes of death or misfortune. Similarly, young women who converted to Christianity often maintained close ties to non-Christian families and bridged spiritual lives on the mission stations with life in their families. Over this time period, women became cultural mediators who borrowed, adopted, and combined spiritual beliefs to provide more complete answers to problems faced by rural African families in South Africa. (pp. 367–389)

Dr Govinden often led the church services at St Aiden's Church in Durban. She influenced women and society via her well-chosen pieces for her sermons. Being of Indian indentured

heritage and her interest in this history, post her PhD entitled 'Sister Outsiders', she focused on Indian women writers and literature. The indenture experience holds a deep significance for the Indian community in South Africa. In celebration of the 150th anniversary in 2010 their documentation of these experiences has increased. Marie (2014) responds to the limited accounts of the experiences of women in historical records, even though Indian women were hugely impacted by the indenture experience; however, these accounts are few and far between. The history of Indian women in South Africa is undoubtedly largely shaped by their experiences of indenture. Such history is encompassed within their trajectories of poverty, culture, education, and religion as they took the courageous decision to cross the Kala Pani. In this short account, the indenture experience of the Indians in South Africa is examined, giving specific attention to the aspect of poverty and the impact of mission on Indian Christian women. Various scholars briefly make mention of such experiences; however, it becomes important to apportion intentional spaces to those once muted, yet significant voices. Indentured Indian women of Christian origin have a story to tell: 'a story of their encounters across the Kala Pani. Such stories become important to the discourse of the history of the Indian community in South Africa' (pp. 89–101).

Dr Govinden grew up in Kearsney and attended church from a young age. De Beer (2010) described that by 1700 the Cape's slave population comprised 50% Indians. The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) engaged with Muslims in the 17th century – officially commenced mission work in Natal in 1946, long after their settlement in 1860. The outreach faced various challenges, including political tensions, language barriers, and cultural differences. Eventually, the DRC's Mission Boards obtained the necessary funding and personnel to start work in Natal, Cape Town, and Transvaal during the 1960s. As further explained by De Beer (2010), the Mission Board dealt with key issues like minister selection, baptism practices, catechism for older believers, and church organisation. The first missionaries, white ministers from the DRC, aimed to reach the neglected Indian community but faced significant challenges. Indian evangelists, mostly from other churches, became crucial allies, opening doors to Hindu families that foreign missionaries could not access. By 1962, four congregations were established, leading to the formation of the Indian Reformed Church in 1968. In 1976, the church's name was changed to the 'Reformed Church in Africa' (RCA), signifying its transition into an open community. The church has become an inclusive space open to people of all races. In the 1970s, the RCA led efforts to encourage the DRC in Africa and the DRC Missionary Church to explore the possibility of uniting. De Beer (2010) stated that:

The RCA remained strongly focussed on reaching Muslims and Hindus. The resolution of the WARC in 1982 to suspend the NGK and the denouncement of apartheid as heresy by certain members of the RCA led to a serious confrontation with the NGK and a schism in the RCA. The reconstruction of the RCA began in 1986 and in 1990 the RCA adopted the Laudium Declaration, affirming that the church was Reformed, and an

Evangelical Reformed Church. A period of remarkable rebuilding and growth ensued. The Laudium Declaration became the hallmark of the RCA. The specific reformed, evangelical and mission orientated qualities had to be met. Evangelists were again trained and sent out. The RCA offers important insights to all believers in a pluralistic community. In spite of a flood of liberal theological thinking, the RCA holds zealously to her Reformed Evangelical position as expressed in the Laudium Declaration. (p.v)

Through the various hats that Govinden donned, it can be appreciated that, as she put it, 'religious journeys cannot be contained by a straightforward chronological analysis'.

Goedhals (2014) stated in her article, *Ghandi and his Christian friends: Legacy of the South African years 1893–1914*:

It does not set out to capture the complexity of Gandhi's religious or political thought, particularly Gandhi's deepening awareness of his Hindu heritage and its practical applications, nor does it attempt to trace the conscious and unconscious influences that shaped Gandhi's belief, but to examine the implications of his Christian contacts for Gandhi's spiritual quest, with particular reference to South Africa ... This article explores the history and historiography of Gandhi's relationships with those he called 'my Christian friends' during his years in South Africa (1893–1914). (pp. 1–20)

As a young girl, Betty experienced her mother being unwell. Her father stepped in and took care of their small family. Did his actions shape her thinking? Was that the roots of her ideas on feminism, consciousness, and assertion? Walker (1990) states that:

One of the more far-reaching consequences of the Indian community's experience of the miseries of Indenture, Beall argues, was to invest the institution of the family with an enhanced value as 'haven in a heartless world' in the twentieth century'. (p. 17)

Further to this, Anagol (2017) focuses on the twin issues of consciousness and assertion among Indian women in the colonial era as:

It attempts to trace the character of the indigenous feminism and determines whether the consciousness went beyond the question of individual empowerment to encompass a wider conception of women as a group which could be used as the basis for collective action. For high-caste educated women like Pandita Ramabai, Krupabai Sathianadhan and Soonderbai Powar, it was the treatment of women in each religion which emerges as the main issue in their process of conversion and their adherence to Christianity. Among Indian Christian women's writings, Krupabai's analysis offers the most intricate link between religion and a woman's identity and role. A large number of semi-literate women converted to Christianity towards the end of the nineteenth century, many at Ramabai's Sharada Sadan, the largest school for Brahmin widows in India. (pp. 79–103)

In the publication, *In Search of our own Wells*, in *Groaning in Faith*, Govinden (1996:115) states, 'The silences and omissions of my growing years are becoming more and more glaring now, with the passing years'. Govinden was asked to share what these silences and omissions are which



she mentioned in *In Search of our own Wells*. Silences and omissions occur in human experiences and life journeys. Further reflective questions posed to Govinden were, 'As a young child and teenager growing up in Stanger, how did your parents influence you towards a Christian lifestyle? What are some of the traditional activities that were done at home or within the family setting which had a Christian leaning?' To these questions, Govinden spoke about Sunday dress, hair and the mantilla and learning language through the Bible.

In the publication, *No time for Silence: Women, Church and Liberation for Southern Africa*, Govinden (1991) writes:

It was Thursday, 8 November 1990, at the Rustenburg Conference... Beyers Naude was speaking at the first session of the day. The entire assembly was moved. When he had finished, the chairman invited the WOMEN at the Conference to present their 'Statement' to the assembly. I prepared to rise. A clergy friend sitting next to me, whispered: 'Good move, bad timing'. I remained silent. The moment was a solemn one. (p. 274)

At this stage in Govinden's life (46 years of age), she was a steadfast and confident person and knew what she believed in.

In *Women Hold up Half the Sky* (Du 2022:VII), in the foreword, Govinden writes:

The ordination of women has become a major contentious issue in the Church of the Province of Southern Africa (Anglican), which is seen by some as threatening the very continued existence of the church. The Anglican church is due to have a discussion and final decision on this matter in 1992. The church is divided between traditionalists and liberals. The former seek to maintain the status quo, whilst the latter argue for change. There is fear of a permanent rift, and some argue that 'the church is worth saving' whereas others feel that compromise is not possible, even at the risk of a rift. The ordination of women has to be seen as part of the wider social movement of feminism which poses fundamental questions about the nature of humanity itself. If human beings are created equally, why can't they serve in church and society at all levels? Traditionalists have exhausted theological arguments against the ordination of women and are restoring to the hazy realm of biology. The longing for a woman to be a priest is no different from the longing of a man to be a mother is the proclamation of the former Bishop of London, Dr Leonard.

In light of these comments, one must ask, 'How did Govinden become a theologian?', 'What qualified/s her as a theologian?', and 'What constituted her formal academic training in Christian studies?'

In the publication, *Hearing and Knowing Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (1995), Oduyoye writes:

I [Oduyoye] have [has] written from the standpoint that there is no justification for demanding one uniform system of theology throughout the Christian community, but that theology reflects awareness of the horizon toward which all believers move. I hope I shall be able to articulate what I believe to be the essence of the Christian faith: that our lives are hidden in God. (p. 1)

With reference to these sentiments, I wished to explore what some of the highlights of Govinden's life were, firstly as a Christian and secondly as a theologian.

In the publication 'Hearing and Knowing Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa' by Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Theology from a Cultural Outlook* (1995), Oduyoye writes in the section entitled Inculturation:

The process described as inculturation raises questions regarding the incorporation of African social structures and religious practices into Christianity. How can one be African and Christian at the same time? In this area we meet, for example, questions about the rites of passage, naming, and other initiation ceremonies, as they confront Christian baptism and confirmation. However, inculturation discussions tend to focus on the humanizing effect of Christianity on communities. (n.p.)

To Govinden, the question was, 'You grew up in an Indian home, but your life experiences took you throughout the world. What was life like as an Indian Christian during apartheid, and how is it now as a retired South African lay preacher?'

In *Her-Stories* (p. 9), it is noted that the Circle is the space for women of Africa to do 'communal theology'. The request to Govinden was to share what she considers to be her most significant theological contribution to South African society, especially through the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. In terms of complementing African church history, it was noted by Phiri (1997:6) that 'very few histories contain the roles that women played'. In light of this, I probed Govinden on whether there are women in African church history and where they are. The question to Govinden was, 'How far has the Circle come in achieving these aims almost thirty years later?'

In the publication, *Women hold up half the sky* Du (2022:7) states that 'The ordination of women has become a major contentious issue in the Church of the Province of Southern Africa'. Govinden became a lay preacher and hesitates to call herself a theologian; however, through her work in the church, she encountered many individuals who impacted society, such as Emma Thandi Mashinini (1929–2017), who was very involved in social justice, reconciliation, and the Anglican church. She was a trade union leader. Govinden has written about Charlotte Maxeke, a well-known activist in the 20th century, and Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati. She was an Indian social reformer and Christian missionary. She was the first woman to be awarded the titles of Pandita as a Sanskrit scholar and Sarasvati after being examined by the Faculty of the University of Calcutta. Two different women from different contexts. Also, she has written about Kunwarani, who came to South Africa and was an Anglican. According to Govinden, if one goes to Saint Aiden's Church, the foundation stone that Kunwarani laid is still there. The question to Govinden was, 'How did you become a theologian?'

Referring to *Her-Stories*, the interviewer referred to the following quotations in order to be suitably able to achieve the aims of this article and to receive answers to the research

questions. On p. 8, there is reference to the 'selective uses of scripture', and the question was, 'How have you used scripture to bring about change?'

In her publication, *In Search of our own Wells*, Govinden writes, 'This politics of empowerment is not something that happens automatically and easily, but through costly and personal collective sacrifice, in the face of rampant and unacceptable oppression'. The politics of empowerment forces questions such as 'How would Govinden describe the South African community as a religious community these past 50 years?' This question is addressed in the section titled 'Research findings presented according to themes'.

## Research methodology

In *Faces of Religious Healing in Nkhoma, Malawi: An Exercise in Oral History* (2018:5), Christina Landman writes, 'The voices of the interviewees are recorded in this article unmediatedly, organising them under themes that emerged from the voices themselves'. In this article, the aim is to present an unbiased, unmediated report post an oral history interview with Govinden based on a theological and religious exploration of an Indian indentured labourer descendant in South Africa. Govinden was identified as a trustworthy, reliable, and suitable interviewee, as she is a clear thinking, lucid, and articulate octogenarian, born on 13 January 1944, a Christian of South African Indian ancestry, of indentured heritage, whose Indian grandparents came to the Port of Natal to work on the sugar fields; a university doctoral graduate; an accomplished author and researcher; and a past lay preacher of the Anglican Church.

To realise this aim, the following oral history method has been used:

- A semi-structured questionnaire was compiled and discussed with Dr Govinden on 26 September 2024. She reviewed the schedule and directed the researcher to other academic works worthy of reading before the interview.
- During interviews, the rules and values of the oral history methodology were followed. In accordance with these ethical research values, the voices retrieved were not interpreted in terms of hidden agendas and presupposed themes. Consequently, the spoken words of the interviewee are recorded in this article unmediated, organising them under themes that emerged from the utterances themselves (Landman 2018).

## Analysis of data

The data collected were analysed and categorised according to themes. The following steps, guided by Landman (2018:5), were applied to realise the philosophical aim of conducting research by means of oral history methods:

- The ethical framework in which the research was done propelled the interviewer and interviewee on a journey of co-producing knowledge of the lived experience of the interviewee.

- Data collection was done through a semi-structured questionnaire that encouraged the interviewee to share her reflective memories, personal testimonies, and stories of her past.
- No interpretation of the information was done because the analysis of the data was conducted by means of emerging themes that are presented unmediatedly.

## Research findings presented according to themes

On the first research question, How did your parents influence you toward a Christian lifestyle during your childhood and teenage years? What was your involvement in the church, and how were your university experiences shaped by your Christian beliefs?, – the following themes emerged:

- Sunday dress.
- Scriptural influences.
- Learning language.
- University life.

On the second research question, How did you become a theologian? What are some of the highlights of your life, firstly as a Christian and secondly as a theologian?, the following themes emerged:

- Transformation thinking.
- Archbishop Tutu and the Anglican church.
- Circle for Concerned African Women Theologians: 1990 Rustenburg.
- Women and children.
- Writing prayers.

On the third research question, How would you describe the South African community as a religious community over these past 50 years?, the following themes emerged:

- South African Indian religious community.
- South African community.

Unbiased, unmediated reports post an oral history interview with Govinden, and the findings of this research have been summarised and are presented under subheadings.

### Sunday dress

The interview progressed with the interviewer enquiring if Govinden could tell her how she felt when she had to get up and get dressed to go to church as a young girl. Govinden warmly replied:

That's a good question because you wore your best. You wore your Sunday best. You dressed up, wore shoes and socks and all of that. As my mum got older, she always covered her hair, her head with a mantilla. It was just something that the women did. You covered your hair in church and young ones like us followed. They use what we call a mantilla.

Govinden proceeded to ask the researcher if she knew what a mantilla was, as she had a few of them in her home, by stating:

I've got some here. It's like a lace. It's like a scarf, but you use that to cover your hair in church. And that was like something you just did. The women in the old photos, which I shall show you, the women, Indian women with the sari, with their hair up, wore the mantilla.

In follow-up I asked Govinden about her feelings when she received her first mantilla, to which she replied, 'I felt very good. It was a more stylish version of a scarf, I remember I had the actual mantilla, a white one and then I've got others now'.

Being intrigued, I enquired if, at that time, Govinden was looking forward to receiving her own mantilla, and she replied, 'Yes, I did. Where I got it from, it was a proper one, it was triangular.'

### Scriptural influences

The interviewer proceeded to ask Govinden, 'What did wearing a mantilla signify in your life?', to which Govinden replied:

When you were growing up, you were part of that community. Now we don't use the mantilla but in the old days, women also wore hats. So, we would wear hats to church and now that is a rural custom, as it has fallen away, but in the old days it was almost like a rule. You covered your hair as a woman and as a girl. It was custom, but there are some verses in the Bible that said that Saint Paul says women should cover their hair and women should also not speak in church. So sometimes those verses are taken and made into rules. So, it is scripture to cover your hair. And then also from the scriptures they say woman shall not speak in church, but you have women leaders like elders. So, crossing the threshold, yes, might have been very difficult in the initial years but it is also about taking individual small verses from the Bible and making that the rule or looking at the wider nature of faith. Yes, and understanding the wider nature of faith.

Govinden continued by stating:

Snippets from the Bible now became the law, basically as you walked into the church and you delivered your sermon, sort of almost conflict, adoption was always there. It was always easy because you were schooled into a particular way of thinking. And it was also a kind of practice that conformity gets accepted, and it becomes a way of living. It's the same in our secular life as well that we inherited. Then you also inherited that. They become norms and then to question them and change, it's not always easy, but the church is dynamic. It changes as society and family does. And so all these institutions are dynamic, but sometimes they are slower to change than others. They have a purpose. Sometimes they have a purpose, and for me, one of the things that I learned to see it in the broader context rather than in the specific context of that verse. But see other parts of the Bible that show other ways of living and being heard. Ramifications and submission of all.

### Learning language

The interview progressed with Govinden sharing how she learnt language through the Bible by sharing:

I was very alert. So going to church was not just duty. I was very attentive and in my Kearsney piece, by the way, that I wrote, I speak about another issue where we didn't have many books in my house compared to now, but I learned language through the Bible. And I learned language and words through the sermons, through the Bible readings and the hymns. So, the biblical language, you know, like a word like 'chastise', the average child doesn't know that, so the very biblical word like chastise and all the other words that I learned... all these words such as lamentation. It's a name. It's in one of the books in the Bible. Every time you will confess, there is a word in the Bible. To the Ant thou sluggard, now sluggard for people who don't know, sluggard in the Bible means someone who is very lazy. So, we learn this language that came with the biblical language.

### University

Moving on from a young child and teenager and how her parents influenced her towards a Christian lifestyle, the interviewer asked Govinden how her university days impacted her Christian beliefs, to which she replied:

Something was silent. I only appreciated the silences and omissions as I was growing and developing and developing a more robust faith, and that came through a number of different journeys and went to university. I studied at school and enjoyed literature and when I studied at university, the world was opening up... during my schooling and my university education in the 60s at Salisbury Island my world was opening up. I have personally continued in my reading and my writing after I left university. I was teaching and reading African literature, so part of my journey was in the world of literature and understanding, race and colonialism. I did not grow up with that kind of critical consciousness, but it developed with my work at the university.

In the 60s, 70s and 80s a lot of my work was in Colonialism, Post-colonial literature and the anti-apartheid writings. A lot of that kind of work in my literature was making me rethink my own life and upbringing and when I married Herbie, before joining the Anglican Church, it deepened my understanding of social justice.

### Highlights of life, firstly as a Christian and secondly as a theologian

One of the tasks of theology is comprehension, which basically signifies 'understanding what is believed'. Another task of theology is construction and is associated with the building or development of appropriate theological language. Women in the church can have a constructive voice, which among other things, speaks about political and gender activism.

### Transformational thinking

Whether Govinden was informed or coerced to become involved in activism in general, and how it spoke to appropriate theological language, is explored within the ambit of theological and religious explorations. Govinden's work was in African literature. She taught in the English department before she went to the Education Faculty:

I taught *Things Fall Apart* [novel] and taught African literature and Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*. So, there were all these other influences that were intertwined and began to reshape me and so seeing the world in the new light literally from Kearsney to Stanger. The journey takes this winding routes from Salisbury Island Yes, the University of Durban-Westville and to the world as I was attending meetings in and out of the country. The Anglican Church is not just in South Africa, it is in southern Africa. We call the province churches. Anglican churches all over the world are constituted as provinces. So, we have the talent as the province its in. But in the church, the province the whole National Register, so the Southern African Church included South Africa. Areas in Africa, other African regions, Swaziland, Namibia and Botswana, all these were part of the Anglican Church, and we were meeting all our neighbours. We call these the provincial meetings and here we listened to the witnesses against apartheid, which were led by our leaders. As a layperson, this was all part of my own learning and transformation. So, we did lots of forced ... and I began changing my way of living and thinking because growing up as a 14-year-old, 15-year-old, 16-year-old, you didn't have exposure.

### Archbishop Tutu and the Anglican Church

Govinden married Herbie Govinden, an Anglican, and followed the Anglican Church after marriage. In the Anglican Church, she met Archbishop Desmond Tutu during the struggle years in South Africa, and she shares:

When Archbishop Tutu became the Archbishop of the Anglican Church, there was very vigorous and forceful work done in the anti-apartheid struggle. And my own work was in the church in southern Africa in the Justice and Reconciliation Commission or Committee we had. We had Bishop Reuben. Then he was the reverend who was once among the leaders, but there were lots of other leaders in the Justice and Reconciliation Commission. We were meeting people across the racial spectrum, men and women, priests and laypeople speaking about the role of the church against apartheid, a lot of my learning took place in that Church context and parallel to that was my work in literature.

### Circle of concerned African women theologians conference: Rustenburg

During the interview, Govinden was asked if she recalled the 1990 Rustenburg Conference incident in light of that incident then, almost 35 years ago, when she was confident, strong in her faith, a leader, and an astute Christian. She was further asked, 'When you handed over the memorandum, did you even think about what happened in 1956 at the Women's March ... you being part of that Rustenburg handing over? Govinden replied:

That's a good point because later on, I began to appreciate more and more the significance of what the women in 1956 did. That was 35 years earlier. And it was not like we were doing anything new. And this is part of the lineage that we have been having. That's such a good point because so often we have those journeys which have been taken and it's not like taking it for the first time. And the women in 1956, now that you mentioned it, they were saying no time for silence in 1956, and they were also a multiracial group. And in the 1990s we were doing this in the context of the church, but it also was linked to the political and social struggle as well.

The Rustenburg conference was an important event in 1990 as the country was beginning to rewrite its history. There was so much happening at the same time. Govinden continued to share:

As I said, there were different impulses and strength, so part of it was my education, not the formal university life but the ongoing university education, my studies and my teaching. But also, my work in the church, the Anglican Church. You will notice – 1990 was quite like a crossroads. Mandela was released from prison in February of that year and there were different voices in the church and also in the party, either, as you know, so there were churches saying you don't criticize the government, you submit to the government and the laws and authority. There were those who even have defended apartheid. And there were churches and groups who defended someone who comes from the Afrikaner Calvinist Church and made this fearless stand. I met him personally. So, here Beyers Naude is speaking – you know, truth to power. As we often said, the conference was a time when the different churches in South Africa from the different groupings came together to ask what is our role and the church was not united during apartheid and of course to some extent we still have to find common ground on many issues. It was certainly a moment when I had, through the work with other women and men grown to this point of saying No time for Silence, counting myself as part of this group standing and speaking against injustice on the basis of gender and of race. Before that we took part and along at that time, we also took part in the movement for the ordination of women.

### Women to be ordained

There was a group in the Anglican Church calling for women to be ordained. For Govinden:

It was for me, a personal journey. How do we read the Bible in the light of this? And so, from the theology you grew up with and that you learned it was a real thinking of all that we were brought up with. But the God and our Father and women and priesthood and learning all this again, it was a time of ferment in the church and the church itself. And the Anglican Church was grappling with this. The ordination of women came at that time, and I was part of it as a lay woman myself. There were women who were part of the movement who became ordained priests. And for me, with a lot of lay women and myself also a part of this movement and I say somewhere in one of my writings that we were in different ways protesting against apartheid. At the university, there were marches down Grey Street to West Street and so on. But something about being in the church, you know, speaking against our Holy Mother, the church was something I did and learned. Something I never did in my younger days, but I grew into this, and I suppose many other women found themselves in the same position. Growing up, probably the opportunity was not there.

### International visits

In 1988, Govinden went to the Lambert Conference in the United Kingdom. According to Govinden:

Now the Lambert Conference is a 10-year meeting of all the Bishops and Archbishops of the Anglican Church at Canterbury. Every 10 years, the Anglican Church meets. I was a layperson member of the council called the Anglican consultant. The



Council. We were invited and lay people were invited for the first time. And so alongside that time in 1988, I have also travelled to different parts of the World, New Zealand, Australia to the States. As part of the work of the church, the Anglican Church Worldwide Anglican Church I was exposed to the anti-apartheid solidarity. When I went to New Zealand, I was a guest of the bishops there and the Anglican Church. It was unbelievable to see the solidarity. They were telling me of the stories of solidarity in the anti-apartheid movement. I preached at the different churches in New Zealand... the work of the Maoris, the First Nations. All of this was happening to me and apart from my work in Feminist writings ... so the whole world had opened up by the late 80s and 1990s. I was a very different person to the one I would have been in the 60s. So, yes, there is a metamorphosis. So, part of it was literally experiencing the worldwide church. The worldwide solidarity against apartheid and also to hear the way in which issues of women were being brought on to the agenda in New Zealand where we had ordained priests. So, we went through all their stories and actually they had their first woman priest.

## Female bishops in South Africa

There were no Indian women bishops in South Africa, but there are a good few Indian women priests. The interviewer asked Govinden if there are any reasons why there are no Indian female bishops to which she replied:

You know there were nominations. Nominations are likely women, so it was not a question of race. It was just a person's journey of faith. And you know, we have lots of competent women theologians who could easily be in that kind of leadership role. Some of them did not choose all that, but it's a good question. It's worth thinking about because there are lots of women across the race in the Anglican church, who could take the Role of bishops.

## Race and gender

The interviewer pursued the Rustenburg Conference by reminding Govinden. 'So, in 1990, your clergy friend sitting next to you said, "Good move, bad timing"', to which Dr Govinden replied:

Because the clergy person felt, and I understood where he was coming from, that we were looking at issues of race at the Rustenburg Conference and we were bringing in the women's issue and so for a long time there was this struggle in the church. From leaders we loved and respected. So, we said, let's deal with the race issue. That's the important one. And so the women who were caucusing and whenever met at provincial meetings. We were meeting women leaders from across the country. So, I don't know if you know these women, Emma Mashinini and Sheena Duncan. All of these are strong women. I know the thing in the secular world, speaking against apartheid, the trade unions and Black Sash and so on. And they were also bringing that into the church. And so, I was influenced a lot by them. I learned at their feet and so while the church leaders and even Archbishop Tutu bless him at one point was saying to our sisters, 'Wait, let's deal with the race issue'. So, there was that kind of thinking that we need to deal with the race issue, but we were learning and for a while we accepted that as well, but we were also learning that we shouldn't separate the races. Sometimes silence and it is ironic and paradox, 'No time for Silence', but silence can be the best

response. When Jesus was being questioned by ..., it's a classic sort of sin as Jesus was brought in and chained. And through all these accusations against Jesus, Jesus remained silent. When Gandhi was being accused of a whole range of things he remained silent, so No time for Silence ... Yes, but silence is also powerful.

And you said the moment was a solemn one. The interviewer probed by asking Govinden if she wanted to share a little bit about that moment:

So, this was such a momentous moment when women were claiming their right to speak. No time for silence. And the moment passed and then we presented the memorandum ... I must check my records and look at the archives of what we actually said, but we sat down and wrote the statement.

## Brave sisters and theology

Govinden shared that:

For the experiences and opportunities, I have had, I am thankful. I had to be in those spaces because they were life changing, they were learning experiences and Theology that I learned from my sisters. I learned from my sisters. If ever I am, who I am, it is international. The brave sisters around me, you and you, then become brave. Mercy and I were very close and traveled together and we spoke at conferences. I was introduced to the Circle for Concerned African Women Theologians (The Circle). This was a continent-wide body. Mercy was the one who taught us, those who were studying Theology, to see ourselves all as theologians. I learned a lot of Theology by presenting on issues and by writing. So, writing became a way of learning. Thinking through the issues, thinking through the questions reading through the books that became available, and traveling also helped me because I was then exploring and getting books. And listening to women in other contexts, amazing learning opportunities that I was blessed with which I would not have otherwise had if I were in a small, confined world.

## The circle of concerned African women theologians: Nairobi

According to Govinden, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians met in Nairobi. So those were the early founding days, and Govinden went to the conference in Accra, Ghana. Reflecting on the recent past, she shared that, 'I didn't go to all the meetings in the recent years. I didn't keep in touch with The Circle'.

After a short pause, she collected her thoughts and mentioned:

The Circle also met at different parts in places in South Africa. I learned a lot through The Circle. We have done some books with Isabel Phiri and Sarojini Nadar. So, these were done at that time, it was well established. Isabelle Phiri actually went to work in Dublin through the World Council of Churches (WCCC). She is from Malawi, and I learned a lot from all of them. In the recent past, it has not been sustainable for me personally to travel, although The Circle is still a very active group. What was very interesting, and you can see from the publications is the way in which we dealt with African issues. So, a lot of my work was in teaching and the university – looking at African feminisms as opposed to Western feminism; African feminism in the secular context; but it overlapped with the work of the Circle because



they were looking at some of those feminists, but also critiquing them and looking at issues of faith in Africa in relation to women. So, it was cross-cutting, kind of simple and straightforward, yes, there are many aspects to it.

## Women and tradition

As the interview proceeded, the dialogue moved towards traditions. Govinden shared:

African literature was to show how women were traditionally in positions of power and so in *Things Fall Apart* [novel], there's a kind of balance in roles, but it's not like culture isn't dynamic, and culture isn't changing. We have had women leaders, the Zimbabwean women writers, showing the role of women leaders and the role of strong women in African history.

Govinden further shared another comparison by stating:

I think the missionaries (and the same in India), also brought in a certain understanding of women and men. And were very selective in the way in which they supported some traditional practices and so on. But if you look at traditional culture in India, and in Africa, over history, we produced strong women. And something happened when there was the colonial Interference.

## Writing prayers

Govinden was asked to share her most personal messages while she was doing lay ministry:

So, two of the things that happened to me ... one is related to Passover, and I feel quite emotional when I talk about it as I have hundreds of prayers. It was Good Friday service. I don't know if you have ever been to them but there are like 3000 people at the Exhibition Centre and walking down the street on Good Friday and this was during apartheid in the 80s. Those services were like a real brave witness against apartheid. And Paddy Kearney asked me once to write the prayers for the Good Friday service and I said to him, I don't know how to. And then I went home and wrote the prayers, and they were used in the service. I have all those old prayers, and I have been writing. I was writing prayers for all the Good Friday services. So, for most of them that is when I learnt. And you know in the Pentecostal Church, you don't write prayers, it's extemporaneous, you pray. And in the Anglican church the prayers are generally set. I wrote prayers based on the gospel readings and the set readings. Writing prayers is a reflective exercise and a critical exercise, so it's writing things that are theologically correct. You may change your Theology, but it is writing things that are theologically acceptable. So, when you are praying, you can pray and doing a critical analysis, but when you are writing prayers, you have to be quite precise and careful about what is your understanding of God. All of these things is then comprised of Christian faith, salvation, the role of the church and the world. So, if you read my prayers, how do you understand the scripture that you are using in your prayers... so prayers become a lot more rigorous. When you are writing them, because you have to in a way reflect. It is not like you don't change your theology on different levels and you are also trying to make the prayers edifying for people, but you are also speaking to God. So how do you speak that to God? So that was one of the learning experiences for me in the last how many years from the 80s. Writing prayers, which I do to this day, that's been an amazing personal experience for me, and it's also

been a blessing to share this and has been used across in different places. I have also written what are called Celtic prayers, St. Aiden. That's another story.

## South African Indian religious community

Govinden was asked to share her thoughts on how the Indian community in South Africa has changed as a religious community in the past 50 years, as this group is still a conspicuous group within South African society. South African Indians constitute 2.6% of the total population (Alexander 2024). In terms of how the Indian community has changed as a religious community over the last 50 years, Govinden confessed that (Phiri, Govinden & Nadar 2002):

I didn't think about that much. I did write a long time ago on Hinduism. It was interesting for the encyclopaedia, and I asked them, 'Are you sure?' So, the Indian community is connected. Indian groupings in the religious groupings are connected to the other race groups. Historically, my church was Saint Aiden's. It was developed and built as an Indian church for Anglican members historically. A lot of our churches historically were built on the basis of race, but they have changed since. So, you got Saint Paul's that was like the all-White Colonial Church. If you go there now, it's largely black. The churches were historically built on the basis of race, but that has changed. And you know, there is an openness, and it is not like we have all changed equally in terms of integration. And part of the challenge is to become more integrated. Dr Nadar's book brings in a lot of the different church groups, Christian groupings among the Indian communities. (n.p.)

## South African community as a religious community

Govinden was asked how she sees the South African community as a religious community, and she replied:

I like your question. You know, there's so many different views. If we had a few folks, it would be interesting to have their views. Certainly, we have got more interfaith dialogue, and I have written interfaith prayers, by the way, which we have used at interfaith gatherings. So, there is interfaith cooperation. We were at the Gandhi Settlement last week and we had interfaith prayers. The Gandhi Settlement has been very good. When we were at Praveen Gordon's memorial and funeral, the interfaith prayers were so deeply uplifting. So, there is the interfaith dimension, but I also found, and I should rather not, but there are changes in different religions and changes in church structures and in churches as well. So, you have what is called 'The Pentecostal Site', which is grown and become very vibrant in terms of numbers and so on. You have got deep thinking and Theology across the different faiths and different churches. And if I look at the Anglican church, you have got a wide diversity in the Anglican church itself, so you have got deeply reflective churches thinking on theological issues on climate change and so on. This is a very important aspect of the Anglican Church, the Catholic Church and also on social outreach and so on. And you have got other churches who pay less attention to that. And so it's more about worship and having exuberant worship, praise and singing that appeals to a pop community, a pop population. And you have got others deeply involved in social issues. And you have got the Dennis Hurley Centre, which is a very good example to answer your question. Inter Faith Church,

Interfaith cooperation where people feel totally at home there. Whatever your faith is and it's still and at the same time it's Roman Catholic, remember, named after Archbishop Dennis Hurley. He himself is a good example of someone rooted in his Catholic tradition and out of that, reaching out to the world, speaking against apartheid. People of different faiths. So, you have got two types of understandings of your faith, and it doesn't make you less of a person of your faith if you embrace other faiths. So, there are those who out of the deep love of their faith in my case, my Christian, my deep Christian convictions reaching out to my neighbour who's my neighbour. And then you have got those who say we will embrace you. But how far do we go? And then you have got fundamentalisms across the faiths as well that have crept in. We have always had that, all our different faiths. Yeah. So as much as these, this coming together, you have those who want to remain.

## Conclusions

This article explored the theological and religious exploration of Dr Govinden by means of recoding her voice on the following interview questions:

- How did your parents influence you toward a Christian lifestyle during your childhood and teenage years?
- What was your involvement in the church, and how were your university experiences shaped by your Christian beliefs? What led you to become a theologian, and what are some of the key highlights of your life, both as a Christian and as a theologian?
- How would you describe the South African community as a religious community over the past 50 years?

Through a semi-structured interview, Govinden was invited to reflect on her memories, and interviewer and interviewee journeyed to co-produce knowledge of her lived experiences. The main themes identified are the following: (1) her experiences from early childhood, adolescence, and student life; (2) the influence of her parents; (3) her path to becoming a theologian and significant moments in her life as both a Christian and theologian; and (4) her perspective on the South African community as a religious community over the past 50 years.

Dr Govinden's theological contribution in terms of South African society, especially through the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, is to empower African women to contribute their critical thinking and analysis in advancing current knowledge. Theology, religion, and culture are the three chosen foci, which she concentrated on, used as the framework for her work in terms of the Circle's research and publications. Govinden has undertaken research, writing, and publishing on African issues from women's perspectives, and this is juxtaposed against the mission of the Circle.

Through her work she upheld the value of the Circle, which subscribes to the notion of enabling, fostering, and making it possible for African women to write, allowing their voices to

be heard in theological literature that may serve their churches and universities as well as enrich the global conversation.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Author's contribution

K.K.A. the sole author of this research article.

### Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

### Ethical considerations

The participants were informed of the nature of the study and consented to participate in this study. Ethical clearance was granted by the Oral History Association of South Africa on 23 September 2024.

### Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, or agency, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

## References

- Alexander, M., 2024, *South Africa's population*, viewed 13 January 2025, from [https://southafrica-info.com/people/south-africa-population/#:::text=Black%20people%20are%20in%20the,million%20white%20people%20\(7.2%25\).&text=These%20ratios%20have%20changed%20since%20the%20country%20became%20a%20democracy%20in%201994](https://southafrica-info.com/people/south-africa-population/#:::text=Black%20people%20are%20in%20the,million%20white%20people%20(7.2%25).&text=These%20ratios%20have%20changed%20since%20the%20country%20became%20a%20democracy%20in%201994).
- Anagol, P., 2017, 'Indian Christian women and indigenous feminism, c. 1850–c. 1920', in *Gender and imperialism*, pp. 79–103, Manchester University Press.
- De Beer, P.J.P., 2010, 'Church planning in the South African Indian community, with reference to the Reformed Church in Africa', Doctoral dissertation, University of Pretoria.
- Du, E., 2022, 'Women hold up half the sky: A woman's role during the cultural revolution', in *AAH 194: Visual Culture in Communist China*, viewed 13 January 2025, from <https://muse.union.edu/aah194-sp22/2022/05/15/women-hold-up-half-the-sky-a-womans-role-during-the-cultural-revolution/>
- Goedhals, M., 2014, 'Gandhi and his Christian friends: Legacy of the South African years 1893–1914', *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 40(1), 1–20.
- Govinden, B., 1991, 'No time for silence: Women, Church and liberation', in D. Ackermann, J. Draper & E. Mashinini (eds.), *Women hold up half the sky: Women in the Church in Southern Africa*, pp. 274–297, Cluster Publications, Pietermaritzburg.
- Govinden, B., 1996, 'In search of our own wells', in M. Kanyoro, & N. Njoroge (eds.), *Groaning in faith*, Acton Publishers, Nairobi.
- Govinden, D.B., 2018, 'Women doing history differently', *African Perspectives of Research in Teaching and Learning* 2(1), 30–46.

- Landman, C., 2018, 'Faces of religious healing in Nkhoma, Malawi: An exercise in oral history', *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 44(3), 5115. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/5115>
- Marie, R.S., 2014, 'Across the Kala Pani: Untold stories of indentured Indian women of Christian origin in South Africa', *Oral History Journal of South Africa* 2(1), 89–101. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2309-5792/1585>
- Oduyoye, M.A., 1995, *Hearing and knowing: Theological reflections on Christianity in Africa*, Orbis Books, New York, NY, viewed from <https://archive.org/details/hearingknowingth0000oduy/page/n5/mode/2up>
- Phiri, I., 1997, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy: Religious Experience of Chewa Women in Central Malawi*, African Books Collective, Kachere Series, Malawi.
- Phiri, I.A., Govinden, D.B. & Nadar, S., 2002, *Her-stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, Cluster Publications, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.
- Redding, S., 2016, 'Women as diviners and as Christian converts in rural South Africa, c. 1880–1963', *Journal of African History* 57(3), 367–389. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853716000086>
- Walker, C. (ed.), 1990, *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, David Philip Publishers, New Africa Books, Claremont, South Africa.