

Finding Valliamma:

**Uncovering the story of Valliamma Munuswamy Mudaliar, the
teenage girl who died in the South African liberation struggle**

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ABSTRACT

This is the story of Valliamma Munuswamy Mudaliar - an icon and a secret. In 1913, Valliamma, a teenage activist, was sentenced to three months hard labour for protesting against a new marriage law that sought to nullify all customary Hindu and Muslim marriages. She fell ill during her short incarceration at Maritzburg Prison and, in an act of defiance, refused to accept an early release from prison officials. Valliamma died on 22 February 1914, a few weeks after her term of imprisonment ended on her birthday. She was only 16 years old. Across the globe, memorials commemorate Valliamma. Memorials have been erected in Chennai in India and Malaysia in her honour, whilst in South Africa, a baby shelter known as the Valliamma Cradle of Love was established in Phoenix, north of Durban. The young Valliamma met Indian lawyer and anti-colonial activist Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi during a political rally. She would soon become an important figure in Gandhi's non-violent resistance campaign for civil rights in South Africa. While she features in many parts of Gandhi's resistance movement in South Africa, she is unknown to those who do not actively seek out her history. Valliamma lost her life in South Africa's liberation struggle; however, she is "invisible" in the story of South Africa's political landscape. Today, Valliamma's fight for freedom and dignity deserves a place in our history books. This longform journalism essay comprises three parts: the story of Indenture, the story of my ancestors, and my quest in "Finding Valliamma". It is written for my daughter Sharlette Rose, so that she will always know Valliamma, who came before her.

DECLARATION

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts by Coursework and Research Report in the Department of Journalism, at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.

Sharlene Naiker

27 March 2025

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sharlene Naiker', followed by a period.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The journey of researching, writing and completing this project has been a long and emotional one.

Some days, I wanted to give up.

This research project is a reflection of the love, support and guidance that I received from many people. These amazing individuals held my hand through this journey, which was often interrupted by professional and personal challenges.

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To my husband, Shavalan, thank you for your endless support and love during this arduous journey. I love that you are my person and I am yours, and that whatever door we come to, we open it together. You are a blessing to me.

To my daughter, Sharlette Rose, thank you for being the inspiration behind this dissertation. I dedicate this research to you, my darling. I'm thankful for every moment I have with you as your mother. I hope to continue learning alongside you. I love you endlessly.

INTRODUCTION

Valliamma Munuswamy Mudaliar was a young, Indian girl like no other. She couldn't be. At the young age of 16, she had done more living and made more sacrifices than one could imagine. More than a century ago, Valliamma decided to fight against a justice system that stripped Indians of their dignity and human rights. She would pay the ultimate price for this bravery.

Valliamma, a teenage activist, was sentenced to three months hard labour for protesting against a new marriage law that sought to nullify all customary Hindu and Muslim marriages. She fell ill during her short incarceration at Maritzburg Prison and, in an act of defiance, refused to accept an early release from prison officials. Valliamma died on 22 February 1914, a few weeks after her term of imprisonment ended, on her birthday.

To tell her story, I discovered the places where the young Valliamma walked, lived and died. As I immersed myself in these deeply significant places, I reconstructed her life and reflected on my own thoughts as an Indian woman living in South Africa. This story seeks to reclaim Valliamma as an important figure for South Africans, locating her place in the history of the struggle and restoring her to public heritage.

This longform narrative story is about a young woman of whom little is known in the political landscape of South Africa, even though her story has been immortalised over time through memorials across the globe, in fictional books and soon through a movie.

While this research sought a critical approach to uncover her story, the absence of records, stigma attached to the indentured experience and lack of living sources made this process arduous and frustrating at times. Long hours were spent searching archives and reading literature as I tried to make sense of Valliamma's story, the incredible activist who was mighty enough to inspire Gandhi, the reason behind great memorials across the globe, yet is still a mystery in the land of her birth.

This is a story of Indenture and how this system and later, the oppression of Indians who chose to settle in South Africa, has impacted generations of Indians, with the effects still felt today.

A few decades ago, it was almost taboo to talk about the past. This is changing, so this story unpacks the lives of the first indentured labourers through my eyes and offers a small reflection on identity and what it means to be a descendant of indentured labourers. Despite the gloom, pain and suffering experienced on those sugarcane plantations, there is certainly joy, accomplishment and much more to celebrate.

This is a story about roots and my ancestors. How can I plan great things for the future if I do not acknowledge my ancestors and where they fit in the cultural landscape of South Africa?

My family members are tight-lipped about the past. I'm not sure what is the reason behind the silence; however, I attempt to unpack this amnesiac approach to the past in this story.

Finally, this story is for my daughter Sharlette Rose Naiker. I stumbled across Valliamma's picture in a newspaper and almost did a double take when I realised that my then six-year-old daughter bore a striking resemblance to Valliamma. I needed to write this story for my daughter in the hope that it forms part of the legacy I will leave for Sharlette Rose to remind her of the many brave women like Valliamma who paved the way for her.

Telling Valliamma's story is a form of healing from the past that my family members choose to remain silent about and my way of breaking the stigma attached to the indentured experience. I do not believe that anyone can truly plan for the future if they do not acknowledge their past. I unpacked this amnesiac approach to the past in my research.

Valliamma's story is one of triumph over oppression and deserves to be a part of our collective South African heritage.

Bealuh Thumbadoo (2022) captured this sentiment: "Our ancestors had little choice. We have more... some of our work must stand up to the light and render worthwhile their sacrifice and legacy."

On 9th August 2022, I stood in Valliamma's cell at the Pietermaritzburg Prison. I felt a strong sense of loss. But, in as much as she died a very tragic death, the point is that she lived. Her life needs to be celebrated and honoured, and her story must be kept alive for all the young women still to come.

Who was Valliamma?

Valliamma Munuswamy Mudaliar was born to Indian migrants R. Munuswamy Mudaliar and Janakiammal in Doornfontein, Johannesburg, in 1898. She belonged to the Tamil weaving caste known as the Senguntha Mudaliyar people (Vishwasamy, 2010). At the time, Doornfontein was developing into a trading area for the formerly indentured. E.S. Reddy (1997) states that Doornfontein played an important role in the Satyagraha in the Transvaal. As a resident, Valliamma was at the heart of the resistance movement.

Satyagraha is a Sanskrit word meaning "truth force". Gandhi initiated this form of passive resistance or non-violence against British rule in South Africa after he witnessed the harsh conditions experienced by South Africans when he arrived in the country in April 1893.

In the preface of *Satyagraha in South Africa*, he states:

The Satyagraha struggle of the Indians in South Africa lasted eight years. The term Satyagraha was invented and employed in

connection therewith. I had long entertained a desire to write a history of that struggle myself. Some things only I could write.
(Gandhi, 1968)

E.S. Reddy unpacks how the state oppressed Indians on a website dedicated to the life of Gandhi (M.K. Gandhi Institute, n.d.).

In early 1913, when Satyagraha in the Transvaal had been suspended, Justice Malcolm Searle of the Cape Supreme Court ruled that marriages performed according to a religion which allowed polygamy - that is, all Mahomedan and Hindu marriages - would not be recognised in South Africa. If this ruling had prevailed, almost all married Indian women would have been reduced legally to the status of concubines and their children treated as illegitimate. The women and children would have lost the right of inheritance and the right to enter South Africa. The government ignored repeated appeals from the community for legislation to remedy the situation.

Valliamma's decision to join the Satyagraha movement and fight against the oppressive laws imposed on Indians would later lead to her martyrdom (David, Choonilal, Naidoo and Naidoo, 2022).

At the age of 16, Valliamma catapulted into the political limelight when she joined a group of women, including Gandhi's wife, Kasturba, in a protest march from the Transvaal to Natal. It was a defining moment for Indians, especially Valliamma, whose name is closely associated with various protests and political campaigns. She was arrested for her involvement in the march and sentenced on 23 September 1913. After her conviction, Valliamma fell ill in prison and was bedridden. She was later released but died in February 1914.

Gandhi's autobiography, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, notes that he visited an emaciated Valliamma and acknowledged her determination and bravery in the fight for the rights of her people (Gandhi, 1968: 262) Surely Valliamma's sacrifice places her in the same league as the likes of Ruth First, Charlotte Maxeke and Sarah Baartman, who were all "martyred heroines of persecution" (Naidoo, 2021).

MAKING OF AN ICON

This research would be incomplete if it did not reflect how the story of Valliamma has been told over the decades, the common themes in her story and how it came to be that she has an iconic status at certain times and places, but little is known of her in present-day South Africa.

The majority of literature on Valliamma, emphasises three common factors, namely:

- Her close association with the Indian lawyer and anti-colonial activist Gandhi.
- The theory that the colours of her sari inspired the design of the Indian national flag.
- Her allegiance to India.

Three fictionalised accounts of Valliamma's life have been published. South African author Aziz Hassim attempted to capture the story of Valliamma and her role in the passive resistance movement in his novel *The Agony of Valliamma* and this created some recognition for the "long-neglected historical figure" (Pather, 2014). Suzanne Franco then released *Soul Force: Valliamma Found Herself No Longer a Child, Not Yet a Woman, But an Activist* in 2018, a work of fiction written in an autobiographical style. Franco tells Valliamma's story against the backdrop of the Satyagraha movement in South Africa. The most recent book, Mala Lutchmanan's novel, *Valliamma - A Child Soldier of South Africa's Freedom*, released in August 2022, details Valliamma's journey on foot from the Transvaal to Natal and how she used her oratory skills to mobilise mine and plantation workers in the fight against the inhumane laws Indians were subjected to. "Valliamma's fearless activism contributed in great part to the freedom and dignity we enjoy today. She is a heroine, who belonged to all," said Lutchmanan in an interview with the *Rising Sun* newspaper (August, 2022).

It is important to note that all three books are fiction and based on oral stories told to these respective authors by individuals who were considered mentors and friends to them. Azim Hassim's *The Agony of Valliamma* was born after his mentor Soobrie Pillay passed away.

"He has repeatedly exhorted me to record her story and I had not responded to his request," Hassim writes (Hassim, 2011). He further notes that his book attempts to recreate what her life would have been like, "including the imagined dialogues between the protagonists." (Hassim, 2011)

Lutchmanan, who is known as a cultural activist and a guardian of the Tamil dialect in South Africa, took her book further by publishing it in Tamil, the mother tongue of Valliamma. "The selfless contribution made by this young Tamil woman for South Africa's freedom ignited in me the yearning to pen the biography of Valliamma in Tamil for Tamil diaspora" (Lutchmanan, 2022). During her research and writing, Lutchmanan also found that documented history on Valliamma was limited; and, like Hassim, used oral traditions to craft her story.

Whilst my research drew on a few themes and nuances from these publications, this longform journalism article is an attempt to capture insights that may not have been documented or explored before. This project is an exploration of her life and why these authors and others view her as an icon. It attempts to paint a picture of the life she could have experienced when she was just a girl, daughter and sibling.

African Indians (David, Choonilal, Naidoo & Naidoo, 2022) a book that gives an account of the indentured experience on the voyages to the then Port Natal, taken from the diaries, scrapbooks and photographs of Captain Max de Gruyter, pays tribute to Valliamma, highlighting her contribution to the struggle for freedom.

Yana Pillay, considered by many as the gatekeeper of Valliamma, has shared his vast knowledge of Valliamma's life with Hassim, Franco, Lutchmanan and David, Choonilal, Naidoo and Naidoo. This is evident as these authors, in published notes and acknowledgements, have stated that Pillay's willingness to share his knowledge was a significant contributor to the success of their books. Pillay, the founder of the Natal Tamil Federation and a respected community leader, is also the custodian of documents on Valliamma.

However, through his writing, Gandhi is considered the only credible source on Valliamma's life. In 1913, Gandhi met Valliamma during a Satyagraha campaign. She then became an important figure in Gandhi's non-violent resistance campaign for civil rights in South Africa. Gandhi wrote about Valliamma in several editions of *Indian Opinion*, a newspaper he established in 1903 in Durban, which played a significant role in communicating with migrant workers.

In *First Martyrs of Satyagraha*, E.S. Reddy wrote that Gandhi attended the unveiling of a memorial dedicated to Valliamma at the Braamfontein Cemetery in Johannesburg. This was said to be one of last acts he undertook before he leaving South Africa for India.

Gandhi later wrote this powerful message in his book *Satyagraha in South Africa*.

Valliamma's service is imperishable. She built her temple of service with her own hands, and her glorious image has a niche even now reserved from it in many a heart. And the name of Valliamma will live in the history of South African Satyagraha as long as India lives.

*Despite her iconic status, as I have argued above, there is little concrete material on Valliamma. Devi Moodley Rajab hints at the reason for this invisibility in her book, *Women: South Africans of Indian Origin*.*

For large periods of our history in this country, Indian women were largely invisible. Perhaps it is true to say that among their counterparts of white and coloured women, Indian women were the most occupationally stagnant group under apartheid rule.

Perhaps, too, this could be attributed to South African Indian people's almost amnesiac approach to history when it comes to remembering their past.

As Solomon Pathasarthy Pillay wrote in the foreword of Lutchmanan's book:

The history of Indians arriving in South Africa is a story of bravery, resilience, hopelessness, desperation and eventual liberation ... One such remarkable piece of history is that of the life, struggles and liberation pedigree of a diminutive little girl of Indian origin, Valliamma. The story of Valliamma is incredible beyond comprehension for many reasons (Pillay, 2022: 8)

Selvan Naidoo, curator of the *1860 Heritage Centre* wrote in a Facebook post:

In commemorating the legacy of civic activism of people like Valliamma, we must be inspired to go to the trenches as a collective South African community to heal this country together, to stand up against the abuse of women and children, to stand up against rampant crime so that "every right-minded man and woman in South Africa condemn immoral and flagrantly unjust actions" from whoever that may come from. (13 August 2019)

AIM AND RATIONALE

This longform essay made use of Gandhi's articles and book and other fragmentary sources to create a picture of the kind of person Valliamma was in an attempt to depict her life during that tumultuous time. By reconstructing or "reimagining" Valliamma's life, with the use of various spaces, writings, histories, memorials, I attempted to understand the significance of her presence (and invisibility) for the Indian community (and other communities) in South Africa today. An important part of this research delved into how the system of Indenture and, later, the oppression of Indians who chose to settle in South Africa, has impacted generations of Indians, with its effects still felt today.

I looked at why her story has faded over the past century and relate this to my own family history and our attempts to preserve our traditions and culture. In addition, I wrote about my family history that I traced back (with the help of relatives) to the first indentured labourers and offered a small reflection on identity and what it means to be a descendant of indentured labourers. As I sifted through myth and legend, this research project unearthed this remarkable young woman and, in doing so, celebrates the past. It is a past that is often described with gloom, pain and suffering, but certainly there is also joy, accomplishment and much more to celebrate.

Political activist and author of *Made in Chatsworth*, Kiru Naidoo, said that only when the indentured sacrifices are acknowledged and commemorated for the freedoms we enjoy today that we can claim that our work as historians, archivists, filmmakers, journalists and writers is done. "That is a real pity for she ought to have a revered place in the history of South African freedom." (Naidoo, 2022)

During this project, my research into my ancestry resulted in a form of healing from a painful past. By unpacking this courageous young woman's story, it became an opportunity to reclaim Valliamma as an important figure for South Africans, and locate her place in the history of struggle and restore her to public heritage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The initial research for this narrative project began online as I sifted through newspaper archives, scholarly literature and articles on Indenture. While much has been written about the history of Indenture and post-Indenture experiences of the Indian community in South Africa, there was little information available on Valliamma. The lack of academic literature on Valliamma created many grey areas in this project.

This literature review draws on three main areas of scholarship: the history of Indenture and post-indenture experiences of the Indian community in South Africa; the role of Gandhi in elevating Valliamma as an icon of struggle; and stigma and its role in relegating certain Indian experiences, histories and figures to the margin.

To understand Valliamma and her decision to join the passive resistance movement, it is imperative to unpack the story of Indenture and the role it has played in shaping the lives of Indian people in South Africa.

To delve into the story of Indenture and of its impact Indian people in South Africa, it is vital to read sociologist Ashwin Desai and Professor Goolam Vahed's book *Inside Indian Indenture*, which is considered a leading work in literature on Indenture, as it provides an in-depth understanding of South African Indian history.

Desai and Vahed also co-authored *Many Lives: 150 years of being Indian in South Africa*, which includes many individual stories, including Valliamma's, and depicts how the past held many joys and triumphs despite the hardships the Indian community faced. The book is a treasure trove of information and mirrors my attempt to paint a portrait with words so that others may know Valliamma.

More than 160 years ago, the SS Truro and the Belvedere left the shores of India, crossing the Indian Ocean, bringing the first batch of indentured labourers to Port Natal in South Africa. (Desai & Vahed, 2010) Many boarded those ships to escape India's harsh caste system and find a better life in the Colony of Natal. Promises were made as depicted in the lengthy notice to immigrants below:

NOTICE TO COOLIES INTENDING TO EMIGRATE TO NATAL

You will be taken free of expense to Calcutta and, while there, will be well fed and properly lodged until the ship sails, and should you be ill, the greatest care will be taken of you.

When the ship is ready, you will be supplied with good clothing; the finest ships are selected, and the voyage takes about five or six weeks. The food, medicines and other appliances on board are of good quality and your health, comfort and safety will be most carefully attended to. The Indian Government has appointed officers who are most strict and vigilant in securing for you these advantages.

On and after your arrival in Natal, there is a Protector of Immigrants ready to advise you at all times during your residence there. You will be located on an estate where a medical man is employed. Your religion will in no way be interfered with, and both Hindoos and Mahomedana are alike protected (Desai and Vahed, 2010: 38).

Indenture. It is unclear whether the kind of life that they would come to live was immediately apparent to the indentured when they signed and or thumb printed the contract - that they would be bound in a “legally authorised domination which denied them choice as to work, residence or remuneration, as assumed that their labour lay in the ownership of some lord, master, employer or custodian. (Desai & Vahed, 2010)

Naidoo cites that further misery followed when the Indians landed in the Colony of Natal, as 10 passengers had died before being assigned to a sugar cane plantation.

The exhausted passengers, having spent 84 days at sea, arrived ten days after the first indentured ship, the *Truro*, arrived from Madras (Chennai), also carrying 342 passengers. The *Belvedere*'s passengers were held at a poorly prepared quarantine site where standing water and cramped living conditions at the campsite invited death. (Naidoo, 2022).

South Africa soon became a land of broken promises for these immigrants. Indentured life was riddled with a “systemic violence from the outside, as well as within its internal social life.” (Desai, 2010: 2). “Their lives were lived in the context of the white ruling class that saw them through the lens of racist stereotypes” (Desai & Vahed, 2010)

Indentured women bore the brunt of this violence, endemic in the Indenture experience. In one instance, Desai cites the tragic story of Wootme, a young Indian woman who was found murdered at Blackburn Estate in Inanda, north of Durban on 5 April 1890. Her husband, Mulwa, used an axe to smash her head. He was hung for his crime. Desai and Vahed note that indentured women were paid lower wages and received fewer food rations than men.

Rowanne Sarojini Marie (2014) expands on this, saying that pregnant women continued to work for seven months; thereafter their rations were suspended until they resumed work again. “Women were sometimes forced to append themselves to men to gain access to food. Men labelled such women, who acted out of desperate need to survive, ‘rice-cookers’.” (Desai & Vahed, 2010: 6)

In 1911, five years before its empire-wide *abolition*, *Indenture* came to an end in Natal. (Bates, 2012). On 3 January 1911, The Secretary of Commerce announced in the Indian

Legislative Council that Indenture to Natal would be terminated from 1 July 1911 (Desai & Vahed, 2010: 365)

This newfound freedom for Indians proved to be more of a burden than liberation as they encountered tense standoffs with the British, who still owned the land in Natal. Goolam and Vahed (2010) note that when Indenture came to an end in 1911, upper class or elite Indians started to lobby for their rights as South African residents. This unsettled the British.

The ex-indentured had three options: re-indenture, return to India or move into the continent as “free” Indians (Goolam & Vahed, 2010: 241). These were not easy choices to make as each one had its challenges. The Indenture system had changed the lives of these migrants.

After completing their indenture, many rented land to grow fruit and vegetables for the local market. In 1885, the Wragg Commission noted that Indians dominated the food produce market. Those who did not turn to the food market became entrepreneurs and opened stores and hotels, while others made a living through gardening, hawking and fishing. In order to force Indians into employment, the government introduced, in 1910, a 3 pound tax on all non-indentured adults, boys under 16 and girls under 12 and older. Many workers were forced to re-indenture to avoid tax. (South African History Online, n.d.).

During the early 1940s, Doornfontein, a small town on the outskirts of Johannesburg, was developing into a trading area for the ex-indentured. E. S. Reddy (1997) states that Doornfontein played an important role in the Satyagraha in the Transvaal. Valliamma’s father, Munuswami Moodaliar, lived in a small brick and mortar house on President Street and ran a busy fruit and vegetable store on Market Street. The shop also sold South Indian sweetmeats. Well-known activist and close confidant of Gandhi, Thambi Naidoo, lived at 156 President Street with his wife Veerammal and their seven children. Reddy adds that Naidoo was imprisoned 14 times during the Satyagraha campaign and that “five generations of Naidoo’s family fought in the struggle for freedom from racist tyranny in South Africa” (Reddy, 1997).

A three-pound tax imposed on indentured labourers infuriated Indians at the time. Desai (2010) states that the frustrations “created the potential for a collective response, reinforcing the volatile mix of deprivation and desperation” amongst the ex-indentured. Less than a third of the 10 800 Indian males required to pay the tax did so. Gandhi’s passive resistance campaign called for its abolishment in 1914.

In 2021, Gopalkrishna Gandhi wrote in *The Telegraph*:

In the early 1910s, these Indian labourers, poorly paid, uncivilly treated, without political or even civic rights, were riled by a racial poll tax — Three Pounds per head — that hurt their pride more than it hurt their purses. This, together with other disabilities like restrictions on movement between province and province and

a requirement for getting registered on the basis of fingerprints,
was resisted by the affronted Indians who faced the consequences
— stiff fines or jail.

The three-pound tax was designed to force ex-indentured to work again under semi-slave conditions or leave South Africa. This caused great suffering and could not be ignored (Reddy & Hiralal, 2017).

The imposition of the three-pound tax was not the only burden that crippled the ex-indentured. The British also questioned the validity of their customary marriages. Baxter (2017) provides more insight into how Searle's judgement on 14 March 1913 came about. The judgement arose from an urgent application for the entry of the wife of a Muslim trader into to Cape "under qualification of marriage from India".

According to the judgement and having regard to the terms of the Cape Colony Marriage Order in Council, the marriage has been celebrated in a mosque and there be deemed monogamous, and so was invalid. Entry for the woman into South Africa was denied.

The 1913 Searle Judgement had the effect of nullifying all marriages adjudicated according to Muslim and Hindu rites. Concerns were raised around the implications of the legal status of Indian women within a marriage, the legitimacy of children born of that union, and the right of ownership and inheritance. (Goolam & Vahed, 2010).

According to Reddy,

Gandhi consulted his associates in the Transvaal about renewing the Satyagraha with two principal demands: recognition of the status of Indian marriages and the abolition of an onerous tax of three pounds imposed on former indentured labourers, their wives and children to force them to re-indenture or leave South Africa. They agreed that women should be invited to join the Satyagraha as the honour of Indian womanhood was involved. (Reddy, 2012)

The judgment caused a huge uprising and this was when Valliamma decided to join the Satyagraha movement. She refused to be called illegitimate.

Through his political affiliations, Gandhi soon heard of Valliamma and arranged for a meeting with the young woman and her parents at their modest home in Doornfontein. He was said to be fascinated with stories of Valliamma's bravery and was impressed by her oration at political rallies and underground meetings.

In 1913, thousands of Indian workers from plantations and mines heeded Gandhi's call to strike. Valliamma played an active role in mobilising support for the strike. Gandhi recognised this powerful trait and encouraged her to speak her truth.

On 15 September 1913, a batch of 16 resisters from the Phoenix Settlement, 12 men and four women, including Gandhi's wife, son and two other relatives, proceeded to the Transvaal to court arrest (Reddy & Hiralal, 2017). A month later, more than 20 000 Indian workers in the coal mining area of Natal commenced with strike action calling for the scrapping of the three-pound tax.

More than twenty thousand workers on plantations and the cities then went on strike. The Government brought the army and reinforcements of the police into the area. In collusion with the plantation owners and other employers, it was able to suppress the strikes by mid-December. The brutality against the Indian workers, and the imprisonment of women. (Reddy & Hiralal, 2017: 8).

Many workers were shot and killed during the strike, which did little to ease the crippling laws that infringed on the rights of Indians. However, it is important to note that the strike was the beginning of the revolt against the British. The spirits of the Indians were not broken as they vowed to continue their protest until their leaders were released and the laws abolished.

On 10 November 1913, Gandhi and a group of women were arrested for crossing the border into the Transvaal without a permit. According to SA History Online, the women were arrested under the Immigration Regulation Act which restricted Asians from moving within the borders of the country.

Ela Gandhi (2015) wrote that thousands of indentured workers went on strike and many women suffered when their husbands were killed and maimed. "There are no records of women strikers. But many women with children joined Gandhi in the march across the border between the former Transvaal and Natal provinces in defiance of the law."

On 22 December 1913, police arrested Valliamma and a group of women, including Gandhi's wife Kasturba and Valliamma's mother, in Volksrust near the Mpumalanga border. It had been almost two months since Valliamma met with Gandhi at Tolstoy Farm in the Transvaal (Desai & Vahed, 2010: 390).

The women were charged and given the option of imprisonment or a fine of three pounds. They chose imprisonment and were sentenced to three months of hard labour at Maritzburg Prison. This hard labour entailed the washing of prison uniforms and scrubbing the cement floors and prison walls. Conditions inside the prison were horrid. Two of the women gave birth inside the prison.

Gandhi wrote:

The women's bravery was beyond words. They were all kept in Maritzburg jail, where they were considerably harassed. Their food was of the worst quality, and they were given them from outside nearly till the end of their term. One sister was under a religious vow to restrict herself to a particular diet. After great difficulty, the jail authorities allowed her that diet, but the food supplied was unfit for human consumption. The sister badly needed olive oil. She did not get it at first, and when she got it, it was old and rancid. She offered to get it at her own expense but was told that jail was no hotel and she must take what food was given to her. When this sister was released, she was a mere skeleton, and her life was saved only by a great effort. (Gandhi, 1968: 261).

The months of travelling and speaking at political rallies had been harsh on Valliamma. She commenced her prison sentence weak and extremely ill. "Eating little, sleeping less had taken its toll on the frail bodied Valliamma, and at the time of her arrest, she was already not well" (Negi, 2022). The hard labour worsened her health and her condition deteriorated. Prison authorities took pity on Valliamma and offered her an early release. "Such was her tenacity that when prison authorities offered to release her on medical grounds, she refused." (Desai & Vahed, 2010: 390).

She finally left the prison on 11 February 1914 after Gandhi and General Jan Smuts reached a provisional agreement.

Gandhi visited Valliamma on her deathbed and wrote the following:

How can I forget her? Valliamma R. Munuswami Mudaliar was a young girl of Johannesburg only sixteen years of age. She was confined to bed when I saw her. As she was a tall girl, her emaciated body was a terrible thing to behold."

"Valliamma, you do not repent of your having gone to jail?" I asked.

"Repent? I am even now ready to go to jail again if I am arrested," said Valliamma.

"But what if it results in your death?" I pursued.

"I do not mind it. Who would not love to die for one's motherland?" (Gandhi, 1968: 262)

The Hindu, India's national newspaper states:

Her death in the early 1900s was a reflection of the travails Indians — mostly descended from indentured labour — were going through at a time when Britain was more interested in soothing Afrikaner feelings after the Boer War than offering Africans and Indians a fair deal. (*The Hindu*, 2009).

It could be said that Valliamma's death was a significant milestone in the struggle for identity in South Africa.

There is little material to describe what Valliamma's last days on Earth were like. At a memorial service at Valliamma's gravesite in 1997, Indian High Commissioner to South Africa, Gopal Krishna Gandhi, attempted to capture Valliamma's thoughts and feelings in the beautiful monologue below:

There is something wisp-like about you, Valliamma, which eludes us. No longer a child, not yet a woman, what made you decide to join the marchers to become a revolutionary? I can just picture you jumping over the runnels of water, doe-stepped, with the light of youth in your eyes, helping the older marchers along... Did they sing as they marched, Tamil songs, perhaps some in Hindi or in Gujarati? I wonder what your thoughts were during the march. You had not been to India (as far as we know) so you could not have pictured your ancestral village, its little temple, and its paddy fields. You were South African, of South African earth, knowing only its sugarcane acres and its mines. But whatever your thoughts were, they were certainly about life, about living, about the future. You were there when the police arrived raising pandemonium. You were there when the arrests began. I wonder what you felt when you entered the prison gates, when the iron doors shut clang behind you. You a child of the sun and the air, what did your mind say when you entered the dark and damp of the Pietermaritzburg jail? Did Kasturba speak to you about what lay ahead? Did someone say to you: Child, this is it? We have chosen to suffer, so here we are.

GANDHI, THE SCRIBE

In as much as Gandhi was a brilliant orator, he was also widely lauded as an extraordinary writer whose style of writing was simple and clear. He wrote plainly to describe his hopes, faith, sorrows and disappointment as his Satyagraha movement grew in South Africa. "Perhaps Gandhi's love for and careful reading of choice English writers and the Bible trained his ears for making proper use of words. He read widely and digested what he read." (M.K. Gandhi Institute, n.d.).

Bulla (2019) comments that writing was central to not just Gandhi's causes but his entire being.

"Writing was not only a habit of being; it was also Gandhi's way of expressing himself to the masses, especially since he was never fond of his oratory skills" (Bulla, 2019). Whilst his writing was a collection of articles and speeches, it gave deep insight into his life and

thoughts during a turbulent time in South Africa. It is important to note that even though his autobiography was written in his mother tongue, Gujarati, he chose to address his followers and write in English. Gandhi was often described as an eloquent and expressive speaker. (M.K. Gandhi Institute, n.d.).

As tensions between the British and Indians continued to rise, Gandhi established the *Indian Opinion* newspaper in 1903 on the eve of the Satyagraha struggle. Published in three languages, Gujarati, Tamil and English, the newspaper played an important role in mobilising support for the Satyagraha movement led by Gandhi and the National Indian Congress to fight discrimination on the grounds of race and advocate for the civil rights of the Indian community in South Africa.

During his South African years (1893-1914), Mohandas Gandhi started a printing press and a newspaper, *Indian Opinion*. One of the world's great intellectual archives, *Indian Opinion* constitutes an experiment with reading and writing that fed into Gandhi's ideas on *satyagraha* or "passive resistance. (Hofmeyr, 2014)

On the centenary celebrations of the founding of the *Indian Opinion*, Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie (2013) explained the significance of the newspaper and its role in providing an historical record of the "disabilities that Indians suffered under".

Indian Opinion played a very significant role in the early years of the twentieth century by fostering the idea of one united Indian community and a national identity. This was no mean task for Indians were divided by religion, caste, class, and even Indian regional affiliations. 'we are not, and ought not to be, Tamils or Calcutta men, Mohammedans or Hindus, Brahmins or Banyas, but simply and solely British Indians'. *Indian Opinion* especially highlighted the poor conditions under which indentured labourers worked. Editorials asked 'Is all well on the Estates', cases of harsh treatment by employers were publicised and the astoundingly high rate of suicide was pointed out. (Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 2013)

Dhupelia-Mesthrie (2013) further notes that *Indian Opinion* and political activism on the part of its editors became an established tradition. The newspaper became a powerful instrument for the mobilisation of Indians and the growth of the Satyagraha movement. The resisters had received hardly any training except for Gandhi's speeches at mass meetings and his articles in *Indian Opinion* (Reddy & Hiralal, 2017: 11).

The newspaper regularly printed the names of resisters who contributed significantly to the struggle.

Indian Opinion, the main source for the preparation of the lists, gave only the first names in many cases and the spellings of the

names were not always consistent so that there may be a few duplications. Many of the names appear only in the Gujarati edition of *Indian Opinion*, and their spellings in English in CWMG may not be accurate, especially in the case of South Indian names. (Reddy & Hiralal.2017: 212)

The young Valliamma featured several times in *Indian Opinion*. Gandhi also used his editorial freedom to pen several articles supporting Valliamma. The Tamil edition of *Indian Opinion*, dated 28 January 1914, carried an article “Release of Our Brave Indian Sisters”, which covered the release of 11 women, including Valliamma and her mother Janakiammal from Maritzburg Prison .

The edition dated 25 February 1914 carried an editorial and article on Valliamma’s death.

In another column, we record the lamented death of yet another martyr to the passive resistance cause. Miss Valliamah Moonsamy, a young lady not yet in her twenties, was one of those devoted Indian women who sought imprisonment in protest against a marriage law that dishonoured her parents’ marriage and cast a stigma upon her own birth. Her sudden and unexpected demise, two days after her return home, holds all the elements of tragedy. We mourn the loss of a noble daughter of India, who did her simple duty without question and who has set an example of womanly fortitude, pride and will, we are sure, not be lost upon the Indian community. We tender to her family our most respectful sympathy.

On 15 July 1914, three days before he left South Africa, Gandhi again showed his support for Valliamma when he attended the unveiling of her gravestone at Braamfontein Cemetery in Johannesburg.

STIGMA

Growing up in the sprawling Indian township of Chatsworth, south of Durban, I was a curious child who never stopped asking questions. I became a journalist later on. Whilst my parents always encouraged me to ask questions and supported my choice to enter the world of journalism, they drew the line when I asked about pictures of my ancestors that lined the walls of my grandparents’ lounge. These were pictures of my great-great grandparents who settled in Africa in the early 1900’s. I could not understand why they would display these photographs with such pride but would dismiss any questions about the past.

Over the decades, this amnesiac approach has contributed to a deep-rooted sense of invisibility that many Indians experience. I cannot help but wonder if this could be a reason why Valliamma's story and others have been lost over the years as we try to forget the horrors of the Indenture experience.

In an interview with *Quartz* magazine, author of *What Gandhi Didn't See*, and fourth-generation South African Indian Zainab Priya Dala, comments on the stigma attached to the Indenture experience.

With the South African Indian people, and the South African people at large, I want them to feel a sense of pride in themselves, in their community and their strong lineage.... I see a lot of shame when it comes to being descended from indentured labour; I hope that me speaking out, will make people proud of where they came from and they will start looking for their families and villages in India.

Youlendree Appasamy (2020) shares Dala's sentiments.

South African Indian families are deeply invested in the avoidance of shame... There are things we don't talk about, memories we would rather bury than speak out loud. But memories don't die; they rise like spectres and haunt the living.

Kala Pani Crossings: Revisiting 19th Century Migrations from India's Perspective (Bhardwaj & Misrahi-Barak, 2021) talks about the *Kala Pani* or the "crossing of the black waters," which refers to the transoceanic migration of indentured labour from India to plantation colonies across the globe from the mid-19th century onwards." To try to understand the stigma attached to the Indenture experience, it's important to unpack what crossing the *Kala Pani* meant for these immigrants.

Rowanne Sarojini Marie (2014) cites that it is evident that the disturbing experience of crossing the *Kala Pani* had long-lasting impacts on the Indian community. Marie adds that historically, Indians were averse to crossing the *Kala Pani* since it was traditionally regarded as full of peril to the Indian soul. Marie elaborates that the majority of immigrants longed for India; however "to make the journey back to their land of origin was unthinkable".

It was even more dire for women.

For women in particular, if they had returned to India, the stigma, oppression and hardship would have been even more than they had experienced even before they had left. (Marie, 2014)

In the Colony of Natal, Goolam and Desai (2010, p. 76) cite that the indentured were simply “coolies”.

What becomes clear through the literature is that the indentured were victims of “misery, poverty and hopelessness” (Marie, 2014), even before they arrived in South Africa and then experienced more hardship and discrimination by the colonists who “saw them as numbers” (Goolam & Desai, 2010, p. 79).

In reflecting on the stigma attached to the indentured experience, it is important to note the courageous journey these immigrants took in crossing the *Kala Pani* and that these stories need to be told and celebrated for future generations and serve as inspiration for descendants of indentured labourers.

NARRATIVE APPROACH

This research project is in the format of a longform narrative, written as a non-fiction story from a narrator’s point view, that chronicles the life and times of Valliamma. I intend for it to be published as an article and further contribute to literature on our collective South African heritage.

The writing style reimagines Valliamma and her life during the era in which she lived, a time when South Africa experienced huge political change that impacted the lives of Indians who chose to make South Africa their home after the abolishment of Indenture.

My narrative approach is a personal, storytelling type of writing that uses elements linked to a visit to Valliamma’s grave in Braamfontein, Johannesburg, to my personal story as my family has located the graves of my ancestors and taken soil from their graves in South Africa back to Tamil Nadu in a symbolic ceremony.

Narrative journalism or immersion journalism is when a writer depicts an issue or experience from a deeply personal viewpoint. As a writer with a journalistic background, I intended to interpret my findings through a narrative style of writing.

The essay starts with my discovery of Valliamma, through a picture published in a local newspaper and moves through a timeline of significant historical events that shaped her life as a young activist in South Africa. As there is only one photograph of Valliamma that exists and a series of articles published in *India Opinion* by Gandhi that speak of her life at the time, most of the information used in the essay was obtained through field visits, various archives and from interviews with experts.

I drew inspiration from the writing style of Ted Botha’s, true crime classic *Daisy de Melker*, the story of a woman who was hanged for poisoning her son and her two husbands for insurance money. Another example of this style of writing is contained in *The Indian Africans* co-authored by David Paul, Ranjith Choonilall, *Kiru Naidoo* and Selvan Naidoo.

Each chapter of the essay focuses on a specific time and theme aimed to bring Valliamma to life. I also weave my personal experiences into each chapter.

Another important aspect of the approach and style of this essay is that this exploration did not seek to simply rewrite Valliamma's life but contribute to a better understanding of the social and political landscape of South Africa at the time and thereby reimagine her life and celebrate her courage and bravery.

METHODOLOGY

My narrative approach is a personal, storytelling type of writing that uses elements that links a visit to Valliamma's grave in Braamfontein, Johannesburg, to my personal story as my family have located the graves of my ancestors and taken soil from their graves back to Tamil Nadu in a symbolic ceremony. To overcome the challenge with regard to the lack of actual voices on Valliamma, I draw on my own experiences as a young Indian woman living in modern day South Africa.

Narrative journalism or immersion journalism is when a writer depicts an issue or experience from a deeply personal viewpoint. As a writer with a journalistic background, I aimed to reflect my research and interpret my findings through a narrative style of writing.

The research report will take the form of a professional project, i.e. a piece of longform journalism comprising three parts: the story of Indenture, the story of my ancestors and my quest in "Finding Valliamma".

The project takes an historical approach and uses articles and period photographs from archives and articles from newspaper collections from the early 1900's, as well as books and other documentation unearthed in the course of the research.

The William Cullen Library, with its extensive collection of newspaper archives, is a valuable resource, in providing context of the political era that Valliamma lived in. I use these elements to give context to her life in Doornfontein, examine how the abolishment of indenture impacted on Valliamma and the community she lived in, and re-imagine her unusual connection with Gandhi.

In my search to uncover more on Valliamma, I conducted field trips to places associated with her, including her prison cell at the old Maritzburg Prison, her final resting place at Braamfontein Cemetery and the Valliamma Cradle of Love children's shelter in Durban.

These visits provide intricate details and context to the reconstruction of her life and demonstrate how she is remembered and memorialised.

During my research journey, I was fortunate to meet many learned individuals who were generous with their time and knowledge, their efforts played a significant role in filling in many gaps in Valliamma's story.

These interviews were recorded on video and still pictures.

Reverend Jabulani Mnculwane, curator of the Old Prison Museum in Pietermaritzburg, granted me access to the museum on a public holiday (the museum is closed on public holidays) and a personal tour. He painted a picture of what Valliamma's incarceration would have been like and allowed me access to her prison cell. I'm indebted to him for his constant support of my research.

I also conducted interviews with Sarah Welham from the Friends of Johannesburg Cemeteries and Flo Bird from the Johannesburg Heritage Foundation, both are champions of Johannesburg heritage and gave me great insight into Valliamma's gravesite located at Braamfontein Cemetery. Their great interest in my research project and their conversations on heritage, death and remembering the past has been invaluable.

In a *Mail and Guardian* opinion column, researcher and political commentator Angelo Fick states that the preservation of the archive is crucial "if we are to chart our way into the future" (2019).

"The archive is not a luxury in a society with the traumatic history that South Africa has. It is an essential treasure, which we have to preserve." (Fick, 2019)

Fick's statement emphasises the importance of the archive. The use of the archive was instrumental in collecting information on the sights, activities and the political landscape that Valliamma found herself in.

Fieldtrips to Valliamma's prison cell, her gravesite and William Cullen Library were instrumental in putting together the pieces of her life, some elements of which was not published before. By using the archive, I was able source intricate details that assisted in the reconstruction of Valliamma's story. The archive played an important role in reconstructing the lives of Indian people at the time.

Furthermore, the use of various newspapers including Gandhi's *Indian Opinion*, which was published in Natal, helped me examine the reports on political unrest and negotiations between Indians and the British and how this shaped the political landscape which launched Valliamma's activism. The use of direct archive material, e.g. the reports on Valliamma published in *Indian Opinion*, as well as indirect archive material gave a detailed depiction of the world she lived in.

Other archive and visual material used in this research project include the following:

1. The 1860 Heritage Centre offered deep insight into the lives of the Indian indentured labourers who came to South Africa in 1860. Valliamma is featured in an exhibition at the centre which strives to document and preserve Indian identity as part of the South African community.
2. I found texts on Valliamma in several books, *The African Indians* (David, Choonilal, Naidoo and Naidoo, 2023), *Inside Indian Indenture* (Desai and Vahed, 2010), *Women: South Africans of Indian Origin* (Rajab, 2011) and *Many Lives: 150 years of being Indian in South Africa* (Vahed, Desai and Waetjen, 2012), which I used to highlight how Valliamma's bravery and activism inspired the youth of today to speak out against inequality, corruption and poor governance.
3. Newspaper clippings from *Indian Opinion* and *The Star*.
4. Maps and photographs from the Johannesburg Heritage Foundation.
5. Photographs from the commemorative booklet, *The Amavasagadu and Mangai Family Legacy*.

This longform research also took on an ethnographic feel as I discovered the places where the young Valliamma walked, lived and died. As I immersed myself in these deeply significant places, I reconstructed her life and reflected on my own thoughts as an Indian woman living in South Africa.

At the outset, there are many grey areas related to what has been written about Valliamma to date, a factor that contributed to this research project.

Author and social sciences academic, Professor Goolam Vahed, notes that since 2010, interest in indentured records has increased as more people started tracing their family history.

In the lead up to the 150 year commemoration of the arrival of the indentured, local newspapers encouraged people to submit stories of interest. The '1860 Project' of the Sunday Tribune attracted many family histories. Subsequently the Natal Archives, Documentation Centre, 1860 Heritage Centre, and people like myself were inundated with queries about ways to trace their family histories. There have been many books, museums (e.g. Verulam), conferences, and visits to India as Indians are keen to remember that record their past. (Vahed, 2021)

During discussions with my family, I discovered that family members had published our ancestors' indentured story in a commemorative booklet, *The Amavasagadu and Mangai*

Family Legacy, which contains pictures and other valuable information that provide priceless insight into my identity. I used these indentured records and pictures to draw similarities between my ancestors' early life in South Africa and the experiences of Valliamma and her family.

As Valliamma lived more than 100 years ago, it was not always possible to completely immerse myself in the narrative. So, to close the gap, I used my own knowledge and experience of Indian culture in this research project.

ETHICS AND LIMITATIONS

As I have illustrated, few concrete facts are known about Valliamma. Vahed and Desai describe this lack of information concerning indentured people as a form of reduction.

Their lives were lived in the context of the white ruling class that saw them through the lens of racist stereotypes... It is not surprising that the indentured appear in the official records as mainly as when they were brought before the colonial authorities for infractions, for 'criminality', for being troublesome. (Vahed and Desai, 2010: 2)

Public information comprises stories told by Gandhi and authors such as Aziz Hassim, Suzanne Franco and Mala Lutchmana. Valliamma never speaks in her own voice, which is a serious challenge I faced in writing this longform essay. Whilst the lack of information can be considered a major hurdle, it was not my intention to rewrite history but to understand the past.

My aim was to tell her story with the information I gathered and, in doing so, tackle the stigma that accompanies the story of Indenture and, ultimately, create a space for discussion and debate. As this is a deeply personal project, I had to ensure that my own memories and thoughts were unambiguous as I recounted Valliamma's story. Furthermore, all ethical considerations and approval protocol for interviews were observed during the research process.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1. CHAPTER ONE- A PHOTOGRAPH**
- 2. CHAPTER TWO – DOORNFONTEIN**
- 3. CHAPTER THREE- FIRE**
- 4. CHAPTER FOUR - GANDHI, VALLIAMMA AND INDIAN OPINION**
- 5. CHAPTER FIVE- MARITZBURG PRISON- UNDER LOCK AND KEY**
- 6. CHAPTER SIX- HEADSTONES**
- 7. CHAPTER SEVEN- - INDENTURE AND ROOTS**
- 8. CHAPTER EIGHT– WOMEN OF THE RESISTANCE**
- 9. CHAPTER NINE- THANK YOU**

CHAPTER ONE - A PHOTOGRAPH

This journey of “Finding Valliamma” starts with a photograph. A single photograph that would capture my imagination and send me on a journey of discovery, soul searching and healing.

The photograph is a simple black and white image, published in a local newspaper. It’s a grainy image that depicts a tall, South Indian teenage girl. Her oiled, black hair is parted in the middle and is probably secured in a tight bun or ponytail at the back. Her dark eyes and serious expression are a little intimidating; she appears much older than her years. She is dressed in a sari, traditional attire for Indian women, and a brooch is perched at on her long-sleeved sari blouse. Each of her hands bears a single, metal bracelet. This is Valliamma Munuswamy Mudaliar.

More than a century ago, Valliamma, who was born to migrant Indian workers in South Africa, decided to fight against a justice system that stripped Indians of their dignity and human rights. She would pay the ultimate price for this bravery.

The first time I saw Valliamma’s picture, I had to look twice. I thought my eyes were deceiving me. My now eight-year-old daughter, Sharlette Rose, bore a striking resemblance to Valliamma. This resemblance further fuelled my fascination with Valliamma and made me determined to uncover her story..

After sifting through books and archives, I had almost given up on finding more images of Valliamma until I struck gold at the Johannesburg Heritage Foundation, an organisation which aims to conserve Johannesburg’s built heritage.

It appears that the picture of Valliamma, which has been widely used in books, newspaper articles and other literature, was actually cropped out of a larger picture. This larger picture, contained at the Johannesburg Heritage Foundation’s archive, offers deeper insight into this remarkable young woman.

The picture, published in *The Star*, dated 15 April 1997, shows Valliamma with six other women and a child. The older women are believed to among the first women activists who challenged the harsh British laws imposed on Indians during that period.

Valliamma was born to Indian migrants R. Munuswamy Mudaliar and Janakiammal in Doornfontein, Johannesburg, in 1898. In 1913, Valliamma was sentenced to three months of hard labour for protesting against a new marriage law that sought to nullify all customary Hindu and Muslim marriages. She fell ill during her short incarceration at Maritzburg Prison and, in an act of defiance, refused to accept an early release from prison officials. Valliamma died on 22 February 1914, a few weeks after her release, on her birthday. She was only 16 years old.

Today, across the globe, memorials honour Valliamma. The Valliamma met Indian lawyer and anti-colonial activist Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi during a political rally. She would become an important symbolic figure in Gandhi's non-violent resistance campaign for civil rights in South Africa.



Figure1: Freedom fighters: Valliamma (top left) with a group of female activists.
Credit: The Star/ Johannesburg Heritage Foundation.

CHAPTER TWO – DOORNFONTEIN

Valliamma was born in Doornfontein, a small town on the outskirts of Johannesburg, which was developing into a trading area for the ex-indentured. She belonged to the Tamil weaving caste known as the Senguntha Mudaliyar people and was proud of her Indian heritage.

The arrival of upper caste South Indian families, most of whom were traders, is under-reported in historical literature on Indians who settled in South Africa. Furthermore, scores of ex-indentured migrants proved to be budding entrepreneurs and ventured into farming, hawking and gardening. Records do not explain why Valliamma's family chose to settle in Doornfontein. However, as her father, Mudaliar, was a trader, it would have been a good business decision to settle in the area. Mudaliar ran a busy fruit and vegetable store on Market Street. The shop also sold South Indian sweetmeats. The street was lined with stores that sold groceries, fabric and other household essentials.

The family lived in a small brick and mortar house on President Street. Their neighbours were well-known activist Govindasamy Kristnasainy 'Thambi' Naidoo, his wife Veerammal and their children. Naidoo, a close confidant of Gandhi, spoke Tamil, Telegu, Hindi and Creole. He played an important role in addressing mass meetings. In 1913, Veerammal joined the passive resistance or Satyagraha movement and was arrested in Newcastle for crossing a border without a pass. Veerammal, Valliamma and 10 other women, were also arrested and sentenced to three months of hard labour at Maritzburg Prison.

The Satyagraha movement was launched in 1906, after Gandhi experienced first-hand the oppressive and discriminatory restrictions imposed on Indians who settled in Johannesburg. In June 1893, Gandhi was asked to leave the first-class compartment of a train even though he possessed a valid first-class ticket. The reason? Whites and "coolies" (a derogatory term for Indians) were not permitted to travel together in first-class.

Through his passive resistance philosophy, Gandhi, with the support of activists like Naidoo and Valliamma's parents, organised mass political meetings where he mobilised support to challenge discriminatory laws. The Satyagraha movement lasted eight years in South Africa.

As Indian communities are often close-knit, Valliamma probably spent a fair amount of time with the Naidoo family. Across South Africa, South Indian families created strong bonds with a deep sense of community and an even greater allegiance to India.

The eldest of four children, Valliamma attended the local school but received political education from her parents' friends who often gathered at her house to discuss the political upheaval facing Indians at the time. Naidoo, was imprisoned 14 times for his refusal to obey oppressive laws.

The Indenture system had changed the lives of Indian migrants. Once their period of Indenture was over, they were given three options: re-indenture, return to India or move across the African continent. Each choice came with its perils.

When the indentured system ended in 1911, many Indians chose to remain in South Africa. Some settled in Doornfontein, which was developing into a trading area. The large Indian community that chose to settle in Doornfontein and Johannesburg in the Transvaal and would soon become a thorn in the side of General Jan Smuts and the White community.

Doornfontein would play a significant role in advancing the Satyagraha movement in South Africa. It would also be the place where Valliamma's activism was born. As a resident of Doornfontein, Valliamma was at the heart of the resistance movement.

History books list Doornfontein as one of the oldest farms in Johannesburg. The Bezuidenhout family built their farmhouse on Doornfontein in 1863 after Mrs BS Viljoen signed over the farm to her son-in-law Frederik Jacobus Bezuidenhout on 12 September 1861. Doornfontein farm was a beautiful green valley that stretched to Cyrildene, past Gillooly's Farm, and then to Kensington Ridge in the south.

Johannesburg, contrary to the idea many may hold, did not remain a tumble of tin shanties for long. It took shape rapidly, and grew in an orderly and well-directed fashion into a town and then a city. These two photographs taken from the same spot at an interval of two years demonstrate the fact and indicate how Johannesburg developed from a town on a flat, treeless plain into an attractive city of trees and gardens. The photograph above shows Doornfontein and Johannesburg in 1889, and below in 1891.



Picture 2: Doornfontein and Johannesburg in 1899 and 1891.
Credit: Johannesburg Heritage Foundation.

Whilst this was several decades before Valliamma and her family settled in Doornfontein, it set the wheels in motion for how Doornfontein would form part of South Africa's historical landscape. At the dawn of the 20th century, when Valliamma was still a child, Doornfontein was a middle-class area but appealed to the working class as it was close to Johannesburg and there were several mines in the area.

There was a huge demand for housing as mineworkers, domestic workers and general workers moved to the Johannesburg area. Some middle-class families saw the influx of workers as a financial opportunity and rented out their homes to anyone who could pay. Doornfontein soon became a melting pot of cultures, a vibrant community that attracted many early struggle activists.

Historical records only list the white home owners in President Street.

SOUTH TO NORTH, RIGHT-HAND SIDE ONLY.	
<i>Commissioner-street—</i>	House
Stands	H Joubert, res
Small house	Vacant stands
	Vacant store
<i>Market street —</i>	W Merrett, res
Vacant stands	Mary Hawkeswood, res
<i>President-street—</i>	L H Godfrey "
Vacant stands	M Rossettentein ,

Figure 3: Johannesburg Street directory 1899

Credit: Johannesburg Heritage Foundation.

2. ASIATIC OCCUPATION OF VARIOUS PROPERTIES.

Notification has been received from the Commissioner for Immigration and Asiatic Affairs of an application for a permit in terms of the Asiatics (Transvaal Land and Trading) Act, 1939, particulars of which are set out below.

This application is referred to the Council for its comments.

Stand No. 91, Doornfontein, No. 8, Rockey Street.

Applicant: Mrs. Emnaji Chodree.

Business: General Dealer (transfer).

This stand is situated at the south-west corner of Rockey and Davies Streets, in a "General Area" Zone.

It is understood that the applicant and her late husband have occupied these premises for over 30 years, and the purpose of the application is to transfer the business into the name of the widow of the late licensee.

We recommend:

That the Commissioner for Immigration and Asiatic Affairs be advised that the Council raises no objection to the grant of approval of this application from a town planning point of view.

ADOPTED.

Figure 4 : A notice in the local newspaper detailing the application for a permit from an Indian woman Mrs Emnaji Chodree

Credit: Johannesburg Heritage Foundation.

It is unknown how many Indian families, besides the Mudaliar and Naidoo families, lived in the suburb. However, as a minority group, Indians resorted to creating their own community of schools and places of worship. Doornfontein was home to Valliamma as much as Chatsworth, south of Durban, was home to me.

CHAPTER THREE - FIRE

The red and orange flames from the hawan is mesmerising, almost hypnotic. For a second, I forget about the blazing heat, the cymbidium orchids that are digging into my scalp and my intricately beaded sari that weighs a ton. This is the happiest day of my life and nothing else matters. I steal a glance at Shav as he mops up droplets of water that are pouring down his forehead.

He looks far from happy.

The pundit continues to chant Vedic prayers as he signals us to feed the fire with spices, oils and petals. As a modern-day couple, we have chosen to mark our union with a traditional wedding to honour our deep South Indian roots and Shav's late father. By the look on Shav's face, the decision to get married in the middle of a Durban summer, in front of a raging fire, wasn't a good idea after all.

But traditions and culture are important, and we want to honour our ancestors who descended on the shores of Port Natal as indentured labourers more than 160 years ago. The tying of the Thali, the application of a crimson dot on the forehead and the toe rings are traditions that were passed down from generation to generation and it is equally important that I continue with these symbolic components of a traditional Hindu wedding.

This sacred wedding ceremony was once threatened. In early 1913, soon after the practice of Indenture was abolished and Indians were trying to find their place in society, the Cape Supreme Court ruled that all traditional marriages would not be recognised in South Africa. This angered the Indian community as it nullified their marriages and had an impact on the rights of inheritance.

ES Reddy explains this further in MKGandhi.org, a series of diary entries by Gandhi. Just as the Satyagraha movement in the Transvaal was being suspended in 1911 after the formation of the Union of South Africa, the Searle judgement "ruled that marriages performed according to a religion which allowed polygamy - that is, all Mahomedan and Hindu marriages - would not be recognised in South Africa". The ruling was seen as an insult to all Indian women.

"Almost all married Indian women would have been reduced legally to the status of concubines and their children treated as illegitimate." (ES Reddy, 2012)

Until the ruling, women were silent members of the Satyagraha movement. However, the ruling and Searle's refusal to overturn it provoked an uprising with hundreds of women joining the protests.

In a blog entitled 1906-1914 Satyagraha (⁹ <https://www.muthalnaidoo.co.za/article-categories/indian-south-african-history-from-1906/369-1906-1914-satyagraha>) Muthal Naidoo (2013) writes that the “Satyagrahis” sprang into action and were allowed to not only participate but lead in the protests. This was a turning point for women, including the Valliamma.

Reflecting on the indignation of the women, my mind springs back to 12 December 2015 and those flames, the sacred chants and the smell of the sambrani (incense) that permeated the air. Imagine someone telling me that it was all for nothing, that the symbolism and honour of my traditional wedding meant nothing. It would have hurt and angered me.

I, too, would have shouted for my marriage to be recognised. I, too, would have hated for my child to be labelled a “bastard” and I, too, would have challenged the justice system.

Veerammal Naidoo, N Pillay, K Murugasa, A Naidoo, PK Naidoo, Chinnaswami Pillay, NS Pillay, RA Mudalingum, Bhavani Dayal, Minachi Pillay, Baikum Murugasa Pillay and Valliamma refused to accept this oppressive ruling by an individual who didn’t understand their culture and traditions.

Traditional South Indian weddings, like the one I had, are steeped in colourful, rich symbolism such as the *Maalai Maatral* where the bride and groom interchange floral garlands three times to start their union as husband and wife, or *Saptapadi* where the couple circles the holy fire or hawan seven times.

CHAPTER FOUR - GANDHI, VALLIAMMA AND INDIAN OPINION

Whilst many books have been written about Valliamma, Gandhi is the only credible source of her story. We could even go as far as calling Gandhi the guardian of Valliamma's story. Gandhi was known to be a brilliant orator, but he was also lauded as an extraordinary writer whose style of writing was simple and clear. He wrote plainly to describe his hopes, faith, sorrows and disappointment as his Satyagraha movement grew in South Africa.

He became an important figure in efforts by Indians to fight against British rule. As more anti-Indian laws were passed by the government, the restrictions on immigration and trading rights made life miserable for Indians.

With tensions between the British colonial authorities and Indians rising in the early 20th century, Gandhi established the *Indian Opinion* newspaper in 1903 on the eve of the Satyagraha struggle.

Published in three languages, Gujarati, Tamil and English, the newspaper played an important role in mobilising support for the Satyagraha movement led by Gandhi and the National Indian Congress..

Indian Opinion was a credible archive that shared Gandhi's ideas and more about his passive resistance project movement. It played a significant role in highlighting the inhumane treatment of indentured labourers. The newspaper became a powerful instrument for the mobilisation of Indians and growth of the Satyagraha movement.

The turning point that led to the entry of women into the struggle in 1913 was the Searle Judgement, which nullified all non-Christian marriages. This meant that all Indian women, Hindus, Muslims and Zoroastrians, were reduced to mistresses and their children declared illegitimate. Indian women accepted the invitation from Gandhi and the Satyagraha moment to join the protest. Valliamma and her mother Janakiammal were among them. This decision by the women gave the community a deep sense of pride.

Through his political affiliations, Gandhi soon heard of Valliamma and arranged for a meeting with the young woman and her parents at their modest home in Doornfontein. He was said to be fascinated with stories of Valliamma's bravery and was impressed by her oration at political rallies and underground meetings.

Valliamma featured several times in *Indian Opinion*. Gandhi also used his editorial freedom to pen several articles in support of her. The Tamil edition of *Indian Opinion*, dated 28 January 1914, carried an article "Release of Our Brave Indian Sisters", which covered the release of 11 women, including Valliamma and her mother, Janakiammal, from Maritzburg Prison.

The edition dated 25 February 1914 carried an editorial and an article on Valliamma's death.

In another column, we record the lamented death of yet another martyr to the passive resistance cause. Miss Valliamah Moonsamy, a young lady not yet in her twenties, was one of those devoted Indian women who sought imprisonment in protest against a marriage law that dishonoured her parents' marriage and cast a stigma upon her own birth. Her sudden and unexpected demise, two days after her return home, holds all the elements of tragedy. We mourn the loss of a noble daughter of India, who did her simple duty without question and who has set an example of womanly fortitude, pride and will, we are sure, not be lost upon the Indian community. We tender to her family our most respectful sympathy.

A collection of *Indian Opinion* articles, *Souvenir of the Passive Resistance Movement in South Africa 1906-1914*, highlights Valliamma's activism and bravery. In a speech at the Johannesburg banquet on 1 August 1912, Gandhi spoke about his life in Johannesburg and the many challenges and triumphs he experienced in the city.

It was last, but not least, Johannesburg had given Valliamma, that young girl, whose picture rose before him even as he spoke, who had died in the cause of truth. Simple-minded in faith- she had not the knowledge that he had, she did not know what Passive Resistance was, she did know what it was the community would gain but she was simply taken with unbounded enthusiasm for her people- went to gaol, came out a wreck and within a few days died.

CHAPTER FIVE- MARITZBURG PRISON- UNDER LOCK AND KEY

The streets of Pietermaritzburg are deserted as I drive my rental car towards the Old Prison Museum. It's Women's Day, President Cyril Ramaphosa has just wrapped up his keynote address commemorating the day on the other side of town and I find myself in search of the famous prison where teenage activist Valliamma spent the last few months of her life.

It seems bittersweet to spend my Women's Day searching for a building that incarcerated hundreds of women who fought for liberation from the apartheid state.

Maritzburg Prison, now known as the Old Prison Museum, was opened in 1862, and spanned more than 160 years of history, having housed political prisoners, including Nelson Mandela, King Dinuzulu, Gandhi and Valliamma.

It's a public holiday and the museum is closed. I can't let that stop me. As I'm about to approach the security guard, museum curator, Reverend Jabu Mnculwane, steps in and kindly offers me a guided tour of the museum. It must be my lucky day, a guided tour and the entire museum to myself.

Before I delve into why Valliamma was imprisoned here, it's important to note the resistance campaigns by Black and Coloured women during that era.

When Jan Smuts, a former general in the Anglo-Boer War and prominent Afrikaner leader, was appointed colonial secretary, he immediately stated that the influx of Indians and Chinese to the Transvaal area was a threat to the Afrikaner community.

Oppressive laws always affected women and children; Black women, in particular, bore the curse of Pass Laws. These Pass Laws required Black men and women to carry written permission to access particular areas. Failure to produce this pass, often led to arrest or some form of punishment. Fed up, the women decided to act and sent a petition to every town and village in the Orange Free State in February 1912. Their petition was so powerful that there were fears that the resistance to the Pass Laws would lead to a national revolt by Black people.

For several months, the protests continued and hundreds of men and women were arrested for Pass Laws violations in areas across the Orange Free State. Women, in particular, refused to accept the government's refusal to relax the enforcement of Pass Laws. They tore their passes and threw them to the ground. They would rather be arrested than face the indignity of carrying passes. By October 1913, the Orange Free State Women's Anti-Pass Campaign spread to other parts of South Africa.

Valliamma joined a group of women activists. At 15, she was the youngest of the 11 women in a resistance campaign walking from Tolstoy Farm in the Transvaal to the Natal border. Tolstoy Farm is located 35 kilometres from Johannesburg and is now the site of a brick

factory. It remains a significant location in Valliamma's story as it is believed that she spent a sizeable amount of time there.

Tolstoy Farm was created by Gandhi and served as an ashram (a place of spiritual shelter) and the headquarters of the Satyagraha movement. It was where Gandhi met with political leaders and the location also served as a shelter for those, like Valliamma, who resisted discrimination against Indians in the Transvaal.

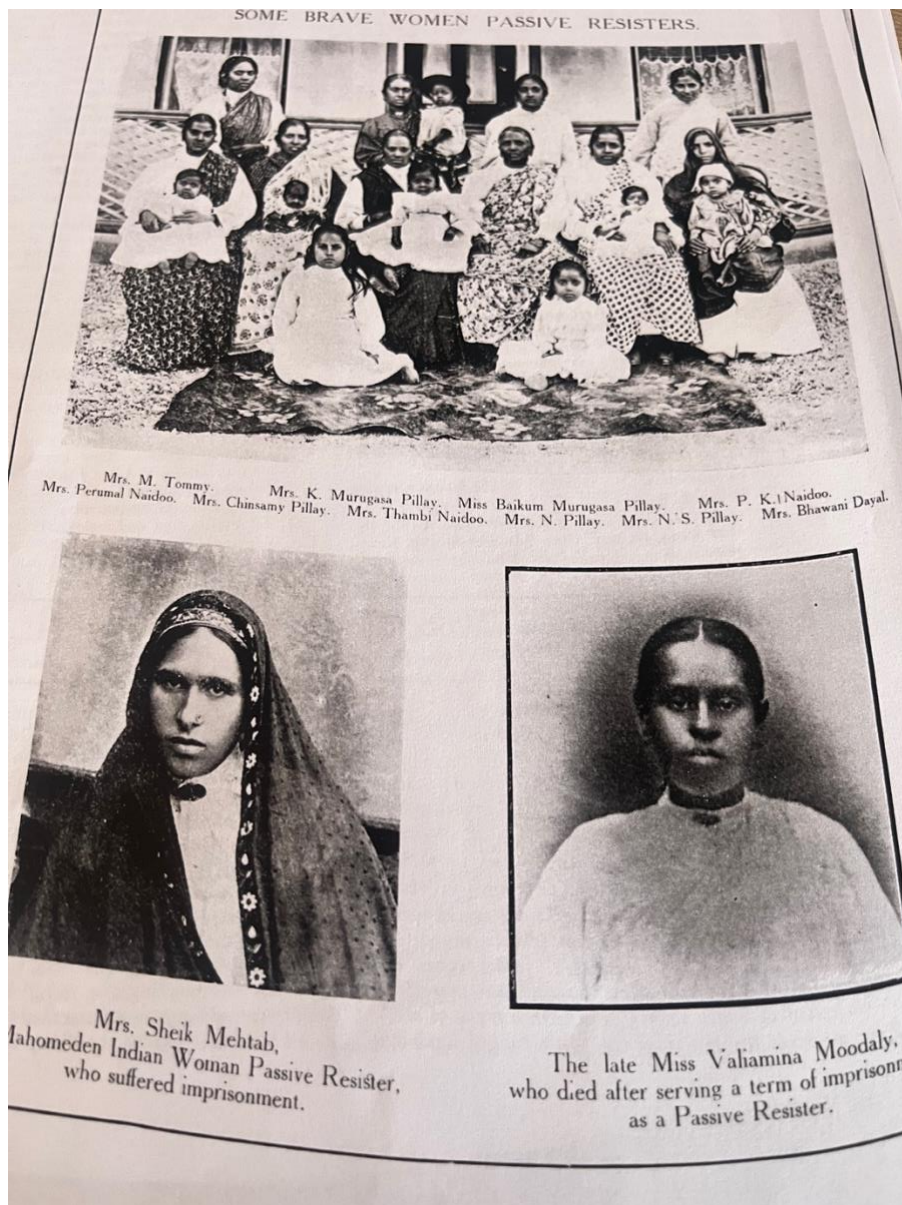
Tolstoy Farm played a great role in educating Valliamma on how to campaign against discriminatory laws.. Due to its historic importance, it is now a heritage site.

Valliamma and the women were involved in marches, rallies and demonstrations where they convinced mineworkers and their wives to join their protest. Thousands of Indian workers from plantations and mines heeded the call to strike. Valliamma played an active role in mobilising support for the strike, which was acknowledged by Gandhi.

On 22 December 1913, police arrested Valliamma and a group of women, including Gandhi's wife Kasturba and her mother Janakiammal in Volksrust. Desai and Vahed write that it had been almost two months since Valliamma met with Gandhi at Tolstoy Farm in the Transvaal.

The women were charged and given the option of imprisonment or a fine of three pounds. They chose imprisonment and were sentenced to three months of hard labour at Maritzburg Prison. This hard labour entailed the washing prison uniforms and scrubbing cement floors and the prison walls. Conditions inside the prison were horrid. Two of the women gave birth inside the prison.

In 2014, India's *Economic Times* recalled Valliamma, noting that Gandhi wrote about her determination from the age of 11 to mobilise women and youth in the campaign to oppose discriminatory laws. In 2017, historians and academics Reddy and Hiralal wrote that the youth, many of whom had been born in South Africa, were the backbone of the struggle and Valliamma, especially, had become a symbol of heroism.



Picture: Valliamma and some of the women passive resisters who joined the Satyagraha movement.

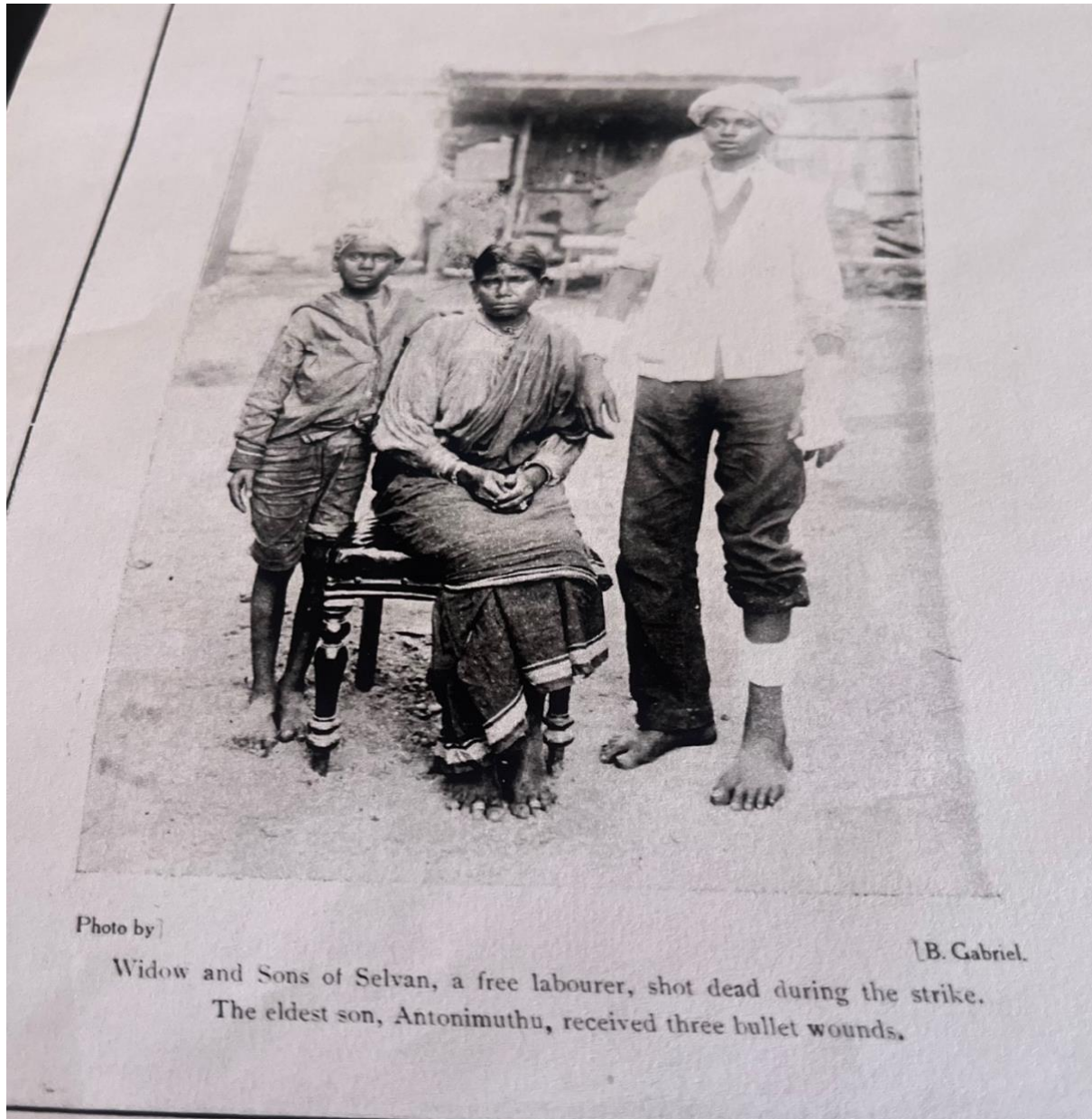
Credit: Souvenir of the Passive Resistance Movement in South Africa 1906-1914: William Cullen Library

When the news of the women's imprisonment reached the mineworkers in Newcastle, in northern Natal, more than 20 000 of them embarked on a massive strike and joined the women in the protests. They also called for the scrapping of the three-pound tax, imposed after the end of Indenture, which was a significant burden to the newly independent Indian workers.

The Satyagraha Campaign of 1913, or the "Great Indian Strike", was the largest mass mobilisation of Indians in South Africa. Many workers were shot and killed during the strike, which did little to ease the crippling laws that infringed on the rights of Indians. However, it is important to note that the strike was the beginning of a revolt against the British. The

protestors' spirits were not broken as they vowed to continue until their leaders were released and the laws abolished.

A free labourer, Selvan, was shot dead during the strike, while his eldest son, Antonimuthu was shot three times. Patchiappen was also shot dead during the strike.



Picture: Selvan's wife and sons.

Credit: Souvenir of the Passive Resistance Movement in South Africa 1906-1914: William Cullen Library

Back at the prison, Mnculwane, who is tall and speaks in an authoritative voice, launches into a lecture on the history of the museum; I can tell he has done so a million times. He jiggles a large bunch of keys in his hands every time he wants to make a point.

“I’m here for Valliamma,” I whisper.

“Oh yes, come this way,” he says.

Mnculwane leads me down a narrow passage. The wind is howling above and his keys cannot remain silent as he walks ahead of me. He points to a tiny cell and says, “This is all that is left now.”

There before me are the remnants of a tiny white walled cell, left devastated by a recent fire. The six wooden beams that once held up the ceiling have now collapsed. Paint is peeling off in layers and a dozen bricks lie strewn across the floor.

“This is where the young Valliamma was kept. She spent most of her time in this tiny cell with only a tiny window that allowed some light in,” he explains.

Mnculwane adds that Valliamma’s cell would have contained a metal frame bed and a thin mattress, the standard prison provision for that era. Prison cells were cold as there was little natural light and no offer of additional heating. Conditions were harsh for the women and some larger cells housed more than 200 women at times, making the prison cramped and unhygienic.

We walk a few metres to an open courtyard that is overgrown with grass and weeds. Its fort-like walls keep the howling wind at bay. I catch a glimpse of blue skies. A black and white cat brushes up against a wall and quickly disappears under a small metal gate.

“This courtyard was one of the few open spaces in the prison. The women were allowed to sit in the courtyard for only a short time during the day. It’s possible that Valliamma, too, spent time in this space. Those who were sentenced to hard labour were never given time to sit around; they were constantly under guard and their daily duties were extremely brutal,” says Mnculwane.

I spend a few minutes in the courtyard in quiet reflection; I’m overwhelmed by a feeling of deep loss as I picture a petite Valliamma sitting on a bench in that tiny courtyard. As Mnculwane and the security guard engage in a lively conversation about the overgrown grass, I close my eyes and think about Valliamma.

Did she long for her family during those long, hard months? Did her fellow prisoners rally around her, offering comfort and support? How could a teenage girl possess such strength and fortitude in the face of so much adversity and oppression?

The courtyard looks like a place that offered moments of sunshine and solace. I think back to my childhood days, when the “aunty” who lived opposite our house kindly offered to braid my hair and knot my tie before I left for school each day. She stepped in because my mother was a factory worker and had to catch the 5am bus for work while I slept soundly in my bed. The proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child”, comes to mind. The village, in my case, was the “aunty” who made sure I was presentable for school.

If what I know of Indian aunties, family or not, is true they always step in and play a motherly role. I hope that this was the same for Valliamma during those tough months in prison; that there was a pair of tender hands that braided her hair and she was offered kind words of love and support. I hope there was also a hug to ease the fear before it was time to return to washing prison uniforms and scrubbing floors and prison walls, in addition to the other duties that was part of the hard labour sentence.

Indian Opinion lists Mrs DM Lazarus of Newcastle as one of the women who risked her life by assisting women involved in the strike. Mrs WM Vogl, who also stepped up to provide support to the female resisters. Vogl’s efforts on behalf on the Transvaal Indian Women’s Association and two Indian women’s bazaars endeared her to many Indians in South Africa.

Meanwhile, inside the prison, living conditions were horrid and many prisoners, including Valliamma, fell ill. How did she feel when her fever could not break? Was she able to interact with her mother who was also imprisoned with her? Did anyone offer her a cold washcloth to help her cool down? It must have been dreadful and equally heartbreaking for such a young girl to experience such trauma in a cold, dark prison cell.

Gandhi was touched by the women’s bravery.

He wrote the following in his book *Satyagraha in South Africa (1968)*:

“The women’s bravery was beyond words. They were all kept in Maritzburg jail, where they were considerably harassed. Their food was of the worst quality and they were given them from outside nearly till the end of their term. One sister was under a religious vow to restrict herself to a particular diet. After great difficulty, the jail authorities allowed her that diet, but the food supplied was unfit for human consumption. The sister badly needed olive oil. She did not get it at first, and when she got it, it was old and rancid. She offered to get it at her own expense but was told that jail was no hotel, and she must take what food was given to her. When this sister was released, she was a mere skeleton and her life was saved only by a great effort.”

Valliamma was also in a poor condition. The months of travelling and speaking at political rallies had taken its toll on her. She commenced her prison sentence weak and extremely ill. Her condition worsened over the weeks and soon she was bedridden, confined to the metal frame bed. By then, Gandhi had heard of Valliamma’s plight and called on prison authorities to negotiate an early release. Valliamma remained defiant, her allegiance to India and the

passive resistance struggle could not be shaken even by the mighty General Jan Christiaan Smuts.

After long days and nights of negotiation, a provisional agreement was reached between Smuts and Gandhi. Valliamma was released on 11 February 1914. Her emaciated body was carried out of the prison. She returned to her Doornfontein home on 20 February. Two days later, she passed away.

Gandhi visited Valliamma on her deathbed and wrote the following in *Indian Opinion*:

How can I forget her? Valliamma R. Munuswami Mudaliar was a young girl of Johannesburg only sixteen years of age. She was confined to bed when I saw her. As she was a tall girl, her emaciated body was a terrible thing to behold.”

“Valliamma, you do not repent of your having gone to jail?” I asked.

“Repent? I am even now ready to go to jail again if I am arrested,” said Valliamma.

“But what if it results in your death?” I pursued.

“I do not mind it. Who would not love to die for one’s motherland?”

CHAPTER SIX- HEADSTONES

I remember standing in the back room of a crematorium as I watched my darling mother being prepared for cremation. Staff don't usually allow women in this area of the crematorium; however, when I refused to budge, they shook their heads and walked away. I felt numb as they placed her on a thin piece of wood. My aunts had ensured that mum's final look was fitting for the stylish person she was in life. She wore a green and cream sari; the same one she wore to my wedding. She loved that sari so much.

As the doors of the cremator opened, I felt weak and vulnerable. The mortal remains of my beloved mother would soon be reduced to ashes and life would never be the same again. Death is cruel, unpredictable and incomprehensible. It robs us of loved ones, leaving us to navigate the emptiness they leave behind. In that moment, as I watched my mother's bare feet disappear in a red furnace, I vowed never to attend another funeral.

It's a Monday morning when we drive through the gates of Braamfontein Cemetery, in search of Valliamma's final resting place. Johannesburg had experienced torrential rain for several days, so the tarred main road of the cemetery is covered in mud and leaves. There is a slight breeze and the smell of earth is in the air. My stomach feels uneasy as we drive down the road with hundreds of tombstones on either side of us.

Sarah Welham, founder of The Friends of Johannesburg Cemeteries (FOJC), and Flo Bird, chairperson and founder of the Johannesburg Heritage Foundation, wave to me. Overwhelmed by being surrounded by death, my hands shake a little. We greet each other and they thank me for my interest in the cemetery and quickly reassure me that the tour is going to be very enlightening.

As we drive along Valliamma Avenue to the young activist's grave, Welham explains that the cemetery is divided into sections: Dutch Reformed, Church of England, Roman Catholic, Hindu, Muslim and Jewish and Chinese. The road passes the section of the Anglo-Boer War graves and a small Chinese section that is fenced off. At a curve in the road, Bird points out Valliamma's grave, which is not far from the tarred road, a prominent granite headstone that stands alone, almost away from the others in that section of the cemetery.

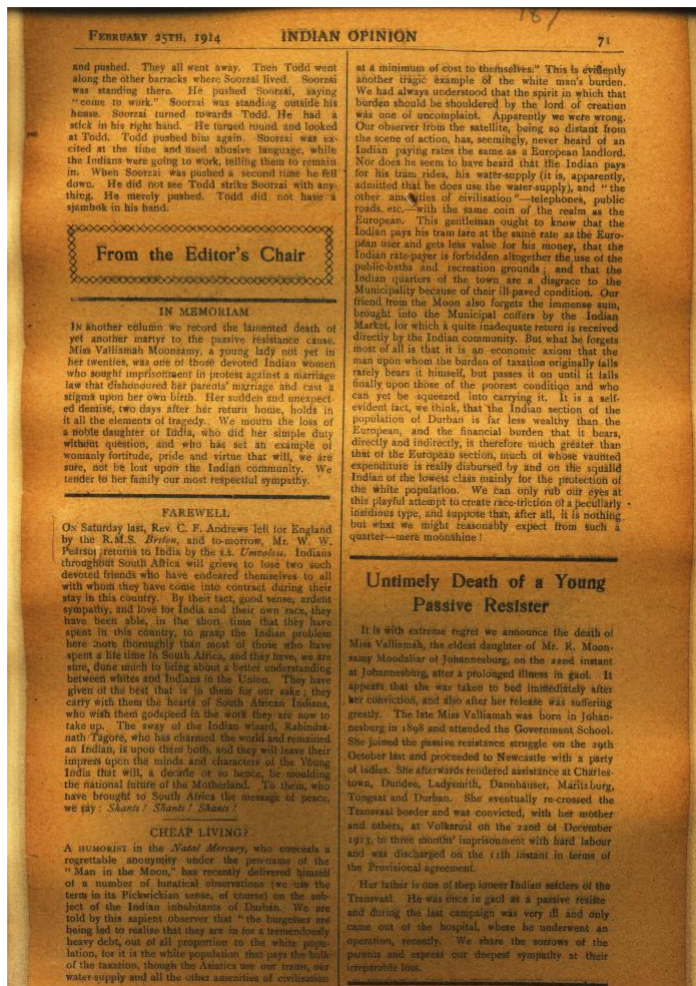
I'm no expert on headstones, but Valliamma's stands out from the others at the cemetery. It has a certain reverence about it, befitting of a young woman who sacrificed her life for justice and equality. When Valliamma died on 22 February 1914, from a fever, she became a passive resistance martyr whose brave actions are admired by South Africa's Indian community and abroad.

Non-white activists were not commemorated during colonial and apartheid days; there are no records of a funeral. Perhaps, due to her rebelling against the anti-Indian policies, a decision was taken to have a low-key farewell for the teenage martyr. Her beautiful headstone with its intricate inscriptions serves as a powerful tribute to her courage and bravery.



Picture 4: Valliamma's final resting place at Braamfontein Cemetery in Johannesburg.

On 15 July 1914, three days before he left South Africa, Gandhi again showed his support for Valliamma when he attended the unveiling of her gravestone at Braamfontein Cemetery in Johannesburg.



Picture 5: Indian Opinion of 25 February 1914, announced Valliamma's death.
Credit: Indian Opinion

As her grave was unmarked for many years, possibly a strategy by her family and comrades so that nationalist police couldn't find it. Its location remained a mystery for decades until United States academic Professor James Hunt confirmed its exact location at the cemetery, according to a report in *The Star* on 15 April 1997.

The headstone reads:

**"In loving memory of our sister,
 Valliammal Munusamy,
 who died 22 February 1914
 aged 17 years.
 of illness contracted in the Maritzburg Gaol,
 which she went as a passive resister**

Bird explains:

“It’s a very handsome headstone and it’s granite, which is good because sandstone doesn’t really last. The granite will last. It will have to be cleaned eventually but that’s it. We are very happy that it’s permanent with a beautiful inscription. Somebody really quite talented did the inscription.”

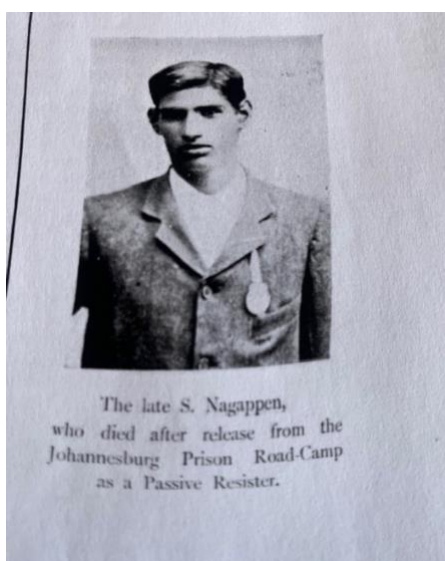
Heavy rains have washed a heap of leaves and twigs onto her grave and this makes reading the inscription difficult. Bird and my husband attempt to clear the grave with a bottle of water and a plastic bag we found in the back of our bakkie. It appears no one has visited the tombstone in ages which makes us sad. There’s a moment of stillness and we all bow our heads as we pay homage to Valliamma.

Hindus have a long history of being cremated, so it’s interesting that Valliamma, a Hindu by birth, was buried at Braamfontein Cemetery. No explanation is forthcoming about the reason for a burial instead of cremation, but Bird can offer some insight into the headstone.

“She didn’t really have much of a headstone, her grave was marked. When city officials realised her important status, they made sure she got a proper headstone.”

Valliamma’s headstone was unveiled by Mrs Chas Phillips on 15th July 1914.

One could say that Valliamma is in good company at the cemetery. Only a few metres from her grave is that of another passive resister, Swami Naggapan; a young man, who died after he was brutally assaulted by security police. Naggapan was arrested on 21 June 1909 for hawking without a permit. He was beaten by police and made to walk 26 kilometres to the Jukskei Road Prison Camp. He died of pneumonia and heart failure in jail on 7 July 1909.



Picture: Swami Naggapan

Credit: Souvenir of the Passive Resistance Movement in South Africa 1906-1914: William Cullen Library

We walk to his grave, which is located near the edge of the cemetery. He has a simple granite headstone, with English and Tamil inscriptions, which read:

**“In Reverential Homage
to
Swami Nagappan
who passed away on 7 July 1909, aged 19 years
of illness contracted in jail to which he went as a passive resister”**

Discriminatory laws against Indians showed no mercy to activists like Valliamma and Nagappan; however, to honour these young people, the words “passive resister” were included on their headstones.

Times Metro reported in July 2001 that Nagappan’s original memorial, a granite headstone, had been vandalised in 1978 but was replaced in 1997 in a ceremony led by ANC hero Walter Sisulu. Even though Valliamma’s grave is situated close to the unfenced section of the cemetery, where vagrants enter the cemetery, it has never been vandalised.

Another grave of interest is that of Chinese immigrant Chow Kwai For. It’s reported that For committed suicide in 1907 rather than submit to racist regulations.

Along the fence, we discover a section of paupers’ graves, which are unmarked. Welham explains that these graves were later discovered to belong to miners from The Rand Rebellion or the *1922 Strike*, an armed uprising of white *miners* in Johannesburg.

Opposite Valliamma’s grave is the burial place of musician Enoch Sontonga, the composer of Nkosi Sikelel iAfrica, the national anthem of South Africa. According to Bird, an act of vandalism, which prompted an investigation by archaeologists and historians, led to the discovery of Sontonga’s unmarked grave. It is now covered by a massive black granite block designed by William Martinson, and is a national monument. The monument also contains an additional plaque that honours those buried in unmarked graves.

The plaque reads:

**“This monument is one of many graves in the area.
Please show respect to the memories of all who are buried here.”**

Bird and Welham argue that cemeteries play a pivotal role in remembering the past.

“There are memories here that are hugely important and people who played such a major role but even if they weren’t recognised much at the time, we recognise them now and if we

hadn't had the cemetery, they would have floated them down the river. Cemeteries have that value," says Bird.

Welham describes Braamfontein Cemetery as the history book of Johannesburg. "This cemetery has all classes, all races... This is where you come to learn about early Joburg," she says.

Valliamma died on Sunday, 22 February 1914, 111 years ago. There were no funeral notices, live streaming of the funeral, or a condolence book. The newspapers of the period, the *Rand Daily Mail*, *The Star* and the *Weekly Star*, which did not publish on Sundays, continued with their usual advertisements, parliamentary news and other public announcements on Monday, 23 February 1914. There was simply no mention of Valliamma's death or Gandhi's efforts to grant her an early release from prison.

When the Indian High Commissioner to South Africa, Gopalkrishna Gandhi (who is also Gandhi's grandson), visited Valliamma's gravesite in 1997, he made an important observation that Braamfontein Cemetery was a "Whites only" cemetery. This meant that the section with the Indian graves could not be accessed by non-Whites and could be another reason why Valliamma's final resting place was forgotten about for decades.

Whilst Valliamma's death was not marked by a huge funeral today, we recognise her tragic passing as a significant milestone in the struggle for equality by the indentured minority who chose to make South Africa their home. She remains a symbol of hope.

In the foreword of *Women: South Africans of Indian Origin*, written by Devi Moodley Rajab, Professor Mamphela Ramphele writes: "History continues to largely reflect narratives of victors."

However, this is not true in the case of Valliamma, Naggapan and others, whose tales of sacrifice and bravery are unknown to those who do not seek them.

Perhaps, as American writer and literary critic Ralph Ellison describes in his book *Invisible Man*, there is an "historical amnesia" where people choose to forget their past and create new identities whilst settling into their adoptive country. Perhaps, this was the case with the indentured who chose to forget the past and reconstruct a new life in South Africa.

I cannot help but wonder if this could be a reason why Valliamma's story and others have been lost through the years as we try to forget the horrors of the indentured experience. Even though there are many holes in Valliamma's story, I'm able to draw on many similarities that we share to imagine her life, and this bonds me to this courageous young woman.

CHAPTER SEVEN - INDENTURE AND ROOTS

Tracing my family history has always been a dream of mine.

Growing up in the sprawling Indian township of Chatsworth, south of Durban, I was a curious child and never stopped asking questions. I became a journalist later on. Whilst my parents always encouraged me to ask questions and supported my choice to enter the world of journalism, they drew the line when I asked about pictures of my ancestors that lined the walls of my grandparents' lounge. These were pictures of my great-great grandparents who had settled in South Africa in 1890. I could not understand why my family would display these photographs with such pride but would dismiss any questions about the past.

Over the decades, this reluctance to speak about the past has contributed to a deep-rooted sense of invisibility that I experience daily. Tales of violence, sexual assault and unfair labour practices form part of the indentured experience. There are things we don't speak about and memories we want to forget, but without acknowledging the past, it has been difficult to resolve many social issues experienced by the Indian community.

Indentured women bore the brunt of this violence, endemic in the indenture experience. In one instance, Desai cites the tragic story of Wootme, a young Indian woman who was found murdered at Blackburn Estate in Inanda, north of Durban, on 5 April 1890. Her husband, Mulwa, used an axe to smash her head. He was hung for his crime. Desai and Vahed, in their book *Inside Indian Indenture: A South African Story*, note that indentured women were paid lower wages and received fewer food rations than men.

Rowanne Sarojini Marie has expanded on this, saying that pregnant women continued to work for seven months, thereafter their rations were suspended until they resumed work again.

“Women were sometimes forced to append themselves to men to gain access to food. Men labelled such women, who acted out of desperate need to survive, ‘rice-cookers’.”

A lonely brick and mortar house stands on a hill in Redcliffe, north of Durban. It's a simple two-bedroom house with a kitchen and a porch. Most people wouldn't give it a second look, but this is where my story begins. The house could do with a good coat of paint and a new wire fence; however these aesthetic elements seem minor when you consider that over the past century, this house has borne testimony to the sheer preservation and hard work of my paternal great-grandparents, Kannigadu and Ponnamah.

I can almost picture my great-grandfather, Kannigadu, sitting on that porch after a long day on his farm, with his pipe between his lips as he looks down into the valley. Inside the house, nine little are children running around while my great-grandmother Ponnamah makes sure everyone is fed and bathed.



Picture: The Kannigadu family home in Redcliffe, Durban.

The house has been renovated over the years, with aluminium doors, hot water, and a new bathroom among the improvements. However, some items from a bygone era remain. In the kitchen is a coal fire stove that heats up the home and, on special occasions, a huge pot of delicious breyani can be found simmering on that stove.

Cooking and sharing food are the cornerstone of Indian culture. I'm sure my great great-grandparents brought along some cooking utensils, maybe even a small pot, when they boarded their ship to South Africa. Basic ingredients such as dhal (lentils), vegetables from the surroundings and green bananas were often curried and turned into sumptuous, healthy meals for families and often happily shared with visitors. That stove stands shiny and proud in that simple kitchen that has fed generations of the Kannigadu family.



Picture: The coal stove at the Kannigadu residence in Redcliffe, Durban.

If walls could speak, they would describe the hardships and triumphs my great-grandparents endured to ensure that the Kannigadu name lives on today. What a story they have, which sadly, was not passed down to their descendants.

But as their grandchildren and great-grandchildren grew curious about their roots, a group of family members banded together to arrange a family reunion in December 2018.

With the assistance of family members far and wide, they compiled a commemorative booklet, *The Amavasagadu and Mangai Family Legacy*, which traces my family's history..

More than 160 years ago, the SS Truro and the Belvedere left the shores of India, crossing the Indian Ocean, carrying the first batch of indentured labourers to Port Natal in South Africa. Many boarded those ships to escape India's harsh caste system and find a better life in the Colony of Natal. Other ships would follow.

While the Redcliffe house is an important part of my roots, it is important to further back. It all started in January 1890 when my paternal great, great-grandparents, Amavasagadu Bodigadu (born in 1860) and his wife Mangai Kulladu (born in 1870), together with their two sons, Kistnan (born in May 1887) and Kannigadu (born in February 1889), left their village, Vadapattinam, a district of Tamil Nadu State, and boarded the Pongola III to South Africa.

Valliamma's family also hailed from the south of India, from a tiny Thillaiyadi village called Nagapattinam. So great was their love for the village that she was often referred to a "Thillaiyadi" by her family and, later on, comrades in the resistance movement. Whilst the distance between Vadapattinam and Nagapattinam villages is 222 kilometers, both practice the same cultural and religious beliefs. Furthermore, Nagapattinam is highly regarded as an important centre of the Tamil Nadu State region.

According to historians, Valliamma was born in Doornfontein, South Africa. Her parents, Munuswamy Mudaliar and Janakiammal, are believed to have travelled from Nagapattinam to Port Natal, South Africa. As traders, they would have had access to the ships, especially when Nagapattinam and 276 other villages were handed over to the Dutch East India Company.

Indenture Number	40633	Indenture Number	40632
Names	MANGAI	Names	AMAVASAGADU
Father	KULLADU	Father	BODIGADU
Age	20	Age	30
Sex : Male(M); Female(F); Boy(B); Girl(G)	F	Sex : Male(M); Female(F); Boy(B); Girl(G)	M
Caste	Odda	Caste	Odda
Height	155	Height	160
Zillah	CHINGLEPUT	Zillah	CHINGLEPUT
Thanna	MADURANTAKAM	Thanna	MADURANTAKAM
Village	VADAPATNAM	Village	VADAPATNAM
Arrival/Ship/Port of Departure	Feb 1890 Pongola III Madras	Arrival/Ship/Port of Departure	Feb 1890 Pongola III Madras
Employer	Natal Central Sugar Co. Mount Edgecombe Verulam Sugar	Employer	Natal Central Sugar Co. Mount Edgecombe Verulam Sugar
Remarks		Remarks	
Returned to India or Deceased		Returned to India or Deceased	

Picture: Indenture records for Mangai and Amavasagadu
Credit: The Amavasagadu and Mangai Family Legacy booklet

Amavasagadu and his wife Mangai Kulladu arrived in Port Natal, South Africa, on 15th February 1890, with only the clothes on their back and a hope for a better life. The same could be said for Valliamma's parents, who came to South Africa as traders.

Promises were made as depicted in the lengthy notice to immigrants below:

NOTICE TO COOLIES INTENDING TO EMIGRATE TO NATAL

You will be taken free of expense to Calcutta and, while there, will be well fed and properly lodged until the ship sails, and should you be ill, the greatest care will be taken of you.

When the ship is ready, you will be supplied with good clothing; the finest ships are selected, and the voyage takes about five or six weeks. The food, medicines and other appliances on board are of good quality and your health, comfort and safety will be most carefully attended to. The Indian Government has appointed officers who are most strict and vigilant in securing for you these advantages.

On and after your arrival in Natal, there is a Protector of Immigrants ready to advise you at all times during your residence there. You will be located on an estate where a medical man is employed. Your religion will in no way be interfered with, and both Hindoos and Mahomedana are alike protected (Desai, Vahed, 2010: 38).

Amavasagadu and Mangai immediately assigned to work at the Natal Central Sugar Company (Mount Edgecombe, Verulam). Together with their young sons, they settled in Redcliffe.

Life was hard on the plantation and Amavasagadu and Mangai worked from sunrise to sunset, six days a week, in the scorching heat. Their sons, Kistnan and Kannigadu, were left alone during the day. South Africa soon became a land of broken promises for these immigrants. Indentured life, Desai writes, was riddled with “system violence from the outside, as well as within its internal social life.” According to Goolam and Vahed, “Their lives were lived in the context of the white ruling class that saw them through the lens of racist stereotypes.”

Tragedy struck when their son Kistnan died a few years later. The circumstances around his death are unknown. Amavasagadu and Mangai went on to have three more children, Perumal (born in 1890), Mangamma and Armnie.

My grandmother, Parvathy Govindsamy, was born to Amavasagadu and Mangai’s second son Kannigadu and his wife Ponnamah. Kannigadu and Ponnamah were married in Durban in 1911. Their marriage was blessed with nine children, Rungasamy, Chin, Thumbie, Henry, Ratty, Govindsamy, Lutchmee, Kamachee and my grandmother Parvathy.

In 1911, five years before its empire-wide *abolition*, *indenture* came to an end in Natal and this was the start of a new chapter for Indians who chose to remain in South Africa. On 3 January 1911, The Secretary of Commerce announced in the Indian Legislative Council that Indenture to Natal would be terminated from 1 July 1911.

When indenture ended, my great grandfather, Kannigadu, saw it as opportunity to become an entrepreneur and this spirit of hard work and creativity has filtered through the generations, making the Kannigadu family a respected name in KwaZulu-Natal. Kannigadu was fortunate enough to inherit a portion of farmland from his father, Amavasagadu. Ever resourceful, he built a family home and started a betel leaf farm.

With the proceeds from farming, Kannigadu purchased his first diesel pump and lorry, which he paid for in cash. The money was saved in an old shoebox and kept under his bed.

My great-grandfather was a hard worker and went on to become a successful farmer by selling his fresh produce at the Durban Indian market and sending his betel leaf products to the Transvaal market. Like Valiamma's father, Mudaliar, my great grandfather identified a niche in the market and created a successful family business. He also cultivated tobacco as a hobby.

Kannigadu died on 19 March 1965 (aged 76). Ponnamah died on 14 March 1979 (aged 86).

My grandfather, Packree Govindsamy, was born to Armnie, the fourth and youngest child of indentured labourers Bodigadu and Kulladu. Armnie married Perumal Chetty and bore 11 children when they settled in Springfield, just outside the Durban city centre.

Their main source of income was farming and they used a horse and cart to transport their goods to the Warwick Avenue Market. Armnie and Perumal experienced many hardships but remained resilient. It's believed that they lost their land when the apartheid government expropriated almost half of their farming land, which was later turned into an eight-hole mini golf course and a sports field. Misfortune struck again 1969, when the Group Areas Act forced them off the remainder of the farm. The family was devastated that they had lost everything. Heartbroken, Perumal Chetty died in 1972.

Arranged marriages were common during that period and it's important to note that my grandmother, Parvathy Govindsamy and my grandfather, Packree Govindsamy, were first cousins. They shared Amavasagadu and Mangai as grandparents.

My grandparents, despite not being rich, were kind and generous to anyone who walked into their modest home in Bayview, Chatsworth. They were known to offer accommodation and a warm meal to anyone who came to Durban for work opportunities. Despite having nine children, they made room for nieces and nephews and cousins. My grandmother made magic in her tiny kitchen, serving up the most sumptuous meals using offal like lamb feet, tripe and lamb heads. She made sure that no one went hungry.

I'm proud to be a descendant of indentured labourers, their blood runs through my veins. In reflecting on the stigma attached to the indentured experience, it is important to note the courageous journey of the indentured; their stories need to be told and celebrated for future generations and serve an inspiration to descendants, like myself.

CHAPTER EIGHT – WOMEN OF THE RESISTANCE

Indian women have always played an integral role in society; they supported their husbands, nurtured their children and lent a helping hand to the community. Sadly, their contributions to the struggle are largely invisible and they have been afforded little space in the history books.

The history of indentured women is an interesting one. Indenture made family life difficult for these women. Fathers were largely absent as they were forced to spend long hours on sugarcane fields, making the hopes of a normal family life, the one they left behind in India, almost impossible.

Indian women played a role in the social and communal circles of South Africa; however culture and religion relegated them to the background, where they were responsible for the needs of their husbands and children.

Mothers and wives in extended families were responsible for holding families together. It was a daily struggle; however, their resilience and determination for a better life for their children encouraged them to continue. These women should be celebrated today.

We need to pay homage to Gandhi too. It was Gandhi who elevated the status of Indian women when he recruited them to be passive resisters in his Satyagraha movement in 1913.

At the same time, Black and Coloured women in the Orange Free State had embarked on a protest against Pass Laws. This was also Valliamma's awakening to the Satyagraha movement, when she and a number of Tamil-speaking women joined the march from Tolstoy Farm in the Transvaal. Gandhi was a constant source of guidance and motivation to the women.

When Satyagraha was launched in South Africa, men were quick to join the movement; however, it was Gandhi who pointed out that women's contributions were equally important in the fight for justice. Gandhi and his officials extended an invitation to all women to oppose the Searle Judgement, which invalidated non-Christian marriages.

More than 10 000 people were imprisoned and 60 000 mineworkers downed their tools, proving that these women were a force and at the frontline of the struggle.

Gandhi's wife Kasturba was the first female to join the struggle. Valliamma, her mother Janakiammal, and hundreds of others joined the movement and played a leading role in the struggle against discriminatory laws faced by Indians. This group of brave women, often seen with babies on their hips, helped transform the Satyagraha movement into a powerful mass movement.

The women continued with their protest action, which was later acknowledged with a great sense of pride by the Indian government but sadly was only recognised by post-apartheid South Africa. Gandhi also publicly acknowledged Valliamma and her courageous fight against injustice.

The history of women across the political and social landscape of South Africa would be incomplete without the stories of these brave women. Valliamma's unwavering spirit embodies the unbreakable strength that lies within every woman.

CHAPTER NINE- THANK YOU

I'm drawn back to Braamfontein Cemetery.

As my journey to "Finding Valliamma" nears the end, I find myself standing at her grave, filled with gratitude and a sense of pride. It's 22 February, Valliamma's birthday. The day she was born and the day she died.

More than a century later, this dynamic, courageous young woman is remembered and honoured for her contribution to the struggle for justice and recognition for the Indian community.

It's a beautiful day in Johannesburg, sunshine streams through the tall trees that surround this section of the cemetery. Bird song floats through the air, like a little celebration, maybe nature's way of paying tribute to the heroine on her birthday.

This time, I'm alone. Just me, standing at the grave of a young woman who has captured my heart and imagination since the day I stumbled across her picture in a local newspaper. I gently run my fingers over the intricate ridges on the top of her headstone and then over the Tamil inscription.

I close my eyes and say "Thank you".

I thank her for her bravery and courageous fight against injustice.

For sacrificing her life for her people. For me. For my daughter, Sharlette Rose.

I think of all the birthdays she missed; what could have been. A long and adventurous life where she could have become a global leader like Indira Gandhi or Pandita Ramabai, an Indian pioneer who fought for education and the emancipation of women. Maybe she would have wanted to be both a world leader and a mother and wife. She was denied all these wonderful titles and that makes my heart heavy and my eyes sting with tears. The hopes and dreams of her beloved parents dashed. I cannot help but feel a deep sense of loss for a stranger, but at the same time, for a woman I feel so deeply connected to.

I wipe my tears with my sleeve and take a deep breath. Today is her birthday and my private celebration with Valliamma.

After more than a century, there is much to celebrate. It seems and feels silly but I think this is a great opportunity to tell Valliamma what she has missed over the years.

I tell her the story of a great march that took place on 9 August 1956, where more than 20 000 South African women of all races marched to the Union Buildings to protest against the country's Pass Laws. She would have been so proud and, possibly, at the frontline of the march along with Helen Joseph, Sophia Williams, Rahima Moosa and Lillian Ngoyi. I can almost picture Valliamma singing *Wathint'Abafazi Wathint'imbokodo!* (*Now you have touched the women, you have struck a rock.*)

There are so many women who became trailblazers in the struggle for freedom and ultimately a better life. Phyllis Naidoo, a teacher, lawyer, human rights activist and recipient of the

Order of Luthuli (silver) for her outstanding contribution to the human rights movement, is one of them.

I tell her about Kaiyuree Moodley, a young Johannesburg woman, who is dominating the world of golf, a sport often associated with men who conduct business deals on the golf course. Moodley is a rising star that competes on an international level and like Valliamma, is determined to change the narrative of young Indian women.

In Phoenix, north of Durban is the Valliamma Cradle of Love baby shelter, which provides a safe haven for abandoned babies. The shelter is part of the Valliamma Mudaliar Legacy project, which honours the brave teenager. She lives on in the hearts of many.

I tell her about my Sharlette Rose and how she shares the same, beautiful eyes.. I tell her about all the dreams I have for Sharlette Rose, and that I hope that she knows how much she is loved and cherished and that when the world expects too much from her, she will hear my voice telling her that she's already enough.

I save the best for the last, as they say. You can call it a birthday gift for Valliamma.

A big announcement in KwaZulu-Natal has made national headlines. The story of indentured workers will no longer be confined to history books. The construction of an 1860 Indentured Workers Monument, near Durban's Addington Beach, will pay homage to the 152 184 indentured workers who contributed to South Africa's social, political and cultural landscape.

Finally, after 165 years, the hard work of our ancestors and the story of Indenture, its joys, triumphs and heartache will be celebrated as part of the collective South African story.

I'm smiling. I'm sure Valliamma would, too.

Maybe this is not the end of "Finding Valliamma" I think her unwavering spirit that embodies an unbreakable strength continues to live on in every woman and me. I'm certain that I will continue to find pieces of her throughout my journey.

I'm grateful for her. I promise to visit her again.