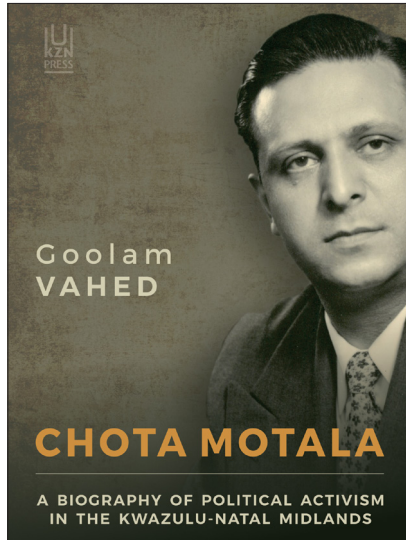


BOOK REVIEW



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chris Ellis

*General practitioner, Pietermaritzburg,
South Africa
cristoballellis@gmail.com*