

# DEATH OF A GENTLE MAN

**T**HE political and community activist, Kandasamy Govinthu, has passed on at the age of 103. He was a towering man of gentle heart and generous spirit.

Born in Pietermaritzburg in December 1908 to indentured parents, he is most likely the very last of his generation.

While indenture was a story of violence and hardship for most, Govinthu told of the benevolence of the family in whose laundry his parents worked.

He was later to set up a business running Castle Steam Laundry for more than 50 years.

In a moving tribute, his granddaughter told of her grandfather's meticulous attention to detail in folding the sheets at the laundry – a metaphor for the care he took with everything and everybody he touched.

His parents had great belief in the power of formal education as a means of social and economic mobility.

The young Govinthu threw himself into his studies with gusto earning outstanding school reports and promotions.

His later mentor was the legendary teacher, BD Lala, of Sastri College.

Govinthu maintained a lifelong reverence for his teacher, passing on the glowing tale to his grandchildren.

As revered was the British-trained lawyer, Albert Christopher, a story recounted by another granddaughter at his funeral service.

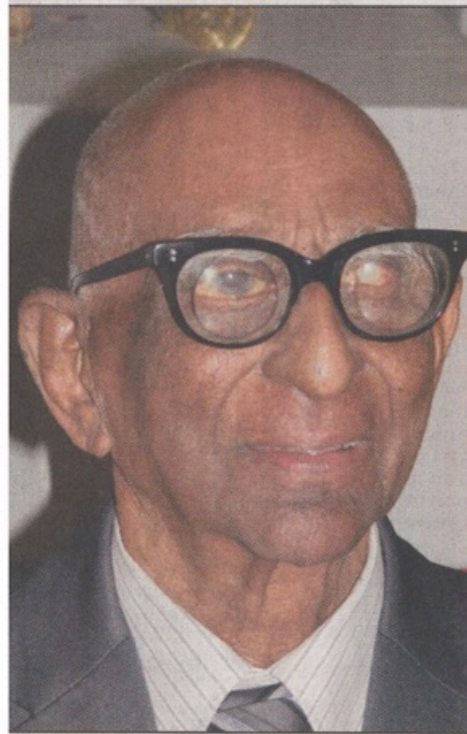
It was Christopher who enticed him into taking part-time classes to further his education at the technical school set up by the Indian Technical Education Committee in 1928.

Christopher chaired the committee with PR Pather and SL Singh as his secretaries.

Govinthu fondly recalled Christopher picking him up in his own car to take him to class.

The college was later to receive the great benefaction of Hajee ML Sultan as well as being named in his honour:

ML Sultan evolved into the Durban Univer-



sity of Technology in 2002.

In 2008, the Convocation of DUT recognised Govinthu with its Silver Tusk Award as a distinguished alumnus of the pioneering class of 1929.

Govinthu maintained an encyclopaedic memory, especially of the freedom struggle right until his last days. Reciting chapter and verse the dates, events and resolutions of meetings he would tell of animated exchanges backed by his meticulous records, press clippings and letters.

He was active in the Natal Indian Congress

of the 1930s keeping close company with among others, the trade unionists, George Ponnen and HA Naidoo.

The latter founded the Sugar Workers' Union.

As Ponnen and Naidoo were both married men, Govinthu urged his comrades to name him as the conspirator if they were arrested for political activities.

When Ponnen returned home after several decades in exile, Govinthu was among the most prominent guests at his reception.

He was active in the Indian Passive Resistance Movement.

His nephew recalls being taken to meetings as a youngster often well into the night.

Govinthu also worked within the South African Indian Youth Movement.

At a local level he successfully mobilised Overport landowners against expropriation of their land under apartheid.

He also worked in cultural bodies notably propagating Telugu as well as a cemetery committee.

In more recent decades he shared a lively comradeship with liberation movement veteran, Phyllis Naidoo.

He was a frequent guest at her celebrated *Footprints* book launches and they regularly found each other at the end of a telephone line.

Govinthu's wife, Parvathy, died in 1981 as did one of their sons.

He is survived by four daughters, Rani, Neela, Ruby and Radha.

His remaining sons are Pat and Ronnie and daughters-in-law Saroj, Lolly and Baba.

He also left 21 grandchildren, a host of great grandchildren and one great great grandchild.

In relatively good health until his passing, he received the greatest physical care and devotion from his children and theirs.

Govinthu was laid to rest in Kenilworth cemetery in the family plot where his parents are buried.

Fittingly a thunderous rainstorm greeted his interment.

It was a recurring drum roll for an outstanding son of the African soil.

– KIRU NAIDOO