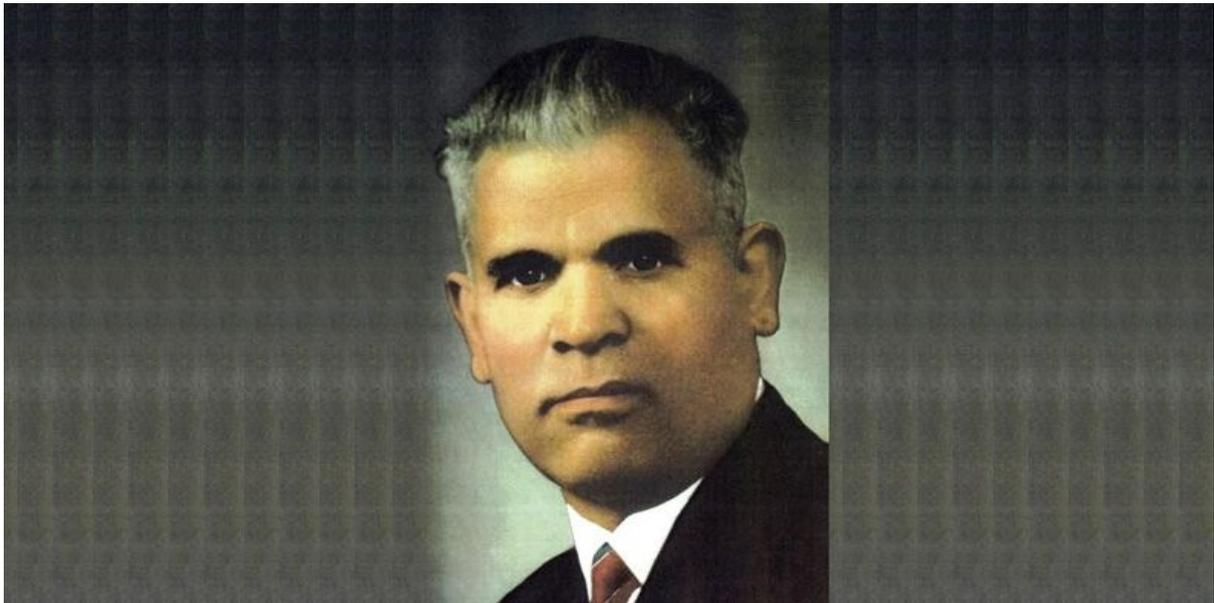


K D Travadi : A Radical Visionary



By Shashi Tavares.

Service to humanity is service to God

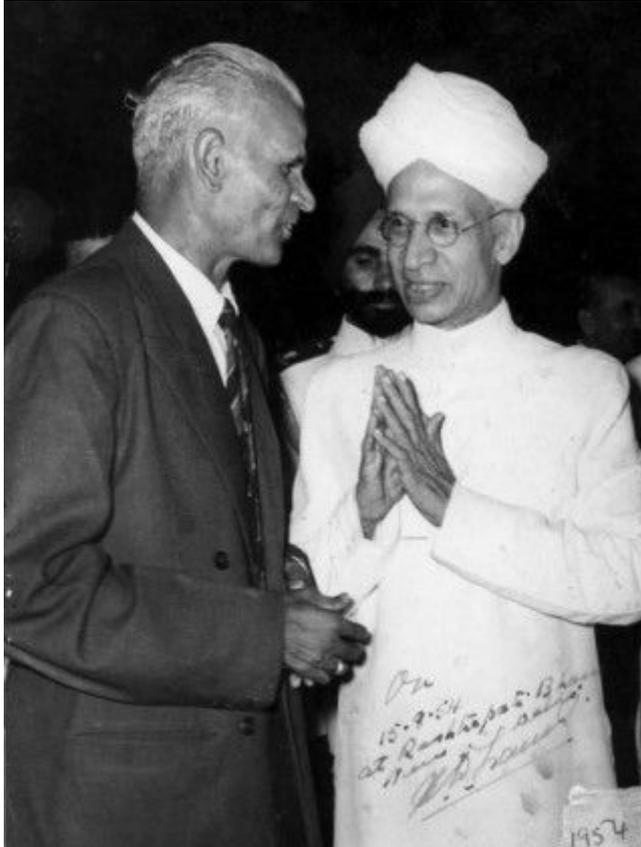
KD Travadi's voice, loud and clear, thundered across the Kenya Legislative Council chamber as he debated the White Paper on the Civil Service with Tom Mboya, on 16 December 1960. He said: '... and I myself, am in my 44th year in this country - I have had my children and children's children born here in this country and I call myself an African and particularly a Kenyan first and Kenyan last. If I go to India they never say, "Mr Travadi the Indian has come, but here is an African"; they always take me as an African.'

Mr Mboya replied: 'Why object to being called an African?'

Mr Travadi: 'Exactly, but you have not adopted the word "African" yet; then why not use "Kenyan" or say that you are not excluding any of the non-indigenous people.'

He was seeking clarification of the word 'Africanization' as opposed to 'localization' from Tom Mboya, to ensure that 'Africanization' did not exclude any non-indigenous people, namely Asians and Arabs, from getting equal rights in the new constitution of the upcoming independent Kenya. Travadi (KDT) continued: 'The Asians have been fighting in this country for the last 60 years against the Europeans for domination by one race and now if the

Africans are going to imitate the same thing then where is the common citizenship for all after Independence is attained?' To prevent creating any wrong impression in the minds of the African community, he stated: 'It is not our intention, Sir, to call for any privileged position.'



Kersanji Dahyabhai Travadi (1896-1961) was born in Jamnagar, Saurashtra, India in 1896, and came to Kenya during the First World War in 1917, to join his older brother, Ramakrishna. While struggling to raise his family and get established in a new country, he still managed to devote time and energy towards improving conditions for Asians, Arabs and Africans in this British colony where Europeans enjoyed the privileges of first class citizenship and the rest were relegated to second and third class status. A Gandhian and a pacifist by principle, he was an activist in everything else, pursuing his passion for justice and equality in every way he could: starting schools, heading committees and community centres, marching for the causes of the downtrodden, and taking

an active part in politics. He also wrote prolifically in local and international papers in both English and Gujarati and urged everyone, young and old, male and female, educated or not, and religious or otherwise, to get actively involved in working for a free and democratic Kenya.

He was my father: a tireless and indefatigable worker. As member, secretary and later President of the Kenya Asian Civil Service Association (KACSA) from 1924 to 1946, he did much to secure better working conditions, salaries and living standards for its members. After 29 years in the Attorney General's office, the last three being his accumulated leave (1946 to 1949) spent in England to qualify as a barrister at Lincoln's Inn, he retired from government service to engage in private practice. In 1958 he was elected to the Kenya Legislative Council and was one of the Asian delegates who attended the 1960 Lancaster House Conference in London, which paved the way for Kenya's independence. His contribution to the educational, socioeconomic and political development of the colony was immense.

Education

Travadi believed that education should be available to everyone, adults and youngsters, so that they would become economically independent and self-sufficient.

He was far-sighted and wanted multiracial schools with Swahili as one of the subjects. He also believed that education should be free and compulsory for all children. To accomplish this vision, he started schools in Nairobi, helped to establish schools in many towns in

Kenya, volunteered his services as a teacher whenever possible, actively participated in educational committees and fought the colonial government to get parity in funds with Europeans.

My father started the first Government Indian Girls' School in Nairobi in the late 1920, this led to the establishment of The Duchess of Gloucester School. My sisters and I attended this school, now renamed the Pangani Girls' School.

He fought vehemently but unsuccessfully against the government's Superannuation Scheme (1938-39) which suddenly changed the medium of instruction from vernaculars to English, thereby forcing STD/Grade Seven failures to drop out of school. This direct assault on Asian children's education encouraged my father to establish many private schools and libraries in Nairobi, Nakuru, Eldoret, Limuru and other smaller towns.

As the President of the Cutchi Gujarati Kanya-Shala (school) and the Secretary of the Indian Educational Council, Travadi was instrumental in arranging the very first Indian Education Conference in 1943; and participated in the establishment of the Royal Technical College (RTC) which eventually became the University of Nairobi in the 1950s.

Social Reformer

KD Travadi advocated many social reforms for those who were suppressed or oppressed: mainly girls, women and lower caste Hindus, fully supporting women's organizations such as the Shree Satsung Mandal and Bhagini Samaj. As recorded in the *Kenya Brahma Sabha Commemorative Souvenir (KBSCS)* issue of April 1979, it was during his presidency that women were allowed to become life members.

My parents opposed child brides and the crippling dowry system. Unlike most people of their time, they believed that besides divorce on grounds of desertion and cruelty, divorce by mutual consent should also be permitted. Travadi advocated this during the LEGCO debate of March 1960 on the Hindu Marriage and Divorce Bill. Replying on behalf of the government, Mr Madan, Minister without Portfolio, said: 'the very idea of divorce itself is unknown to the social life of Hindu people', implying in effect that that would be a step too far. Moreover, my parents believed there should be no stigma against divorcees and widows, and that they should be allowed to remarry, just as their male counterparts were. Travadi had always worked for the betterment of the downtrodden. In his earlier years in Nairobi, he volunteered to teach 'low caste' Cutchies and Kanbis, believing that education was not the prerogative of the privileged. He also started a movement to open Hindu temples for *hrijans* ('lower caste' Hindus), and in 1931, led a procession of hrijans in Nairobi from Ainsworth Hotel to the Shree Cutchi Gujarati Hindu Union. Many Hindus, especially Brahmins, disapproved of (my father's) their 'Brahmin brother's' actions, but the Indian Government recognized his efforts in Kenya by selecting him as Head of the National Volunteer Organization in India. His efforts to liberate the *Dalits* (previously untouchables) have been well documented in Bhanuben Kotecha's book, *East African Footprints*, and in the *KBSCS* issue of April 1979.



Kenya Asian Civil Servants
Demonstration to Mr. K. D. Travadi (President, K. A. C. S. Association)
14th December, 1946



Kenya Asian Civil Service 1924 - 1946

KD Travadi devoted 27 years of uninterrupted service to (latterly as President of) The Kenya Asian Civil Service Association (KACSA) and concentrated his efforts on improving their conditions and salaries. Therefore, he joined many Boards: the Asian Civil Service Advisory Board, the Asian Officers' Family Pension Board and the Asiatic Widows and Orphans Board, to improve benefits for civil servants and their families.

KDT advocated one umbrella association for European and non-European civil servants, to ensure equal rights based on merit rather than race, to eradicate the horrendous disparity in wages and working conditions.

Legal and Political Involvement

KD Travadi had a life-long involvement with political leaders in his struggle to gain social, economic, educational and political parity between whites and non-whites. Besides local politicians, he had met, made friends with and worked with many international leaders, especially from India: VK Krishna Menon, independent India's first High Commissioner to the UK, whom he met in England, and India's Commissioner to East Africa Apa Pant and his wife Nalini Pant in Kenya. Also, as a leading organizer for Indian Vice President Dr Radhakrishnan's visit to Kenya in 1956, KDT developed a lasting relationship with this world famous philosopher and politician. As a LEGCO member, he went to India as an informal representative of Kenyan Indians, and met the Governor of Gujarat in Ahmadabad, and Dr Radhakrishnan in New Delhi.

After his return from England as a barrister in 1950, KDT joined our uncle's legal firm, renamed 'Trivedi and Travadi Advocates' where he pursued his objectives with a passion. An outspoken and fearless revolutionary, he urged Asians and Africans to combine their forces and start a non-violent but a strong and well organized, political, protest movement (*1952 Manifesto*) to oust the oppressive colonial government which was based on the 'colour bar' and racial segregation in land policy, education and health services. He advocated a multiracial, democratic, independent Kenya with equal representation for all, irrespective of race, religion, creed, caste or gender. He once again clarified his position, especially to the indigenous Africans, that he was not seeking any privileges for Asians.

Travadi supported the Kenya African National Union, and there were several meetings held at our home on Blenheim Road in Nairobi. Many Africans including Tom Mboya (future Minister of Economics) and Odinga Oginga (future first Vice President with Jomo Kenyatta as President) came to our home in the dead of night for political meetings. As many as 15-20 people would enjoy my mother's cooking, and discuss strategies to achieve self-rule, gain back the confiscated White Highlands and obtain the release of Jomo Kenyatta and other freedom fighters. Why should the Africans who had supported and shed their own blood for the British during World War II be treated like third class citizens in their own country? KDT supported their fight but not their use of violence.





In his LEGCO debate on 5 May 1960, KDT reminded the House of the deputation that he and other Asian colleagues had sent to the then Governor for the release of Jomo Kenyatta. Also, he reminded them that while in England, in February 1960, the Asian Group Members had approached the Secretary of State and made a similar request for the freedom of Jomo Kenyatta and Makhan Singh. He said that the latter, though a staunch trade unionist with communist leanings, was no longer a 'danger to the country'. Willis Maganda in his book *Trajectories of Indians' Political Alienation*, quotes my father speaking in Parliament in 1959: 'From prisons to Prime Ministership is the order of the day in every emergent country, and I

do not see any reason why history should not repeat itself here in Kenya in an era of “winds of change”.’

So in keeping with his principles, in the 1950s Githungiri trials, my father was one the pro bono lawyers who defended some of the Kikuyus accused of Mau Mau activities during the Lari Massacre. Fondly called the ‘elder statesman’ by younger lawyers and activists such as Pio Gama Pinto, Fitz De Souza and Achroo Kapila, KDT continued to support them behind the scenes.

Having struggled for equal rights throughout his life, including in the LEGCO in the late fifties and as a delegate to the 1960 Lancaster House Conference, Travadi had some advice for the newly emerging nations. In his Parliamentary speech on Budget Debate of 5 May 1960, he described democracy as ‘a plant of slow growth’ which ‘needs patience, peace, stability and even staying power. Translated in terms of millions its essentials are food, clothing, shelter, health and individual freedom. Mere political democracy without economic independence ... and equal distribution can only prove a snare and an illusion’. He warned that, ‘The evils of economic and political control by one country over another for the exploitation of its raw materials, cheap labour and markets’, was another form of colonialism where industrialized nations were benefiting by importing raw materials from the colonies and arranging prices for those products to suit them, not the colonies. He said that ‘under democracy, there should be no monopolies of any type whatsoever’. Travadi foresaw some of the pitfalls and wanted independent Kenya to avoid them and be truly free and successful.



In Memoriam

KD Travadi died in October 1961, before Kenya's *uhuru*, but he had the satisfaction of knowing that his hard fought battle against colonialism was nearly won, and he hoped that the judicial system would be kept separate and independent from politics and the President's Office. A radical visionary who believed that everyone was created equal and that the ills of oppression - be they from a racist, discriminatory colonial system, unjust Hindu caste system, or from domineering patriarchal society - must be removed. He believed that true equality, freedom and education would free individuals from political and religious subjugation, economic dependence and poverty, and that it would help to build a healthier, happier and stable society. A Gandhian, a pacifist and a passionate social activist, my father was a determined, disciplined, dedicated and well-rounded, self-made man. A progressive thinker, he accomplished much in education, socioeconomic and political reforms. A singular humanitarian and a fearless fighter, he sacrificed his life and health in the service of humanity.

Acknowledgement

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research and writing of this article for over more than 10 years since I embarked on this project.

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