

BOOK REVIEW

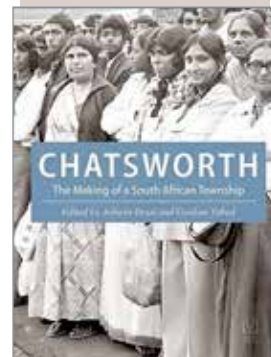
Chatsworth - The Making of a South African Township by Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed

In 1970, the forthright but culturally emancipated Sunday Times columnist, Molly Reinhardt, thought all South Africans should “hang their head in shame” at the discrimination hurled by their government against the South African Indian population. “No people have suffered as much as the Indian community from ruthless uprooting under the Group Areas Act... what it must be like for a cultured, highly civilised, intellectual and sensitive people to accept insulting discrimination is something I cannot bear to think about,” she lamented.

The uprooting which she spoke of – a callous, ultimately failed experiment at social reengineering which created deep fissures of physical, social and economic misery not only for Indians but for all non-white South Africans – had a few years previously (in 1961) led to the creation of the Indian township of Chatsworth, twenty kilometres south of Durban. 120,000 people of Indian origin were to be forcibly relocated, often without compensation, to a rural district which lacked adequate roads, drainage, sewage and electricity. A single, poorly maintained highway would connect the township to the city, making it costly and difficult for Indians to make their way there. Several previously Indian settlements closer to the city were quickly rezoned for white purposes. Among them was the socially vibrant and racially mixed area of Cato Manor – Durban’s gritty but culturally prodigious contemporary to Johannesburg’s Sophiatown and Cape Town’s District Six. A part of Durban’s history has vanished; a new, tawdrier one was ushered in, on its fringes.

Reinhardt’s lament was not hyperbole – at the time of her writing, Indians and their descendants had lived in the country for over a century, but have never benefitted from any security of tenure over the land on which they lived and worked; repatriation back to India being official government policy until 1960. Her regret at Indian’s discrimination was all the more pronounced because, to a very large degree, the city of Durban had built on the migrant Indian population, who had worked in near servitude in underpinning the lucrative “sweet gold” of Natal’s sugar industry. Despite this, they were still viewed with suspicion by their European overlords in Natal and the Transvaal. In the 1930s, Justice Wragg of Natal had concluded that “the majority of white Colonists are strongly opposed to the presence of the Indian as a rival either in agriculture or in commerce.” Repatriation was one way to minimise their threat; but it was difficult to achieve. Forced segregation, with the Group Areas Act as its mechanism, was far easier.

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CHATSWORTH - THE MAKING OF A SOUTH AFRICAN TOWNSHIP
by Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed
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Chatsworth was developed in stages and each development was referred to as a unit. The mixed housing comprised sub-economic houses occupied on a tenancy basis and “economic” homes which could eventually be purchased by occupants. Residents would be faced with row upon row of monotonous apartheid-style housing. Despite being vast (measuring 89 hectares), streets were not named for decades; so descriptions such as “House 4, Road 8, Unit 11” became the norm. For a people proud of the religion and how it intertwined with the daily lives, few places of worship were built. It was, in the words of community leader P R Pather, a “ghetto.”

It also challenged the misconception of them being culturally segregated from other racial groups – for “the poors” of the area did not belong to a single racial group, but comprised a group of mixed Indian, coloured and African unemployed people, united by their daily battle for survival.

It is against this backdrop that the academic study, *Chatsworth – The Making of a South African Township*, begins its examination. Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed are KwaZulu-Natal academics who have written extensively on the subject of discrimination, relocation and dispossession in the Indian context. Desai, a sociologist who also is a Professor at the University of Johannesburg, has also focused on the political and developmental struggles of black communities in townships such as Chatsworth. It was he who termed the phrase “the poors” when it came to describing many of the inhabitants of the area in his earlier book *“The Poors of Chatsworth”* – a study which to a large degree challenged the prevalent

misconception of Indian South Africans as all middle class, economically mobile and politically homogenous. It also challenged the misconception of them being culturally segregated from other racial groups – for “the poors” of the area did not belong to a single racial group, but comprised a group of mixed Indian, coloured and African unemployed people, united by their daily battle for survival.

Desai and Vahed have assembled a diverse mix of contributors to this volume. Dianne Scott, a UKZN academic, discusses the poignancy of the seine fishermen, descendents of the early indentured labourers who successfully transitioned to fishing in the Natal Harbour area – but who were forcibly removed in their thousands to the new township which effectively ended their involvement with the sea. Hannah Carrim looks at the Magazine Barracks area – one of the areas close to the Durban City Centre which was rezoned for white use. Her analysis shows both how quickly and wantonly authorities tore away at established social fabrics in areas of black residence. It also proves the callousness of the system which literally threw people from different locations, social structures and networks together in the hopes of creating a melting pot in Chatsworth. Vahed and Karin Williams explore the drug culture which unsurprisingly takes root in the township over many years, steadily becoming more entrenched and “harder” in terms of drug-styles. Karthigasen Gopalen, along with Sives Govender and Brij Maharaj examine separately how the issue of transport to the city took on profound implications for a people now cut off from Durban. Eventually, entrepreneurial flair triumphed as a family run bus service was launched with community money – but even this was flair was endangered as local authorities sought to force people to use a government rail service which was both more expensive as well as far out of town.

The experiment to seek a multiplicity of different voices has its benefits but also has some drawbacks in unevenness to the book’s flow. Gangsters from a particular era are referred to as “dignified [and] well-heeled” in one chapter while in another

are referred to ruthless hoodlums. Elsewhere, in a simple narrative of a mother who desperately brought up her children single-handedly after her husband was briefly jailed in Robben Island for reasons she never uncovers, her experiences are described as a “war narrative in which heterosexual normativity does moral work for a nationalist cause and wives of anti-apartheid cadres are often attributed to a narrow range of virtuous possibilities, emphasising partnership, perseverance and selflessness” – which seems a bit rich. But these are minor setbacks and overall the framework of the book reads well.

Far from being a relentless chronicling of injustice, though, the book also brims with the indefatigable spirit of a people, dignified despite huge injustices done to them. The voices in this book refuse to accept their hopelessness. Thrown into the middle of nowhere, gradually over time one sees pools develop. Community clubs sprout out, and schools are filled with hard-working principals and teachers. Beautiful temples are painstakingly saved for with hard-earned community money. High rates of poverty result in the introduction of school feeding programs. In 1969 a grand-uncle of mine, A M Rajab, sees it as a fulfilment of a dream of his when by working with trustees of the RK Khan trust, they are able to oversee the development of a major hospital to serve the community – the RK Khan Hospital – with 50% of the capital costs paid for with Indian money. The hospital, beset with logistical problems, nevertheless begins to be a feeder for a generation of local women to become nurses – and now treats 600 000 outpatients annually. The hospital, like the wider township, becomes in many ways a monument to self-help and community resourcefulness.

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Housing and its Discontents

Ultimately, the history of Chatsworth is inextricably linked to the housing question. Much of the subsequent community agitation which one sees stems from this issue. Even prior to Chatsworth’s creation, Indians had faced a shortage of housing in Durban, as the City Council spend little on what they saw as an “alien” population. By 1958, it estimated – incorrectly – that there was a shortage of 20,000 homes for the community, which it foresaw would increase to 36,000 by 1974 – all of which were to be built in Chatsworth. This was far less than the actual demand – but as the editors show, getting the local authorities to build these homes proved to be a source of division within the community. One of one hand, with groups such as the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) – the banned ANC’s ally – focusing their efforts on non-cooperation and active resistance to the state, a strong ethos of civil disobedience was warranted. On the other hand, some groups felt that as noble an ideal as this was, the very real problem of lack of houses, water, education health facilities and other community concerns meant that at least some co-operation was required, no matter how little power and influence was actually granted. Over the decades, this proved a sharply dividing line between those who saw themselves as the ideologically “pure” activists and the “collaborators.” It created deep ruptures within the community – and while much post-democratic academic writing has tended to focus on the “pure” activists, Desai and Vahed show sensitivity in mounting a more complete version of history by focusing on the merits and drawbacks of each camp.

Resistance and Consultation

But how has housing issue changed with the arrival of democratic rule to South Africa? The Grootboom case of 2003 and its subsequent complementary ones were landmark ones in the constitutional history of South Africa and also had substantial implications for Chatsworth; the area's history and its narrative bound up as it was with the housing issue. With the dawn of the democratic age came great hope that the attainment of social justice and the improvement of the quality of life for everyone – enshrined in the Constitution – would finally become more real. Grootboom reasserted citizen's constitutional right to adequate housing to be provided by for government, while subsequent ones confirmed that forced removals by government could only be ordered if government had made provision

for alternative accommodation. But as Desai and Vahed observe, the travails of Chatsworth – the chronic unemployment, lack of opportunities and poverty, together with uneven government service delivery – mirror so much those of wider South Africa, with the result that the dream of adequate housing continues to be a dream deferred for many. The authors chronicle this methodically, from the flats of Bayview to the squalid homes of Westcliff (both areas of the township), and find great poignancy in the life experiences of housing activists like Devon Pillay, Clive Pillay, Maggie Govender and husband and wife Orlean and Pinky Naidoo – people who were born in the area, and who dedicated their lives to uplifting their community in housing and development. Their stories and daily battles are told with seering honesty,

which is one of the book's chief assets. Their stories are also complemented by the adjoining one which the authors weave of Fatima Meer.

Sociologist Fatima Meer was an inspirational and highly influential activist throughout the apartheid struggle. A close friend and advisor of Nelson Mandela, Meer was his first biographer. Much to his surprise after the 1994 elections she refused high office. Though continuing to be a member of the ANC she had decided that even though apartheid had been conquered, the struggle had now shifted to helping the poor and the dispossessed, whom she continued to fight for with vigour – even if it meant going against her own party. Meer's legitimacy in the area stemmed not only from her grassroots work and her struggle credentials, but also because she had chronicled the area throughout its entire existence as an Indian township. In 1969, she had noted the “row upon row of concrete cubicles which rise and fall on a landscape yet to be softened by nature's bounty,” and saw the effect that the displacement of peoples which had led to the creation of Chatsworth would have on the social fabric of the area. More presciently, she documented the extreme poverty and lack of basic infrastructure which gripped the township. Three decades later, little had changed. Flats in Bayview are still described as “spartan with unplastered walls, exposed electrical circuits, no hot water” but while squalid conditions remain largely unchanged, to such challenges were added the sceptre of forced removals by the city council due to non-payment of rents. Chatsworth would become her last great stand, even though it would ironically pit her against government administrators from her own party.

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In 1999, the Durban City Council announced that it would “stand firm” on its policy of evicting “illegal tenants and rent defaulters.” It refused to negotiate with long-standing civic housing associations. Evictions for rental default were accompanied by water and electricity cut-offs. As locals observed, “the heroes of the liberation struggle were simply debt collectors now, not representatives of the people.” Along with the strong role played by residents associations such as the Bayview Residents Association and the Westcliff Flats Residents Association, Meer’s Concerned Citizens Group applied for an interdict preventing the Council from carrying out evictions. Before the interdict was granted (citing Grootboom) the sight of the septuagenarian and wheelchair-bound Meer, leading a crowd of poverty-stricken locals struck a chord with the nation who saw images of old women and single mothers being shjamboked while sheriffs attempted to throw their possessions into the street. “She gave [the story and the poors of Chatsworth] access to the media; the media became interested in the story precisely because Fatima Meer was interested in it.” Following her intervention, city council strong-arm tactics stopped and she encouraged a shift from resistance to consultation and negotiation with local authorities.

While much of this story has been documented previously, most accounts to date present the Chatsworth evictions in a rather one-sided manner. In contrast, to Desai and Vahed’s credit they are able to bring balance by introducing other perspectives as well.

While the story of the Chatsworth resistance received widespread support and has a strong humanist element to it, the resistance also has to be viewed against the wider fight for legitimacy post-democracy by a reconstituted police force and local authority both of whom struggled to work with communities, which they were meant to serve, but who for decades had opposed them as agents of apartheid. Few consider the perspective that in the lead up to the evictions in 1999, the eThekweni municipality were faced with unsustainable revenue losses due to non-payment of water bills, rates and property rentals by Chatsworthians. In 2005, for example, they recorded a deficit of R35 million. The most sustainable approach open to previously delegitimized bodies, of course, is to have them recruit critics from the community and empower these people with the authority to resolve deep-seated community issues from the inside. The authors follow the progress of Derek Naidoo, a Chatsworth activist who is appointed Deputy City Manager of Infrastructure in 2003. Naidoo faces disgruntled tenants in Bayview, Westcliffe, Crossmoor as well as neighbouring Lamontville and KwaMashu and seeks to find solutions to the self-same issues he had previously railed against.

His approach is three-pronged. Firstly, the installation of prepaid electricity meters to give residents greater autonomy in determining their electricity usage and to ensure that those who fell behind with payment did not have the additional burden of a reconnection fee. Secondly, water debts are partially written off and flow meters installed to at least allow defaulters some access to free water, which is restricted to 200 litres a day (previously it would have been nothing). Thirdly, he seeks to arrange for the refurbishment of rental flats and homes and oversee the orderly transfer of this rental housing to full property ownership by residents. This was something which most activists were passionate about, and bought into. As one said, “Most of us lived our whole lives in property we couldn’t call home...our old people were passing away without ever owning their home.” Ironically, it is the last

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and most important measure which fails despite the good intentions, as even though the selling prices are heavily subsidised, the extreme poverty in the area means that few could afford the selling price. Naidoo takes some of the brunt for not pushing for even lower prices, a charge which seems unfair considering that in some cases it was as low as R7 500. Ultimately, even dedicated former activists working 'on the inside' for change in Chatsworth, such as Naidoo, are powerless against the hopeless economic conditions which afflicts thousands. More subtly, they also seem powerless against a cynicism towards authority which has become pervasive among many Chatsworthians, inured as they have been by decades of displacement and subjugation. (The authors see it even in the experiences of long established community upliftment centres such as Helping Hands or the Chatsworth Youth Centre, both of which go into eventual decline as the community turns their back on them). Eventually, in 2012, Naidoo leaves the eThekweni Municipality.

Summary

The length of this review should give one an idea of the sheer density of Chatsworth. It is an academic study years in the making, and fully rounded in character, which leaves one with a complete sense of the sights and sounds, textures and travails of one of the largest black townships in South Africa. Most of its pages are filled with poignancy, and one is left with a palpable sense of the huge challenges which it, like the rest of the country, has to overcome. But in its own way, it also allows a spirit of resilience and of resolve to emerge. The people portrayed here never seem to have given up hope. Molly Reinhardt would have been impressed.