



AMANDLA! — The Liberation Heritage of Durban

VALLIAMMA

Munuswami Mudliar

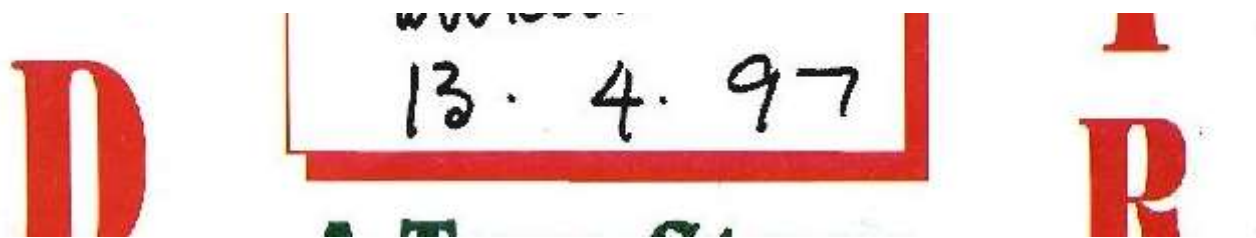
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Remembering Valliamma Munuswamy Mudaliar

South Africa observes **Youth Day** on 16th June to commemorate the **Soweto Uprising** of 1976, in which over 20 000 students embarked on a protest march against Bantu Education. Records note that 176 students were killed. However, other accounts suggest that these numbers might be much higher. While much is written about these brave activists, Youth Day offers an opportunity to remember all courageous young activists who fought for liberation. One such activist was Valliamma Munuswamy Mudaliar who lost her life at the young age of 16 in 1914. Mudaliar was imprisoned for marching against the South African Union's oppressive laws and consequently lost her life after contracting an illness in prison. Below we explore her short yet remarkable life.

Passive resistance against unjust laws

Mudaliar was the daughter of two Indian immigrants from Tamil Nadu who moved to Johannesburg – the so-called “City of Gold” – to better their prospects. Although born in South Africa, the young Mudaliar lived in a segregated world that was increasingly hostile towards people from India, amongst other non-whites.

Soon laws began to emerge which directly impacted Indian populations, including regulations around marriage that rendered any union outside of the church null and void. This put many Indians in a precarious position. In 1910, the government insisted that all non-indentured Indian adults, boys over 16 and

girls over 12, would have to pay a three-pound tax. In consequence, many were forced into **indentured labour** once again to avoid this tax.

In response to these unjust laws, **Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi** – at the height of his passive resistance campaign – called for strikes. These protests predominantly sought to campaign against laws that hindered the movement of Indians between provinces and those that failed to recognise Hindu or Muslim marriages. The first wave of these Satyagraha Campaign protests occurred in September 1913 when a group of women, including Mudaliar and her mother, illegally travelled from Transvaal to Natal. In October of the same year, they joined another group of women in protest and were arrested and sent to Pietermaritzburg Prison. They were sentenced to three months of hard labour. It was during this time that Mudaliar grew ill with a fever. Despite an offer by officials for her to be released early, she chose, as an act of resistance, to see her sentence through to its end. The campaign, after all, sought to fill the prisons and by staying in prison she was making known the plight of Indians. Tragically, however, on 22nd February, 1915 – just a month after her release – she passed away at only 16 years of age.



Valliamma Munuswamy Mudaliar

Reflecting on her short life and his meeting of Mudaliar before she passed, Gandhi wrote:

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” responded 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?” was the reply.

Celebrating her short life

Valliamma Munuswamy Mudaliar lived a short but immensely courageous life, ultimately sacrificing herself for the fight for justice and freedom. Today, this legacy and bravery are celebrated both in South Africa and beyond. In 2008, a commemorative stamp was launched in India to honour Mudaliar’s legacy, and a memorial hall and public library were instituted in Nagapattinam in 1971, in her name. South Africans can find her gravestone at the Braamfontein Cemetery in Johannesburg.



Commemorative stamp

Mudaliar is one of many brave young people whose legacy should be remembered. At 16, she had her entire life ahead of her, and had she lived in a kinder and more tolerant world, she may have gone on to do incredible things. During youth month, may we remember all the young activists who lost their lives far too soon, many of whose names have been lost or forgotten with the passing of time. May we also use it as a day to remind ourselves that these struggles were not in vain. We need to continue fighting for the rights of our youth to ensure that their human rights are realised and their safety, education, health, and dignity upheld.

Images courtesy of [UKZN](#) and [SA History Online](#).

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