

THE CONVERSATION

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Sam Naidu (right) interviews Navi Pillay at the United Nations in Geneva.
Image courtesy Sam Naidu

Who is Navi Pillay, the South African judge who won the Nobel prize? We asked her biographer

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International human rights judge Navi Pillay was awarded the 2026 Nobel Peace Prize. She was honoured for her lifelong dedication to international law and global justice.

To understand more about Pillay and her work, we spoke with Sam Naidu, a feminist and literary scholar with a focus on crime and justice, and the author of a biography of Pillay.

You travelled to Switzerland to interview Pillay in 2009. What lasting impression did she leave?

In the biography, I describe Pillay as a down-to-earth, no-nonsense kind of person with a wicked sense of humour. She was generous with her time and answered all my questions frankly. She exudes strength, integrity and a keen intelligence.

Besides her colleagues at the United Nations (UN), I also spoke with family, friends and former colleagues of hers in South Africa, where I was granted access to her personal archives.



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We hail from the same Indian diasporic community in Durban, and I could relate to her life story. As a feminist scholar I chose her as the subject of a book because she was an inspirational black woman who overcame structural barriers to become a pioneer in human rights law, with a global impact.

We had communicated before my trip, but when I arrived in Geneva and she saw me for the first time, she joked, “Ah, but you are only a young one. I was expecting an old person like me.”

Under the warmth and good humour, I detected a steely grit that no foe to justice and no obstacle to human rights can quell. As her stance in response to Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu testifies, this grit seems to have strengthened over time.

Who is Navi Pillay?

I would say that Navi Pillay is an extraordinary woman whose exemplary life has its origins in one of the darkest moments in the annals of human rights and the law. Perhaps her strength lies partly in this provenance.

She was born Navanethem Pillay, with Tamil ancestry. Her grandparents were indentured labourers who arrived in South Africa from India by ship in the late 19th century, a time of British colonialism. They were brought to today's KwaZulu-Natal province, to work on the sugarcane fields. She was born in 1941 and grew up in a working class home in Clairwood, a suburb of Durban, the fifth of eight children. Her father was a bus driver who earned extra money from fishing. Despite the family's lack of resources, the value of education was stressed in the Pillay household.

This was a time of white minority rule under a racialised system of separate development. Apartheid was formalised in law in 1948, when Pillay was seven. Black South Africans were given minimal education opportunities, but her school principal recognised her academic smarts and her community helped raise the money for her to attend university to study law. She went on to complete a master's degree in law and then a doctorate in juridical science at Harvard University.

Read more: [Navi Pillay's Nobel peace prize is a vote of confidence in a global legal order under fire](#)

A staunch anti-apartheid activist, in 1967 she was the first black woman in the country to set up a law practice. One of her earliest cases as her own boss was to defend African National Congress member Phyllis Naidoo, who was under

banning orders as a member of the resistance. In 1973 Pillay obtained legal representation for political prisoners at Robben Island prison and, in 1986, co-founded the Advice Desk for Abused Women (now Advice Desk for the Abused).

The struggle against formal apartheid finally ended in 1994, with South Africa's first democratic elections. In 1995, Pillay was recommended by former president Nelson Mandela as the first black female judge in the Supreme Court. She joined the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in the same year and in 1999 was promoted as the tribunal's judge president. She then moved to the International Criminal Court in Hague, after which, in 2008, she was appointed UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The Nobel Peace Prize is a most fitting acknowledgment. Whether defending political prisoners in South Africa, transforming international criminal law by tackling rape in Rwanda, or denouncing the genocide in Gaza, she has been a fearless trailblazer in the area of human rights since the 1960s.



In August 2009 Forbes Magazine published its list of the world's 100 most powerful women. At number 64, Navi Pillay was the second African ever to make the list.

She began her career fighting for human rights and justice in apartheid South Africa, but today she speaks for victims everywhere.

As a feminist scholar, you explore crime and violence against women. How did Pillay's judgments about rape help shape global justice?

Pillay's interventions at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda changed international human rights law forever. The tribunal became the first court to hold that sexual violence can be an act of genocide. Pillay sat on the bench that presided over the landmark case.

On 30 May 1996, Jean-Paul Akayesu, the former mayor of Taba, a commune in Rwanda, was brought before Trial Chamber I. Fifteen charges of genocide, crimes against humanity and violations of the Geneva Conventions were brought against him. He pleaded not guilty.

Read more: *How can the International Criminal Court achieve justice for women?*

During the trial several of the victim-witnesses recounted acts of sexual violence perpetrated against them. But Akayesu was not being charged with sexual violence offences. Faced with this conundrum, Pillay posed a question to the office of the prosecutor:

What are the judges expected to do with the evidence of sexual violence in a trial where there are no charges relating to sexual violence and the main charge is genocide?

As a direct result, the prosecution filed an indictment which later led to the finding that rape may under certain circumstances constitute genocide.

Subsequently, this provision was incorporated into the leading modern instruments of international criminal law. There has rarely been a feminist victory with more real, material impact. As Pillay said:

From time immemorial, rape has been regarded as spoils of war. Now it will be considered a war crime.

I cannot think of anyone else who has infiltrated the system and transformed it so radically from within. Navi Pillay is, after all, the six-year-old girl who stood in a court in Durban and gave evidence when her father was robbed by a colleague. When the robber was convicted but the court process failed to see the money returned, she was left asking, "Where is my father's money? Is this justice?"

The difference is that now she is 85 years old, with a long and illustrious career behind her. Her question remains but now it has a global focus: "Where is justice for each and every one of us?"

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Her life-long quest for justice has won her enemies too, those who would belittle her efforts or criticise her methods, although the ideals she adheres to may be harder to fault. But she appreciates that history unravels in surprising ways.

Who would have thought that [Jan Smuts](#), a white supremacist, would leave the [preamble](#) to the UN charter as his lasting legacy to the world? Who would have believed in 1963 that Nelson Mandela would one day be president of South Africa? And who would have guessed that the six-year-old who questioned the meaning of justice in a Durban court would one day win the Nobel Peace Prize?

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