

PLEASANT SURPRISES EITHER WAY FOR MANIBEN AND HIGH COMMISSIONER

By FAKIR HASSEN

For veteran Pretoria activist Maniben Sita, who was recently feted on her 91st birthday, a home visit by Indian High Commissioner Ruchira Kamboj was as pleasant a surprise as it was for the diplomat to learn about her family's activism, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi during his tenure in South Africa.

The daughter of Nana Sita, who fiercely opposed the draconian apartheid white minority government laws of segregation, Maniben joined the struggle at the age of 15 as she became a familiar figure over the years with her trademark sari, that was as distinctive as her father's pointed cap at public gatherings.

Nana Sita had spent some time with Gandhi when he came to Pretoria as a young lawyer to fight a legal battle for a local businessman. He continued the fight against the oppressive regime long after Gandhi had returned to India to lead his motherland to independence in 1947.

Like her father, Maniben was imprisoned on a number of occasions for their resistance.

Kamboj said Maniben's recollection in detail of her father's determination and efforts was fascinating.

"At the age of 91, Maniben leads a simple, uncomplicated and independent life. She loves to read, cooks for herself and does not believe in being a burden on others – this is something really rare to find these days," Kamboj said.

Maniben shared with Kamboj her father's resounding message that remains relevant even today in a democratic South Africa: 'You should conduct yourselves with great dignity since your behaviour will reflect on the Indians living in South Africa.'

On being asked whether the High Commission could do anything for her, Maniben responded in her typical unselfish way.

"She asked that the Indian government should provide the Mahatma's autobiography to all the schools in South Africa so that local Indians and all South Africans could always remember the incredible legacy he had left behind in the land where he had started his struggle, South Africa," Kamboj said, adding that they would now begin this process at schools.

Maniben had in an earlier interview lamented the fact that South African Indian youth, many now in their sixth and seventh generations after the first Indians came here in 1860 as indentured labourers for sugar cane farms, did not know about the pioneering work that Gandhi had done in the country.

"Gandhiji inspired future generations to assist in bringing democracy to the country under Nelson Mandela more than 130 years later," Maniben said.

