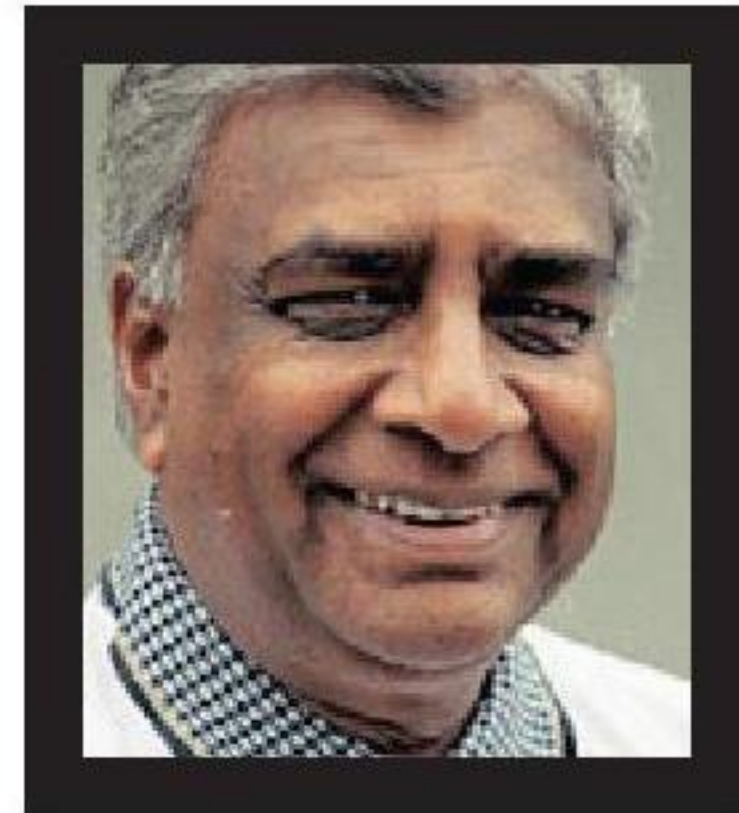


# In praise of ethnic minorities serving on front line



AMI NANAKCHAND

ON MAY 8 there were appropriately social-distanced events honouring veterans of World War II. On that day 75 years ago, the war ended.

Many among them were war veterans like the late Guru Varma and M Padayachee of the South African Ex-Servicemen's League and those who are still with us asserting they are as "fit as a fiddle". Others are very much in their twilight years in care homes fighting a new war – the battle of the coronavirus pandemic.

In a previous column I reported that one such home was the Aryan Benevolent Home. How shameful for all the generations that followed World War II to confront the fact that these institutions form the front line of casualties and fatalities from Covid-19.

Unlike hospitals, care homes don't have the institutional knowledge and resources to minimise the risk of the spread of infection.

Like so many, I have been humbled by our doctors, nurses and other health-care workers as well as those working tirelessly at huge personal cost and heartbroken by the loss of life.

Sadly, some have now joined the rising Covid-19 death toll. Many were from minority ethnic backgrounds. It has been a stark reminder of how much we depend on them to look after us.

Many families who had and still have general practitioners, specialist physicians, consultants and surgeons in their realm, came here in the 19th century from India. Every Indian South African child and every child of immigrants will know the pressure on them to become a doctor. We joke about it but get



CUBAN doctors arrive in South Africa to help fight the spread of Covid-19. | ELMOND JIYANE GCIS

the point.

These doctors from ethnic minorities wanted to serve a country that gave them opportunities. This pandemic has made it painfully clear that we are all interconnected.

Yes, it is also about professional and financial security. When Indians came to this far-away land, they also wanted to find a proper role, a place and a sense of belonging, which is why their children often provide care and services but also work so hard, particularly in the health services.

It was tough for that generation of doctors who "didn't really fit in". Always on the margins they endured racism from their peers and patients. It was hard for them to be respected let alone be promoted. But they treasured the important role they had as doctors because they had a huge sense of patriotic duty to their country.

They had a sense of honour, dignity and pride in their work caring for the sick. We

see that spirit today with so many staff from all across the country, the continent, Europe, India and Cuba working in our hospital wards, which have become the trenches of this battle.

Like Professor Salim Abdool Karim and his former Ugandan-South African colleague, Professor Gita Ramjee, another internationally respected scientist and researcher who served on the front line of another pandemic, HIV/Aids. Sadly, Ramjee succumbed to Covid-19 in March.

We are all moved by their bravery and some by their martyrdom. But the nation has suddenly woken up to how reliant we are on them. Even those in government who once shunned them have been rightly praising the work these doctors are doing.

The government has even appealed to those who have retired to help in the war against the virus.

It feels odd to hear that acknowledgement

after so many years of sustained marginalisation of this ethnic minority fraternity.

The Covid-19 crisis is making us all reflect on things about ourselves and of wider society.

On the other hand, ministers and their securocrat sidekicks have been strutting the stage for the past seven weeks – some in hypocritical self-indulgence – preaching the virtues of their respective departments in the war against the virus.

They tell us about the importance of wearing masks and gloves; about trespassing on beaches; bans on tobacco and liquor sales; the closure of schools and universities as well as aspects of commerce and industry.

Yet thugs from the police service and defence force as well as the labour inspectorate have been abusing their authority and practising their xenophobic pogrom in their dealings with immigrants.

Freewheeling politicians and their lickspittle chamchas (hangers-on), especially those who are in the virus war for political influence and the money, are thriving on the charity of honest people who are making the effort to give a better life to the underdog.

All the accusations of privilege and not being black enough feel so moronic and spiteful right now. Let's hear no more of it. This crisis has proved that ethnic minorities build hospitals and roads, grow our food, drive our buses and ambulances, run our corner shops, teach our children and care for the sick.

We can't actually cope without them. When we get through this nightmare, there should be some representation – perhaps a community health centre or institute – to mark the untold contribution that ethnic minorities have made to this beautiful country. The least we should do is show some appreciation.

The outbreak of Covid-19 in South Africa has also been a celebration of historical inclusion, which, one hopes, contributes to future thinking about the history of ethnic minorities.

*Nanakchand is a journalist.*