


Mahavishnu (Vishnu) Padayachee 31 May 1952–29 May 2021

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I first met Vishnu Padayachee when he walked into my Economics 101 class in 1983 at the University of Durban-Westville (UDW) to lecture on introductory microeconomics. As he began his lecture, I was immediately mesmerised by this handsome urbane, genial, exceptionally articulate lecturer, his mannerisms more akin to those of an English upper-class gentleman, who made Economics 101 not only interesting but also tinged with radical economic ideas. As a young student growing up in apartheid South Africa and studying at a university where many of the lecturers were members of the Broederbond, this was truly extraordinary stuff. Vishnu introduced me to the work of, among others, Harold Wolpe, Martin Legassick, Rick Turner, and the famous speech by FOSATU (Federation of South African Unions) general secretary Joe Foster at the FOSATU congress, which outlined the federations' views on the relationship between the struggle for worker's rights through trades unions, and the struggle for political freedom in South Africa. In those days, people went to gaol for distributing this kind of material. Suddenly, economics was exciting and I began to understand the world around me. Over the years, Vishnu had the impact of steering me towards a better understanding of the world, linking up with new exciting research ideas, striving for academic excellence and enjoying books and leisurely lunches. Remarkably, he had this effect on many, many others.

Vishnu was born on the south coast of (then) Natal in the town of Umkomaas on 31 May 1952. His father was a teacher and school principal. In those days, the life of an Indian school principal involved having to move from one little Natal town to the next. Vishnu's parents lived this life. As a result of this, Vishnu was brought up by his relatives in Umkomaas, a well off and globally connected family with connections in, among others, Germany. I think this upbringing was instrumental in Vishnu's love for the good things in life – good food, sporty cars, good wine and the best whiskey – notwithstanding his lifelong work for a democratic and egalitarian society.

Vishnu studied at the University of Durban-Westville (UDW), at that time the only place where Indians were able to study. He completed his PhD, under the supervision of Bill Freund, at the University of Natal in 1989. He went on to have a stellar academic career having published 10 books, some 110 journals articles, supervised some 70 masters

and doctoral students and achieved recognition across the globe, with appointments in Oxford and Cambridge and Johns Hopkins, among others. In 2018, Rhodes University awarded him an honorary doctorate for his ‘exceptionally distinguished contribution to the post-apartheid transformation of economic policy’.

His academic career was influenced by a number of colleagues in those early years while he was at UDW. One of his early research papers, co-authored with Shaheed Vawda and Paul Tichmann, was an economic history study of Indian Workers and Trade Unions, 1930–1950, and in some ways this reflected the scholar that he would become – an economist, with a keen interest in the history of the downtrodden. In these early years, some key collaborations shaped him. He lived in a flat, in a small 3-story block, in Overport, Durban. The flat above was occupied by Enver and Kulsum Motala. Enver, at the time, was director of the South African Council for Higher Education (SACHED) office in Durban and steeped in worker education. Vishnu taught a number of courses on economics to workers and activists through the SACHED programme. In Kulsum’s network were Ike Mayet, an artisan who was also a book-binder and book collector, and AKM Docrat, the Communist Party of SA stalwart who was repeatedly banned from the 1960s until 1990, and made a living buying and selling books. In later years while we were colleagues at Natal University in Durban, Vishnu often went off to see ‘old man Doc’. For all of his life, Vishnu remained a close friend of Rajend Mesthrie, the famous South African linguist, who also hailed from the little town of Umkomaas.

In 1985 and 1986, Vishnu was invited to lecture on the African Studies programme at Johns Hopkins University in Washington, where he taught a course on the political economy of South Africa under apartheid. These 2 years at Johns Hopkins shaped Vishnu’s lifelong pursuit of academic excellence and collaboration with international academic institutions.

Moving into a full-time research position in the Institute of Social and Economic Research at UDW, Vishnu began working more closely with the economist Trevor Bell, and shifted his gaze to South Africa’s international economic relations, especially with the International Monetary Fund. His lifelong friendship with Bill Freund, who moved to the Economic History department at the University of Natal, began at this time. Vishnu, meticulous and organised to a fault, and Bill, somewhat unkempt and totally disorganised, were a most unlikely collaboration and companionship. But, theirs was a deep and very special friendship. Bill supervised his PhD, on South Africa’s International Economic Relations, 1960–1989, and their collaboration, which included work on economic development in cities, lasted until Bill’s untimely death in 2020.

The early 1990s were exciting years. Under the leadership of Jairam Reddy, UDW became a hotbed of exciting activity as the democratic transition unfolded. Vishnu moved into Reddy’s office, as Special Assistant to the Vice-Chancellor, and took up the cudgels to build a new progressive university. During this period, Bill Freund, Gerry Mare and Mike Morris started the journal *Transformation*, and Vishnu joined them as an editor. He maintained ongoing links with *Transformation*, which published his most recent article only days before his death. The journal was a key outlet for debates on South Africa’s economic policy over the first two decades of democracy.

On the economic policy front, having been involved in the Economic Trends Projects (which advised COSATU [the Congress of South African Trade Unions] on economic policy matters), Vishnu took up a leadership position in the Macroeconomic Research Group (MERG), the economic think tank of the ANC (African National Congress) to design post-apartheid economic policy. In MERG, Vishnu worked closely with Vella Pillay and other members of the ANC's (then) Department of Economic Planning (DEP), a host of local and international economists who assisted the DEP at the time, including Ben Fine, John Sender and Chris Cramer of SOAS (School of African and Oriental Studies, University of London). In MERG, Vishnu became involved in some of the key economic questions during the transition, including the importance of the Reserve Bank's mandate and questions about its accountability. He was part of the team that drafted the final MERG report. Vella, who became a sort of fatherly figure to Vishnu, and the SOAS economists remained lifelong collaborators with Vishnu.

Sadly for Vishnu, the ANC had pretty much ditched the MERG report even before it was finalised. On the issue of the Reserve Bank, the government opted for an independent monetary policy authority and an inflation-targeting regime. This became a focus of much of his later work, as he searched for documents and logical arguments for why the ANC, a supposedly left party, opted for, in his view, a neo-liberal economic policy. Vishnu explored these themes with a number of collaborators around the world including Jonathan Michie (who collaborated with Vishnu extensively over many years), Asghar Adelzadah, Adam Habib, Keith Hart and, most recently, Robert van Niekerk (2019).

As MERG's recommendations were ditched, so was the exciting project of university transformation at UDW unravelling. Having worked more or less full time for MERG for much of 1993 and 1994, Vishnu returned to UDW, which by 1995 was a shadow of the vibrant early years of the Jairam Reddy administration. It was now something of an alien place for Vishnu. Bill Freund rescued him from this world and offered him some solace by arranging an office for him in Economic History at Natal University.

I had joined the School of Development Studies at the University of Natal, then under the leadership of Mike Morris, in 1996. Vishnu joined us in 1997 as a Research Professor. He took up the headship of the school over two spells during the period 2002–2011. For many of us in the School of Development Studies, and especially for Vishnu, these were intellectually exciting times. The School grew to have a talented group of academics, a highly successful academic programme, large amounts of research funding, research and teaching collaborations across the world and a highly impressive research output. The academic programme attracted the smartest students from all parts of the globe – our intake in any 1 year would have included students from, among others, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Mozambique, Uganda, Japan, Canada, France, Sweden, Norway, the UK and the USA. As the senior academic in this milieu, Vishnu led much of the initiative, built what was considered by many to be the among the world's most innovative and productive development studies programmes, created a truly collegial community (something almost impossible in the cut and thrust of academic life) and encouraged younger members of staff by being a generous leader.

He was fortunate to inherit an excellent administration team which he enhanced and which, in turn, pampered him. A key unwritten rule in the School, which Vishnu and his

predecessors enforced, was a common tea time at 10h00, when all the staff gathered for tea and a convivial chat. For all his years there, Vishnu loved lording over the tea time chat and the seat in the middle of the room was, unofficially, his. Notwithstanding his administrative responsibilities, this was a period when Vishnu was highly productive, having supervised a number of masters and doctoral students and published books on Durban's economy (with Bill Freund) and cricket (with Ashwin Desai, Krish Reddy and Goolam Vahed). As well, he published numerous journal articles on economic policy in South Africa, macroeconomics, investment, inflation targeting, social policy and central banking, among other topics – many of these in collaboration with colleagues in the School. While the School remained an exciting space, by then UKZN (University of KwaZulu-Natal) had entered a period of turmoil with some of Vishnu's closest colleagues, among them Robert Morrell, forced to leave the university.

Before long, in 2013, the UKZN management decided to dissolve the School into a larger structure that merged development studies with a set of built environment disciplines. The model apparently worked at the University of Manchester and, so argued the management, what was good for Manchester had to be good for Durban. Deeply angered and too distraught at the destruction of the institution that he did so much to build, Vishnu withdrew and found new inspiring spaces at Rhodes University where Robert van Niekerk and others there created an environment in which Vishnu thrived.

Wits University's economics programme benefited greatly when Vishnu decided to take up an appointment as Distinguished Professor and Derek Schrier and Cecily Cameron Chair in Economics at Wits in 2014. At Wits, he played an instrumental role in developing the Applied Development Economics postgraduate programme and contributed hugely to the conceptualisation and consolidation of the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies at Wits. Notwithstanding ill health, this last period of his life was also highly productive. He completed two books – *Shadow of Liberation* (Padayachee and Van Niekerk, 2019), and a book, with Jonathan Michie, on *Ownership and Governance of Firms* (Michie and Padayachee, 2021), and authored 35 journal articles on topics including economic policy in South Africa, Reserve Bank independence, inflation, inequality, Keynesian economics and business in South Africa.

Given the volume and scope of Vishnu's academic work, it is impossible task to capture all aspects of it. Three threads really stand out for me. Firstly, his work on economic policy in South Africa, beginning with his early work on South Africa's international economic relations and the more voluminous work on MERG, GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution) and post-apartheid economic policy is unparalleled and without doubt his most important contribution. Secondly was his passion for economic history, much of it in collaboration with Bill Freund, but important works include that with Robert Morrell, on Indian Merchants and Dukawallahs in Natal (Padayachee and Morrell, 1991), his work on Indian workers, with Padayachee et al. (1985) and more recent work on central banking (e.g. Padayachee, 2000, 2015; Rossouw et al., 2015). Thirdly is the broad range of his work – from economics, central banking and politics to cricket.

Vishnu was the most organised, meticulous and systematic person I have ever known. He and I shared a preference for an early start to the day. Vishnu was usually at work at

6 a.m. and by the time I arrived at 6.45 a.m. he had cleared his email from the previous day and begun writing for a paper that he would be working on. We shared a coffee before 7 a.m., caught up on the gossip, and then he wrote uninterrupted until about 9 a.m. when the others arrived. From then on, Vishnu's door was always open and there was a steady stream of staff members and students that knocked on his door. He gave generously of his time. Remarkably, even if you arrived unannounced, you left feeling that he had been waiting to talk to you. He loved having an elaborate and leisurely lunch and most days he combined lunch at a Durban restaurant with a work engagement or discussion. Late afternoon was most often spent at Ike's Bookshop. This was his routine pretty much for all of the time that we worked together in Durban.

Everything Vishnu did was meticulous. He updated his CV immediately that a new paper was accepted for publication. Every book in his office had a specific place on his bookshelf, and every one of the books was perfectly ordered. His work output was remarkably efficient. In all the years I knew him, I cannot recall him ever missing a deadline, or not being adequately prepared for a meeting.

Outside his academic work, Vishnu's contribution to books was second to none. For much of the late 1980s, Vishnu spent many hours with Ike Mayet at Ike's Books in Chapel Street, Overport. From these humble beginnings, Vishnu, later with Joanne Rushby and Julian May, established Ike's Books and Collectables in Florida Avenue. It quickly became the intellectual hub of Durban – not only for the book launches but also for all sorts of other events and discussions. The typical stream of visitors into Ike's on any given day included visiting academics seeking Vishnu's counsel on research matters, colleagues popping in for a chat, and students seeking advice, a book hunter looking for an out-of-print book ... it was an unending stream and Vishnu was always at the heart of it. He was himself a great book collector with pride of place on his shelf being a complete set of JM Coetzee's novels – all first editions and signed. He collected art too and introduced me to some of South Africa's best art and we shared a small collection of Mithala art, to which David Szanton had introduced him.

Although he did have his fair share of academic fallouts (which academic has not?), Vishnu had an extraordinary ability to engage across ideological boundaries. Though firmly in the left post-Keynesian economic camp, he was able to supervise students more firmly to his right and engage with academic disciplines from accountancy to politics. He never imposed his ideological views but was always clear on where he stood on important matters.

Vishnu had his shortcomings too. For one, he supported Tottenham Hotspur, and somehow came to terms with their promise of potential success with little, if anything, to show for it. Though a highly successful collaborative worker, he did sometimes bail out of collaborations that he had committed to. Almost everyone that has worked closely with him will, I think, attest to having received an email from him, meticulously constructed and written in the early hours of the morning, with news that he has decided to withdraw from a project. It happened to me on more than one occasion, but we were able to move on. I put this down to his high academic standards and the need fully to be in control of his academic commitments.

Though we wrote a lot together, most of the time he and I spent together was in talking over morning coffee, in our respective offices which for many years were adjacent, in the bookshop, or over lunch. Our conversations were mainly about academic matters –

universities, the latest paper and anger at the ANC – but often drifted into sport. He loved cricket and, more than anyone else I know, understood the intricacies of how the *doosra* was bowled, or the technical adjustment that Hashim Amla had made to his batting.

We spoke a lot about his personal life, a source of great joy – he unconditionally loved his daughter Sonali – but also great pain as his relationships entered challenging and complicated realms.

Owing to his poor health, I saw less of Vishnu over the last 2 years. But we continued to have conversations over the telephone and on occasion when I was in Durban I made a made a point to see him over lunch. Three issues dominated our most recent conversations. Firstly, his concern with the state of our universities. It bothered him no end that our universities were being distracted from the core concern with academic and research excellence and that increasing pressure on universities – from students’ demanding free higher education to political interference – was undermining our ability to retain South Africa’s place in the international scientific community. He implored me, as a university manager, to focus on the core issue of academic excellence. Secondly, the state of our economy and politics in South Africa. That the party that he so strongly supported in the 1990s and worked tirelessly for in the heady days of the transition, and the movement that he was a part of for all of his life, had chosen a set of economic and political strategies that resulted in such outlandish corruption, poverty and unemployment, depressed him. He urged me to use the spaces at Wits to shift our economic policy toward addressing poverty and inequality in our society. Finally, he wanted to ensure that the autobiography of our friend Bill Freund, (Freund, 2021), just published by Wits University Press, be given the recognition that it deserved. A few days before he died Vishnu called, uneasy, incensed and concerned that unless we make sure it happened, the launch of Bill’s book would not be given the prominence that it should. ‘We owe Bill so much because he made it possible for us to be what we are’, he said.

Though he had a taste of being at the table of power with appointments on the Board of the South African Reserve Bank and various other formal and informal relationships to political power, Vishnu was unflinching in maintaining his independence and remained critical of the ANC’s policy choices.

Vishnu’s contribution to economics in South Africa is unmatched. So too is his contribution to so much more. Go well, Mahavishnu Srinivasan Padayachee (his full name, which is what I often called him. Being the contrarian he was, he responded by shortening my name to ‘Im’s’). You have made an indelible and deep contribution to making this world a better place.

Editor’s note

We are proud that Professor Padayachee published in ELRR: See Padayachee V (2019) Can progressive macroeconomic policy address growth and employment while reducing inequality in South Africa? *Economic and Labour Relations Review* 30(1): 3–21.

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