

# **SPEECH AT THE LAUNCH OF THE AHMED TIMOL EDUCATION TRUST**

**Imtiaz Cajee**

**5 June 2010**

When my grandmother was approached to testify at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings on 30 April 1996 about the death of her son Ahmed, my uncle, she initially refused to testify. I pleaded with her, begged her to tell our family's story – to keep it alive. I convinced her that it was important. Her quiet testimony – in her language, Gujarati – shocked the nation. I had over the years heard her vividly describe the pain and agony of losing her son. But my grandma's testimony at the TRC was something else... I had a lump in my throat and was breathless for a while. I had a vision: I needed to do something more constructive in memory of my late Uncle. The idea of writing a book in his memory was born.

Former President Nelson Mandela paid a glowing tribute to Ahmed Timol when he renamed the Azaadville Secondary School in 1999 the Ahmed Timol Secondary School. My grandmother's wish to the TRC was granted. However, she had passed on and was not present to witness this historic occasion.

In January 2005, my book was launched at the former John Vorster Square Police Station, the place where Uncle Ahmed was murdered, now named Johannesburg Central Police Station. The SA Police Choir sang the National Anthem and members of the cabinet attended and paid glowing tributes to Ahmed Timol.

Additional launches were held in Azaadville, Cape Town, Durban, Canada and in the UK. I had the opportunity to speak at these launches, have my photograph taken and sign many copies of the books. I was "famous". More importantly, I had succeeded in assisting my grandmother to keep the memory of Uncle Ahmed alive.

But, now, the truth had become a pebble in my shoe. My grandma's emotional testimony was powerful, indeed. But none of Ahmed Timol's murderers, none of the people who plotted and planned his arrest and later attested to his so-called "suicide", came forward to apply to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for amnesty. And the act of writing the book, of paying tribute to Uncle Ahmed and keeping the story alive – though liberating – did not bring closure, either.

After the book was published I received many calls from people claiming to have information. It is as if there were pages missing. Biographies usually have a beginning and an end. Uncle Ahmed's end remains shrouded in the mysteries of his turbulent times. But that is a story for another evening.

For it is evenings such as this that make the TRC and the book experiences worthwhile. For, the love and the honour and respect that are in this room testify to the fact that Ahmed Timol was a righteous person. That he set an example for us to follow.

Tonight, we are here to honour and pay tribute to an ordinary South African citizen, in recognition of an extraordinary contribution to the struggle for equal rights and freedom; an individual who was ultimately willing to lay down his life.

This is the late Amina Desai description of Ahmed Timol, contained in my book: "Ahmed was a very congenial man. He was always good with neighbours. He was not born an extraordinary figure. He was a diffident man. Ahmed displayed his heroism in the qualities of a very ordinary man. The freedom that we have today did not just come about. Ahmed had showed that an ordinary man could accomplish heroic measures to foster his beliefs. He was always kind and a nice young man." I nominated Ahmed Timol for a number of years to receive the National Order of Luthuli, but my attempts were unsuccessful. Then I began working closely with the Ahmed Timol Secondary School and School Governing Body to nominate Ahmed Timol for the prestigious Luthuli Award. Finally, in December 2009, my uncle, Mohamad Timol, collected the Order of Luthuli (Posthumous) on behalf of Ahmed Timol. I was filled with mixed emotions. On the one hand there was jubilation, but when I long and yearn for my uncle, I know which cemetery to and go and visit.

We should not forget that there are many such cemeteries. My uncle's was but one life. Many thousands of other families across our dear land continue to yearn for justice. Some don't even know where their loved ones were laid to rest.

Generations come and go, and the onus is on people like us to keep the legacy of those who were murdered alive. It's an ongoing challenge, especially because the younger generation finds apartheid difficult to grasp. The hosting of this celebratory dinner re-confirms our joint humanity, Ahmed Timol's community. We are not alone in keeping Ahmed Timol's legacy alive. We have partners, such as the Ahmed Timol Secondary School, and most importantly, all of you.

It was ordinary South Africans who took to the streets to lay Ahmed Timol to rest. They were not intimidated by the Security Branch who monitored the funeral and were present at the cemetery. Ahmed Timol's legacy remains alive: the renaming of the school; a book in his memory; the awarding of the Order of Luthuli; tonight's celebratory dinner for the award and now, the formation of an Education Trust. Principal Juta: When I launched my book I promised to donate the royalties I received to a worthy cause. I am very proud to announce tonight that approximately R60 000 will be donated to the Ahmed Timol Education Trust once it has been formed. I also intend assisting other disadvantaged schools with the royalties accrued from the book sales.

As we prepare for the hosting of the historic World Cup, the spirit of Ahmed Timol, Babla Saloojee, Joe Slovo, Imam Haron, Looksmart Ngudle, Neil Aggett and all other heroes and heroines of our struggle remains with us.