

## *Rohitash (Roy) Bunwarie (1933–2019)*

**R**OHITASH (Roy) Bunwarie was a founding member of Aurora Cricket Club, which challenged apartheid in sport and pioneered a path away from racism. Gopaul Manickum captained the team, with me as his vice-captain, set up in 1973 to represent the first non-racial club to play in the Maritzburg second division and defy the Group Areas Act. On a famous afternoon in October, as the purple jacarandas were coming into flower, the police raided Aurora's first league match, taking names and the scorebook as evidence of a criminal offence. Nothing came of the raid and the walls of apartheid were breached forever.

As Patrick Compton has written, 'The club may not exactly have slain a dragon ... but its distinctive brand of flannelled fools pointed the way forward to the possibility (not yet achieved) of a more level playing field, in cricket and life, in which not only racial barriers would tumble, but economic and class ones too.'

Bunwarie was the first president of Aurora and a very brave man indeed. I remember with particular fondness curry lunches with Mike Hickson, Chris Davis and Roy in which we plotted how to outwit the security police. Roy was a third-generation immigrant, whose grandfather, Ranchur, had arrived on 21 February 1891 from Gonda, India under the Natal immigration laws. Life was not easy in the beginning and his grandfather moved to Glencoe where Roy's father (also Ranchur) became a teacher and married Roy's mother, who was from Tugela. She had no formal education and spoke Hindi exclusively at home, but had an extensive family in that area that had prospered by acquiring property and businesses.

Roy's father ended up in Pietermaritzburg and bought a house in Pentrich. Apart from Roy, who was born on 14 November 1933, there were two further sons and a daughter. Always devout Hindus, the family saw their religion as part of a culture the white



*Roy Bunwarie, Billy Naidoo and Rohan Ramsunder at an Aurora game*

regime would never destroy. While Roy was schooling in Pietermaritzburg he regularly caught a bus and befriended an Afrikaans girl. When the girl's father discovered the relationship, he strode off to report the matter to the police. The late 1940s pre-dated institutionalised apartheid, but the racist eggs had been laid. The police warned Roy's father that if his handsome and charming son did not desist from his friendship, there would be trouble: the girl's parents had threatened to shoot him if he did not stay away from their daughter. So his first brush with the regime saw the end to a precious friendship.

One of the monsters spawned by the apartheid regime was the Group Areas Act that prescribed where different races were to live. Although Pentrich was originally a mixed area, it was declared white and Roy's family were removed to Burger Street in the late 1950s. Scarcely a decade later, a second forced removal was effected and they were transferred to Allandale where Roy lived for the rest of his life. Compensation was pitiful and on each occasion they were paid meagre amounts for properties worth many times more; circumstances that were borne with fortitude. It is difficult to assess the deep psychological and mental scars that remained, but Roy found humour in it all. Later, when questioned by a distant relative on his father's side, Roy explained to him that he was his second cousin twice removed.

Roy also became a teacher and his ability and industry meant quick promotion from primary school teacher to headmaster, finally of a high school. He played soccer with great skill for Pietermaritzburg and Northern Natal teams. He would have loved to play

cricket, but no equipment, grounds or other facilities were available.

Roy's father was a Hindu priest and was dismayed by the insistence of the education authorities that Christian prayers be used at state schools, even though the vast majority of pupils were Hindu or Muslim. Roy learned the tenets of Hinduism from his father and a love of justice and equality became deeply embedded in his soul. For the Bunwarie family the words of Gandhi were instructive: he had stated that love was the law of our being; a love that implied care and concern for others.

The Bunwaries were a middle-class, professional family that upheld good values and morals. They had scant respect for those who sought wealth for its own sake and reckoned like the Hindu poet Tagore that 'God is there where the farmer is tilling the hard ground and where the road-maker is breaking stones. God is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust. God is not with the rich and powerful.'

Roy's father would make sure that they learned by experience as well as from books. On occasion they would attend colourful Hindu festivals in Pietermaritzburg. The main attraction was a large pit filled with white-hot coals where devotees braved the heat with no ill-effects in order to cure or avoid illnesses, or to seek help with some great task. At many levels the creation of a non-racial cricket club would involve faith such as that of these devotees. The myriad laws demonising social contact and the reactionaries defending apartheid certainly made that mission a journey over a similar hotbed.

When Roy was threatened by the police security branch that if he did not

leave the Aurora Cricket Club he would lose his job as a headmaster, he sent a resignation letter to the club, concluding with an enigmatic and subtle salutation that eluded the clodhoppers. After pretending to resign he made it clear that it was a ruse by concluding, 'Yours in Sport – Roy Bunwarie'.

Roy was much more than a courageous fighter against apartheid. He was a lover of life, a *bon vivant*, who lived out his existence with passion. Roy exemplified the importance of giving of his best. He enjoyed a tipple and entered into the spirit of every joyous occasion. A life that was well and truly lived.

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