

THE NIEW JOURNAL

THE VOICE OF THE NAM WOMAN

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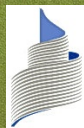
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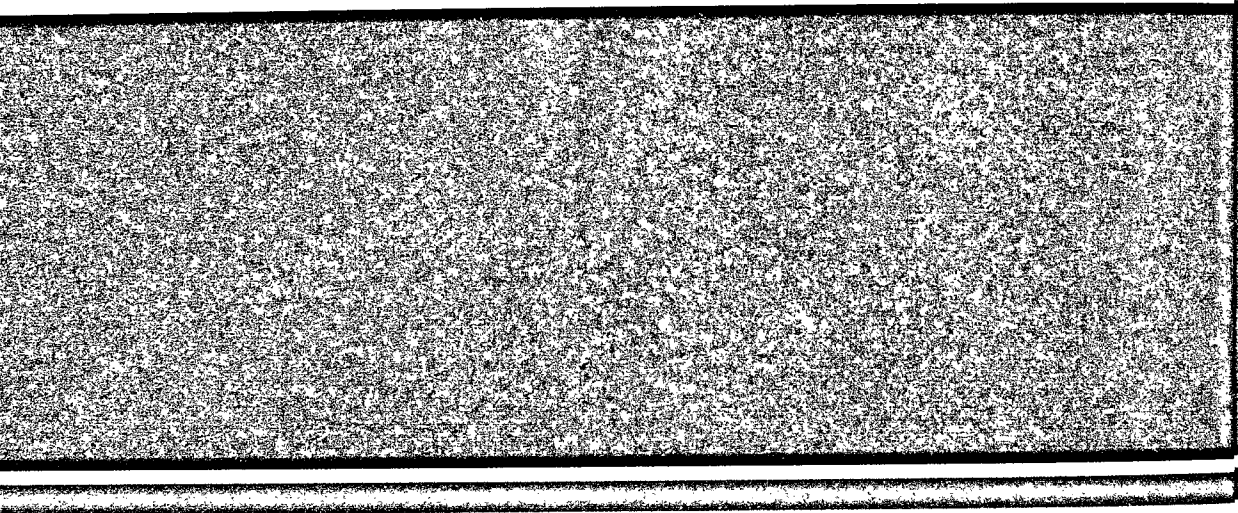
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THE VOICE OF THE NAM WOMAN



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FOREWORD

Y. Bhg. Dato' Dr Noorul Ainur Mohd Nur
Secretary-General
Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development,
Malaysia

I congratulate NIEW for this issue on women and development. Women account for half of the population. Today, they act as effective movers of global growth. The government has always recognised the role of women and sensitive to their contributions to the nation's development. To enhance women's participation in all areas, the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, in association with Non-Governmental Organisations, have organised many programmes which have helped women in both rural and urban areas to improve their lives.

In line with NIEW's mission, this journal's focus on women and development has facilitated in bridging scholars from various NAM countries to compare stories, data and strategies. As shown in their articles, stories of development sometimes begin with accounts of poverty and hardship. But it is indeed heartwarming that initiatives are being identified so that women in developing countries can continue to boost their nations' progress.

By gathering scholars who have carried out research on domestic violence and economic development in NAM countries, we may be better able to form strategies and compare best practices to augment women's advancement. It is my hope that NIEW will continue to highlight issues on women's challenges, their tribulations as well as success stories in the future volumes.







FOREWORD

Y. Bhg. Tan Sri Datuk (Dr.) Rafiah Salim

Director

NAM Institute for the Empowerment of Women

Women are indeed the fulcrum in the development strategy of any nation. Economists have noted that providing women with skills that allow them to enter the work force is the basic formula to increase women's empowerment, raise living standards, and boost the economy. It is therefore pertinent, that in this fourth volume of NIEW, we focus on aspects of women and development that are considered important in different NAM countries.

The main objective of the NAM Institute for the Empowerment of Women is to be the catalyst in providing visionary and leadership roles including setting priorities and broad policy directions for NIEW and its regional offices together with NAM Countries to promote and enhance the advancement of women. In order to achieve this, we have drawn up several strategies so that collaboration between NAM countries is explored and strengthened. In our five-year strategic plan, we have outlined our direction in getting a footing in NAM countries through more

interaction and cooperation with international bodies and universities. The NIEW journal is one such effort of collaboration between a local university and other universities in the NAM region.

It is my hope that scholarly dialogues such as the one provided in the NIEW journal will be a platform for us to highlight issues on women. Women and children are human capital whose potential will remain buried and untapped should we continue to ignore them in the nation's development plans. If they can live in an environment that nurtures their growth, the nation will be better prepared to deal with the challenges of the future.







EMANCIPATING DALIT WOMEN THROUGH WRITING

Indrani Rama Chandran
Malaysia

INDIA'S DALIT WOMEN

Being a Dalit, to those who subscribe to the Hindu caste system, is a factor decided by birth, not unlike being born a female. From the very time of their births, both groups are assigned, with roles which are unfortunately demeaning in nature, and literally impossible to dismiss in their lifetime. Since ancient times, the patriarchal Indian social structure has always placed women at the bottom of the order with men conveniently positioned above them (Karan Singh, 2011:15) simply to infer that men's superiority over the weaker sex is beyond question. Myths and legends have advocated the same. The unspoken rule in India, especially in rural parts of the country, is that a husband is equal to, if not greater than God, to a married woman (Julia Leslie, 1992:10), and that a woman must patiently bear all that the

man imposes on her, whether good or bad. Such is the debilitating impact of patriarchy on Indian women for the reason of being born a woman alone. If the woman is also born a Dalit, she is literally left incapacitated.

The term 'Dalit' which means "ground down", "oppressed", or rejected comes from Marathi, a language of central western India and came into use to represent the people at the lowest ladder of the Hindu caste hierarchy. It was Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the Indian jurist and political leader who was better known as the champion of the Dalits and the downtrodden, who first used the term 'Dalit' in his writings in 1928 to replace the patronising references to people of the lowest caste such as "untouchables", "Harijan", (children of God) or "Scheduled Castes" that existed at that time.

The Dalit woman is often referred to as the "Dalits among Dalits" (<http://www.indiatogether.org/2006/feb/soc-ruthmano.htm>) in response to the magnitude of oppression that she often has to experience in comparison to her male counterpart. Like fellow Dalits who are male, she is discriminated for her low caste and the 'impure' tasks such as manual scavenging that those of her caste have been assigned with for generations; additionally, she must also submit to harassment from upper caste men on the basis of her gender, and to the violence and patriarchal bias inflicted upon her by the male members of her own Dalit community or family. Atrocities that Dalit women, especially those in rural parts of India, often experience apart from the general discrimination faced by the Dalit community on the whole, include torture and beating, molestation, rape, bonded labour and forced prostitution. (Bela Malik, 2005:104) Such situations continue to exist in most parts of India despite constitutional prohibition of caste-and gender-based discrimination (Scheduled Castes/ Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989).

Assertion of Dalit rights have long been the concern of human rights activists, namely Dalit activists who are of the opinion that the oppression of Dalits "clearly fits into the definition of genocide – a crime against humanity" (Pranjali Bandhu, 2005:110). Expressions of Dalit sensibilities have taken many forms over the decades, and Dalit literature, as one such means, has effectively played its role in attempting to uplift the position of Dalits since the late 1800s. The plight of Dalit women, however, only came to be fully represented when female writers who are Dalits themselves began producing writings in their native languages at a prolific rate from the 1970s onwards. The impact of such representations has not only succeeded in creating awareness of the female Dalit cause on a global scale,



but has also resulted in an upsurge of ideological commitment among young, educated Dalit women to free themselves and their village-based counterparts from the clutches of caste-and-gender-based oppression.

In Tamil Nadu, a female Tamil Dalit writer, Bama has played a commanding role as the voice of female Dalits since the publication of her first book, *Karukku*, in 1992. Writing in Tamil, Bama, whose representation of Dalit women in her second novel *Sangati (Events)* form the focal points of discussion of this paper, is regarded as a writer who has provided Dalit women with “an authentic voice and affirmative presence” (Mangalam, 2007: 2). The gender and caste bias faced by Dalit women within the community, and in the hands of upper caste men respectively, forms the crux of the semi-autobiography. Bama’s preface for *Sangati* (translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom) speaks volumes of her visionary commitment to Dalit women.

In *Sangati*, many strong dalit women who had the courage to break the shackles of authority, to propel themselves upwards, to roar (their defiance) changed their difficult, problem-filled lives and quickly stanching their tears. *Sangati* is a look at a part of lives of those women who dared to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them. And through this, they found the courage to revolt. (Bama, 2005: vii)

The fundamental motive of Dalit writing that is written by and targeting at Dalits has always been to revolutionise the readers. This is especially true when it is written by a female Dalit for her female counterparts, for there here has been a growing interest in the past decades among female Dalit writers in India to use their writings as tools to empower Dalit women and drive them towards improving their lives, and those of fellow Dalits.

FROM ONE DALIT WOMAN TO ANOTHER

For as long as Dalit literature has existed, the question as to whether a writer writing on Dalit issues must be a Dalit in order for the writing to come across as realistic, has been a constant topic of debate. Dalit writings have been described as “letters of their own blood” (Khandekar, 1994:6) as a result of the revolutionary stance taken by Dalit writers in highlighting the atrocities imposed upon the community towards bringing about changes in the society. A Dalit writer, therefore, has a social obligation towards his or her people, and does not write for the sake of creativity and art alone. If anything, creativity and art can only be mere tools

that the writer uses to revolutionise the cause. It has been widely accepted that a writer writing for the Dalit cause must be a Dalit by birth in order for the sensitivity and experience to be realistically conveyed.

In the same vein, the struggle to claim Dalit women's rights can only be objectively represented by a female Dalit writer who lives, or has lived amidst the Dalit community. Bama comes from a purely Dalit setting, the characteristics of which she depicts with such brutal honesty. There have been times when her writings were harshly criticised by certain groups as being coarse and crude. Reality, however, cannot and must not be disguised. If language is indeed the mirror of a society, then it is crucial that Dalit stories are told in the actual language of the slums (Raj Kumar, 2010: 134) in which many Dalits live in, and which Bama is famous for. The coarseness of language also becomes necessary to relay effectively the pain, humiliation and anger of Dalit women which are often muted in their day-to-day encounters with those of the upper caste. It is this realism that Dalit literature is rich with that gives it its distinct identity and "separates it from the metaphysical, religious literature of ancient times and fanciful, romantic literature of contemporary age" (Karan Singh, 2011:26).

Writings by Bama and female Dalit writers in general are often semi-autobiographical in nature, in that the stories they relate are based on their own lives. *Sangati* (*Events*), for instance, is based on actual events in Bama's life when she lived with her family amidst the Dalit community.

Bama, in an interview, explains that she first started writing to stop herself from putting an end to her life. "I was confronted with all sorts of problems. I was treated like an outcast. I faced poverty, apathy and even scorn from near and dear ones. I could not take it any longer." (<http://www.ambedkar.org/entertainment/RecognitionFor.htm>). What began as a personal need for a space to find her peace later developed into an unflinching desire to leave the world with a physical proof of the atrocities inflicted upon her people (*ibid*). If anything, *Sangati* is a tribute Bama has paid to the community of Dalit women she grew up with. A plotless piece of writing, *Sangati* was written from an observer's point of view about the many memorable anecdotes that helped shape her life as a youngster. The characters that she revived through *Sangati* are people she grew up amidst; and her focus is lively and rebellious women who lived lives as they willed despite the fear and subjugation that they found themselves constantly exposed to as a result of their low caste.

Bama's pride in these female characters is apparent throughout the novel. She does not attempt to glorify them; instead she recounts their characteristics exactly as she remembers them, and displays the ability to intuit the strength, confidence and vitality that she sees in them despite their pitiable outer appearance. Bama's refusal to permit the female characters to wallow in self-pity is a reflection of her conviction in the empowerment of women. Standing tall among Bama's Dalit women in *Sangati* is the character of her *Paatti* (grandmother), the Vellaiyamma Kizhavi (Old Vellaiyamma), a fictionalised version of Bama's own grandmother. Illiterate Vellaiyamma has intuitive knowledge about things, writes Bama, especially in areas like midwifery in which she was an expert. As she says, "It seems she could handle even the most difficult cases. It didn't matter if the umbilical cord was twisted around the baby, if the baby lay in a breech position, if it was premature birth, or a case of twins" (Bama, 2005:1).

Bama's sentiments towards the traditional attributes of her people's culture and practices are far from antagonistic, suggesting that she is clearly not apprehensive about traditions, and unlike some Dalit activists who find traditions to be the cause of Dalit subjugation and standing in the way of freedom from casteism, Bama contrasts Dalit culture with Brahmanic (upper caste) culture and appears to find in it (Dalit culture) much to praise (Karan Singh, 2011:147). *Sangati* bears heavy traces of traditions and rituals known to, and practised by the Dalit community such as spirit possession, the reaching of puberty ceremony, betrothal ceremony which sees the groom bringing gifts for the future bride, the singing of *roratu* (lullaby) and *oppari* (dirge). Culture and traditions can be turned around by Dalits, whether men or women, to empower themselves by simply reconstructing for themselves a positive self-identity (Arun, 2007:4) and Bama's apparent acknowledgement of this notion through her acceptance of the existing Dalit culture is one of the reasons why she remains "one of the most important Tamil Dalit writers" (Karan Singh, 2011: 130) in India.

An activist need not reject in order to empower. Outright rejection of factors which shape one's Dalitness in the name of seeking modernisation and a better, respectable position in society can only be translated as a sign of insecurity of one's background. Bama's fierce pride in her roots appears to be her source of strength in realising her aspiration to lift Dalit women out of caste victimisation and patriarchal violence. Dalit literature in general is defined as possessing the agenda to revolutionise the society (Raj Kumar, 2010: 133) and Bama does it remarkably well.

Dalit writings, whether feminist in nature or not, tend to possess traits of activist intervention, and Bama's *Sangati* is no exception. While *Sangati* loosely comes across as a "cultural biography of a community," (Mangalam, 2007:4), it is above all, a powerful feminist narrative. Through *Sangati*, Bama attempts to shift the mindset of women who are trapped in the clutches of caste and patriarchal subjugation to believe that a way out is indeed possible. By depicting real stories of resilient and bold women who have attempted to embrace change to seek a better life for themselves and their children even while living under oppressive conditions, Bama is providing Dalit women a proven assurance that existing situations can be altered if only the women find the courage to rise above them. Here again, we see Bama's grandmother character, Vellaiamma paving the way. Bama, as the narrator, tells us how Vellaiamma's practicality made her shrug off the common sentiments held strong by married women with regards to the constitution of marriage. When her husband, Govindan, left for Sri Lanka to work as a labourer four years after marriage and never returned, Vellaiamma "waited and waited for Govindan to return, and at last when there was a terrible famine, she took off her tali (a sacred thread worn by a woman as a symbol of her marital status) and sold it...after that she never wore a tali ever again" (Bama, 2005:5).

Throughout the book, more such positive representations of the freedom allowed, or boldly seized upon by Dalit women, are related. Bama's stories of Dalit women being free from the clutches of traditional and superstitious practices, which set them apart from upper caste women, serve as reinforcement of the uniqueness that envelops the Dalit community. Despite being forced to live a life filled with poverty, hardship, and humiliation, and living amidst a society which is steeped in traditional rigmarole, the Dalit community does not impose upon its women unjust practices such as demanding huge dowries from young women, discriminating against widows by refusing to allow them to remarry, and being sentimentally and blindly bound by symbols and the constitution of marriage (Holmstrom, 2005: xviii). Bama's portrayal of such positive side of the Dalit community lends hope for a renewed pride among the younger generation of Dalit women in the culture and practices of their community.

Changing the mindset of Dalit women, to Bama, is not limited to instilling in them a sense of pride and courage alone. Bama is far from a pretentious activist writer to draw attention only to the pitiable aspects of Dalit women's lives alone. Being fully aware of the inherent flaws that also exist within the Dalit community, Bama assumes the role of reminding her people on the inadequacies that exist within the community which ought to be corrected if they were to rise above their oppressed



situation. *Sangati* dwells at length on the issue of gender-bias that Bama has seen and experienced during her growing years. She relates how male-specific values are inculcated in girls and how they are trained from young to conform to the community's gender-bias practices. Bama laments that even the women subscribe to these gender-bias practises. She relates in *Sangati* of an instance where one of the women in her village, Muukkamma, who chides her sister-in-law, Lourdu for leaving her baby boy unattended while he is crying away. She goes on to say, "There's your son screeching like a crow, having pissed all over the cradle cloth. And here you are, chucking a dice around. If it were a girl at least, you could leave her to cry" (Bama, 2005 : 31). When Bama's character in the book asks Muukkamma why would it be acceptable for a baby girl to scream unattended and not a baby boy, Muukkamma retorts that it is the boy who would care for his parents when they grow old and not girls who would be married off into other families.

The gender-bias practices during Bama's younger days were so extreme that they could be seen even where breast-feeding was concerned, and "a boy is breast-fed longer, with girls, they wean them off quickly, making them forget the breast" (Bama, 2005 : 7). Bama's emphasis on such practices in her writings appears to be a way of reminding the present generation of Dalit women of the need to be liberated from such a mindset. If young girls are not provided with undivided love and attention by their own gender, can the same be expected from the menfolk? Would men learn to respect the rights of women if they become accustomed to seeing women being unfairly treated by their own kind? Is it any wonder then why Dalit women are mercilessly victimised, harassed and discriminated by upper caste men and Dalit men themselves? "Aren't we also human beings?" asks the young Bama character in *Sangati* to her grandmother, obviously appalled at the unjust manner in which girls are treated by their families.

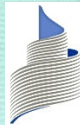
Reality, however, is that womenfolk in traditional Dalit families are indeed treated as lesser human beings by their own husbands, who not only expect their women to supplement their income, attend to household chores and their children, but also to satiate consistently their sexual needs as and when needed, the failure of which would bring about severe beatings and abuse. The character of Bama's mother in *Sangati* relates how a neighbour, Thaayi, a victim of extreme domestic violence, had had her hair cut off by her husband and hung in front of their house so that he could "put down her pride." (Bama, 2005 : 43). Karan Singh (2011) describes this male reaction as an assertion of their masculinity through which Dalit men are able to uphold their pride and belittle the identity of Dalit women.



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