APPENDIX 1
PERSONAL INTERVIEW WITH BAMA
(17 May 2007)

Who are the dalits? How would you define them?
They are the sons of the soil. People who are ill-treated and crushed by the society. To bring all these people under one name, I call them Dalits.

Is there a need to have a separate literature as Dalit literature? Are you still marginalized?
In Tamil literary circle, there was no literature about Dalits. For years and years, Dalits were deprived of getting education and so there were no writers. Later, when they began to get education, they started to write their own history. When we wrote literature we did not separate ourselves as Dalit literary writers. We were labeled as writers of Dalit literature. We happily accepted it. We are still marginalized. We haven’t decided if we need a literature or not. It is a spontaneous outcome of our protest.

Can you explain the symbol in the title ‘Karukku’? Is there a parallel between Christ and Dalit?
No. I didn’t choose this title for that. Karukku is the stem of palm leaves, whose two edges are sharp like knives. This society cuts us with its caste, class and everything and we bleed. That kind of imagination came into my mind. My desire and dream is not to accept such rejection but to cut through or break through the system which pulls us down. So with that intention I gave the title. In Hebrew (New Testament) the word of God is like the double edged sword; whoever is practising the values of Christ know what Jesus told us – to love and respect one another and maintain
equality among human beings. But we don’t treat a person as equal – that pierces into the heart. Keeping these two in my mind I chose that word as title.

Church has been bitterly criticized by you in ‘Karukku’. What is your religious stand now?

What I experienced I wrote. I don’t believe in any particular religion.

Is there a note of positive feminine perspective in ‘Sangati’?

Yes, they are real characters, who try to come out and speak.

Are you a feminist?

Yes, of course.

Sangati has been translated into French? How was it received? Can the French understand the plight of Dalits?

It was well accepted by those people. I would say those people accepted it more than what we accepted it in India. It was a happy trip for me to meet the French people. By translating it they are able to know about dalit women and the condition of dalit women.

Is it included in their curriculum?

No. I am not aware of it.

Which ideology do you follow - Marxian, Gandhian or Ambedkar?

Definitely no Gandhian. A mixture of Marxian and Ambedkar.

Can you explain?

Marxian ideology is that everybody should get everything and nobody should go without anything. They fight for economical, social and labour rights. Ambedkar fought for caste annihilation. Of course, he worked for economic liberty, gaining political power and equality.

Why not Gandhian?
Gandhi… (Laughs). He named us ‘Harijans’ which we don’t like. Because he
interprets it as ‘sons or children of god’ which means ‘devadasis’, the temple
prostitutes – they are known as children of god. He spoke about untouchability but as
far as I know he never fought to abolish untouchability as much as he fought for any
other cause. He spoke about abolition of untouchability but did not work vigorously.
Because of him we didn’t get the double electoral system which Ambedkar
formulated. So even to this day we are not able to get minimum power in politics. Not
even in the Panchayat elections. We suffer a lot because of Gandhi.

‘Vanmam’ is about the conflict between Parayas and Pallar Communities. Is there a
communal fight between them?

I don’t think so. In Vanmam, the fight was between two castes and not religions. In
the course of fighting, that enmity comes through but it is not the cause or reason of
the fight. In this particular context, in this particular village about which I wrote,
priority was given to caste and not religion. Anybody in India is born in a particular
caste and religion. In this novel after the conflict, when people come to help them,
then they talk about ‘Bible people’. But religion was not the main cause of the
conflict.

You have created a group of educated boys in ‘Vanmam’ who try to do good to the
community? But why do they run away when they are needed?

You just can’t imagine dalits, even as a group, to fight against the police force. They
are like upper-class people to dalits. They do all kinds of violence and atrocities. We
don’t trust police.

Women were ill-treated in the police station. Was it a true incident?

Very, very true. In this novel I have written a small portion of police atrocities. There
is another recently published novel, Marial, by a priest Mark. If you had read that
novel you won’t ask this question. You can’t imagine it. These groups of boys are not created forcefully; they were there and their dreams were to get good education and to become somebody in life. It spite of caste conflict, police atrocities, and economical backwardness, they swim against the current to become somebody. I have tried to show how these forces are acting against the boys and ultimately they run away. All the ways are blocked by the police, by the Government, by the Non-Dalits. They have to break through and come up in life.

*Why do you silence the church when the people are suffering, fighting and killing?*

*Usually the church interferes and makes compromises?*

I don’t silence the church. The church’s nature is to be silent. It is a silent church. I don’t silence it. May be if it is for the upper class people they might have come, but not for dalits.

*Don’t you think oppression is suffered by all women both upper class and lower caste?*

I don’t say lower caste. But dalit women. Dalit women are discriminated thrice. Dalits… I would say class, gender and caste. But the other women - only class and gender.

*Negroes also face suppression. Don’t you think their lives are more miserable than the dalits?*

Yes. One way, yes. Becoming slaves…. It’s horrible. There is one positive thing I would like to say … is that they have come together because colour unites them. But in dalits it is very difficult to come together because they belong to different groups and there are many sub-groups. They are ridden with complexes…. So it is very difficult. I have spoken to black women when I went abroad. There is no
untouchability but here dalits are still untouchables. Tribals are not untouchables…

You see.

Are you engaged in activities for the uplift of Dalit women?

Yes, but not completely because I am a teacher. Through my writing, I do and I participate in different women’s activities whenever I get time. When invited, I go to schools and give talks to young girls. In my neighborhood, I concentrate on women; whenever we meet, I talk to them. I consciously do this kind of work.

The State and the Central Government have many schemes and funds to improve the lives of the dalits. Have they created a change in them? Are they making use of it?

It is not the point of making use of it. It is not implemented properly. There are a lot of schemes and funds but when they come from higher to lower level, like cone ice cream, everything is gone… We get only the last drop. Dalits are not benefited very much. They are not aware of some of the schemes or plans because most of them are illiterates. So that is another problem. If these problems are rectified, may be, there is a chance to improve.

Do you have any alliance with societies in foreign countries who work for the oppressed women?

Not continuously, but now and then. When I went for the Asian Women’s Society, I made use of the chance to expose the conditions of dalits; here too we have international meetings of Asian Women’s Writers. There, we discuss several topics like women’s oppression, liberation etc.

How far, do you think, the socio-political status of the dalits improved?

The consciousness about the importance of education has improved. We have to get education. Ambedkar’s teaching and values are widespread now. His slogan “Educate, Agitate and Organise” is the life-giving energetic weapons for us. We have
come to realize our own identities and own them up and we have found our enemies… (Laughs). There is a necessity to break through the system without breaking down ourselves.

*How do the other Tamil novelists receive your literary output?*

In the beginning, it was not well received because of the language and dialect I used. There was an argument about *Karukku* whether it was an autobiography or a novel or a document. Many remarked that I was using filthy words. But later they were not able to reject my work but accept it. Many well known writers gave very good review on it. Now there is no way for them to push it aside.

*You are an Avant-Garde writer flouting all conventions. You use the language of the paraya community. But in translation the novel loses the taste of this language?*

Yes, I agree. But without that how can this be known to others? So I should welcome these translations. I am very satisfied that Lakshmi Holmstorm has done a very good work because other translations have not come out properly. There are limitations for everything. I am happy that it has been done well; otherwise my works will not be recognized internationally.

*Are you trying to create a new structure?*

Yes, I think I can.

*Who are the other Tamil Dalit writers? I mean women writers?*

There are many poets…but novelists…er not many. Sivakami has published three novels and several short stories.

*How are you different from Sivakami?*

Her use of language is like everybody else’s. She uses the literary language for narration.
Are you satisfied with your present job as a teacher? You could help children even if you are not a nun?

Very much. If I were a nun, I would not be able to do this kind of work. I am more satisfied when I approach children and teach them because I am totally free and I am not in the clutches of a nun. As I am free, I could do a lot of work.

Has the situation changed in churches and convents?

Yes, the discrimination has changed, the forms have changed.

Discrimination has gone down to the churchyards?

To some extent. In certain places, in certain areas.

Did other writers inspire you?

Yes, when I was in college I was inspired by Jayakanthan. Later I was inspired by Ambai.

What is your next novel? What is its theme?

I started a work long back but has not completed. It is about the life of a single woman in society. It will highlight a woman’s struggles to live alone and the freedom of her decision to be on her own. I also plan to write about my experiences as a teacher. A teacher is privileged to have two kinds of experiences: the experience of teaching the learners and the experience of learning from them.

Are all your characters real and living?

Yes, I have changed the names of the places and persons. The characters exist today.

Your comment on Mayavati’s Dalit-Brahmin combination. Is it not a bold leap?

Of course. Yes, it is a good strategical approach that she has done. She is able to convince them and bring them together. She is very able and we must appreciate her.
Thanks for sending me your bio data and other details. But M’am you have not included all the awards and recognitions.

I know, but I feel it is not necessary to include all. There are numerous awards and invitations and I’m only happy to receive them because they are tokens of acceptance.

What is the present condition of dalit women in Tamil Nadu?

Not so encouraging. I told you illiteracy is a big problem … because of it they become withdrawn from society. Another problem is poverty. They refuse to come to school because they believe that they could not appease the hunger of their stomachs with lessons at school. Sometimes I feel that is true.

As a teacher, you could influence them?

To some extent. I go to the dalit colonies and meet the young girls and speak to them and try to help them. By the way what is the title of your thesis?

From Oppression to Optimism: A Self spun Philosophy. A comparative reading of the fictional works of Maya Angelou and Bama. I focus on the optimistic vision of the two writers.

I’m happy you write about optimism. Every one writes about the oppression and the impact it created in me. Of course, there is oppression and suffering but they often forget to see the optimism in my writing. It is not a complaint but people image us as writers of oppression. I believe in change, a positive change.

I have brought in resistance theory to analyse your writing.
I don’t know anything about resistance theory (laughs) but there is resistance against patriarchism, casteism, classism and gender discrimination.

*Yes Madam, I have written about it. What about your next novel? Have you completed it?*

Yes I have completed it and it will be published soon. I have titled it “*Manushī*” meaning woman.

*Out of curiosity I’m asking you, could you tell the theme of the novel?*

It is a single woman’s life. It can be taken as the second part of *Karukku.*

*Thank you Madam.*

Best wishes and thanks.