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Memo prepared by:

Hans Magnusson, Dalit Solidarity Network – Sweden

Sweden in solidarity with Dalit human rights

Narratives on oppression and liberation

In Sweden, as I assume is the case in most countries outside South Asia, people in general have little understanding of what caste is and means for peoples' daily lives. We are used to a social order where class determines the hierarchical positions of people. The working classes could in the late 19th century join in solidarity to fight the injustices induced by capitalism and the bourgeoisie classes. Then, this solidarity, national as well as international, in the late 20th century in the cause of the greediness following economic liberation and privatization has to a great extent vanished. The additional division of human beings based on caste has been unknown and mysterious. This, I believe, is the reason why people and governments all over the world – so also India – could walk the streets demonstrating and protesting against apartheid based on racism in South Africa in the 1970's, but find no incentives to observe the discrimination based on caste.

A way of understanding the social order, where caste for centuries has played a decisive role in setting boundaries for peoples' means of livelihood and relative status to each other is to listen to the narratives by the Dalits themselves. This autumn, in Sweden, Dalit narratives expressed in literature (*Dalit Sahitya*), poetry, art and activism constructively coincided to be publicly disclosed due to the contribution by people in different capacities. These narratives expose the untouchability, the denial and suppression of the Dalits, but also, which is as important, the power and capacity of the Dalits to create a new identity en route to full citizenship holding the right to humanity, human dignity and human rights.

At the Book Fair in Gothenburg in September two books were introduced in Swedish translation, *The story on my back – Dalits of India revolting against the caste system* (Ordfront) and *This land which was never mother to us* with poems by Dalit poets and pictures by the Dalit artist Savi Sawarkar. Editors for the two books are Eva-Maria Hardtmann and Vimal Thorat in cooperation with Tomas Löfström and Birgitta Wallin at the Indian Library. The same month it was announced that Ruth Manorama as one of four was rewarded the 2006 Right Livelihood Award. One more activity of importance in the efforts to extend public awareness of caste based discrimination that took place this autumn is the initiative by Dalit exchange students and others at the Stockholm University to arrange a street demonstration.

We learn from these events how writing, art and activism can work together to create a new identity expressing self respect and dignity for the Dalit community regarded as outcaste. The term 'dalit' attains a new meaning as in the words of Gangadhar Pantawane, founder of Asmitadarsh (Mirror of Identity), who according to Eleanor Zelliot has given the most obvious definition of the word 'dalit' the way the Dalits themselves take it to mean today. It is used in an entirely new context and stands for a radical rejection of the suppression made legitimate by religious notions.

Pantawane says: *To me, Dalit is not a caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of this country. He does not believe in God, Rebirth, Soul, Holy Books teaching separatism, Fate and Heaven because they have made him a slave. He does believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution.*

The Right Livelihood Awards – the price for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people

The Right Livelihood Award was established in 1980 on the initiative by Jakob von Uexkull. In its first 25 years, the Award has become one of the world's most respected prizes for personal courage, social transformation and ecological sustainability. The key aim of the RLA Foundation's work from now on will be making the stories of the award recipients known worldwide. Their projects of hope offer practical ways out of the growing crises facing us. To secure our common future, their positive alternatives must become the new mainstream.

The ideology of the Award is phrased in the following words:

“The idea of 'right livelihood' is an ancient one. It embodies the principle that each person should follow an honest occupation which fully respects other people and the natural world. It means being responsible for the consequences of our actions and taking only a fair share of the earth's resources. In every generation, there are groups of people and individuals around the globe who valiantly uphold these principles of right livelihood. They should be the stars in our human cosmos, but their work often entails personal sacrifice, being opposed by powerful forces around them. The Right Livelihood Award was established in 1980 to honour and support such people. It has become widely known as the 'Alternative Nobel Prize' and there are now over 100 laureates from 48 countries. This Award exists to strengthen the positive social forces that its recipients represent and to provide the support and inspiration needed to make them a model for the future. It has been said that if the Nobel Prizes reflected world concerns of the 20th century, the Right Livelihood Award should reflect those of the 21st” (www.rightlivelihood.org)

The four Right Livelihood Award 2006 laureates:



Francisco (Chico) Whitaker Ferreira, Brazil; Daniel Ellsberg, USA; Jakob von Uexkull, RLA Foundation; Ruth Manorama, India; Gloria Chvatal, Fernando Rendón, Gabriel Jaime Franco (International Poetry Festival of Medellin), Colombia

Ruth Manorama, India"...for her commitment over decades to achieve equality for Dalit women, building effective and committed women's organisations and working for their rights at national and international levels."



Photo: Right Livelihood Award

Daniel Ellsberg, USA "*...for putting peace and truth first, at considerable personal risk, and dedicating his life to helping free the world of the risk of nuclear war*



Daniel Ellsberg is a former Pentagon official, who followed his conscience and leaked secret information about the US government lies on the war in Vietnam - the so-called Pentagon papers. Ellsberg has ever since campaigned for peace and encouraged others to speak truth to power.

International Poetry Festival of Medellin, Colombia: Gloria Chvatal, Fernando Rendón, Gabriel Jaime Franco (Festival organisers), Ana Lucia Florez, "*...for showing how creativity, beauty, free expression and community can flourish amongst and overcome even deeply entrenched fear and violence.*"



Francisco ('Chico') Whitaker Ferreira, Brazil - (Honorary Award) *"...for a lifetime's dedicated work for social justice that has strengthened democracy in Brazil and helped give birth to the World Social Forum, showing that 'another world is possible'"*



Chico is a Roman Catholic activist, who has worked for democracy and against corruption throughout his life both at home and in exile. He is one of the key people behind the burgeoning World Social Forum.

Whitaker wrote for a French publication for the 2003 World Social Forum: *"Porto Alegre is not a 'summit of grassroots organizations' nor is it a world congress of a new international movement, but rather a free-form context designed for encounters to enable mutual recognition and learning, which respects all individualities. The Forum brings together delegates from social organisations that are striving the world over to build a world centred on people instead of on accumulating wealth. Today the Forum's organisers are certain they are on the right track to helping citizens rid themselves of their feeling of powerlessness"*.

A week of many events

It was a hectic Award-week from the day of arrival on December 5th to the day of going back on December 10th. There was one seminar, meeting, lecture, interview or social gathering after the other. The first two occurrences took place two hours after arriving at the hotel in Stockholm on the 5th, when Ruth Manorama met Joakim Stymne, State Secretary for International Development at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, and shortly after that the first interview with Alfred Travers. The subsequent days interviews with different media continued up to a total of seven. Media represented, among others, were Swedish Television (a three minutes presentation

on 6th evening), BBC World, Norwegian Radio and a cultural programme at Swedish Radio broadcasted a presentation about caste and the work of Ruth's.

A second meeting at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs took place on the 6th when Ruth Manorama held a speech and talked with 22 young persons attending the Swedish Government diplomat programme. At this occasion the video *I am a Dalit ...* was displayed.

Ruth participated in two seminars with all the Award recipients, one on the 6th in Stockholm arranged by the Centre Party International Foundation and one on the 7th evening in Uppsala arranged by Dag Hammarskjöld's Foundation.

A third seminar with Ruth Manorama alone took place on the 7th morning under the heading *Make gender a matter of power!* It was arranged by Sida in cooperation with the Dalit Solidarity Network - Sweden (DSN-S) and the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN), in which also Rikke Nohrlind participated.



Photo: Khalander

The Award week culminated with the ceremony on 8th December when the four laureates received their prizes. The 9th was a day for sightseeing and trying the taste of Swedish Christmas food. In between all these events there was time to meet with friends.

Ruth Manorama's award acceptance speech

[\(Read the complete speech as a separate pdf-file\)](#)



Photo: Right Livelihood Award
Jakob von Uexkull and Ruth Manorama

In her speech Ruth Manorama said she dedicated the award to the 200 million Dalit people through out the length and breadth of India, who are involved in this historical struggle for their rights and freedoms. Ruth Manorama referred to the heroic struggles that was undertaken by the great social reformers during the British rule and who were also able to identify the plight of the depressed classes, mentioning in particular Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. She emphasized that the award given to her is indeed a fitting recognition of the future empowerment in the social, economic and political life in India for the Dalit community and in particular the Dalit women.

Ruth ended her speech saying that “we as Dalit women pledge ourselves to liberate all our people from continuing bondage of poverty, deprivation, suffering, gender and other discrimination”, and quoted Bama (2005)

“To bounce like a ball that has been hit became my deepest desire,
and not to curl up and collapse because of the blow” .

The Gothenburg Book-Fair

As mentioned in the first paragraph of this memo two books about the Dalits in Swedish translation were introduced in September 2006 at the Book Fair in Gothenburg, *The story on my back – Dalits of India revolting against the caste system* (Ordfront) and *This land which was never mother to us* (Tranan) with poems by Dalit poets and arts by the Dalit artist Savi Sawarkar.

The cover of the first book pictures Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891 – 1956). The cover illustrates Ambedkar in various situations of his life, from the more personal occasions of birth and marriage to his official assignments as a lawyer, Law Minister in Jawaharlal Nehru’s first ministry and as chairman of the Constituent Assembly that wrote the Indian Constitution. Ambedkar makes up the reference point of the contributions of both books.

The two books provide a very comprehensive introduction of Ambedkar as the prominent and still inspiring leader of the Dalits and as a statesman, who in the process of writing the Constitutional proposition pointed at the importance of

implementing both political and social democracy. The publishing of the two books involves a welcome opportunity to introduce Ambedkar to a public that in the main know very little, if anything, about him. And, to our satisfaction the main daily in Sweden today published a review of the two books covering a full page. The review in our eyes makes justice to the role of Ambedkar in all his capacities.



- **The story on my back – Dalits of India revolting against the caste system**

The book is an anthology in three parts held together by the common theme of the Dalits. The first part contains short stories by eight Dalit authors, who depict their own and their parents' experiences of the caste system. Each story contains several narratives, about humiliation and abuses but also about anger, courage and resistance. The title of the book is taken from the story written by Omprakash Valmiki. When he at one occasion asks his teacher why one can read about the poverty of Dronacharya in the Hindu epos Mahabharata but there is no tells to be found about the poverty of the untouchables, the teacher gets furious and punishes him by beating him with a cane on his back, saying "I will surely write a book about you ... on your back". And, Valmiki says, "he wrote a book on my back with a series of sharp blows and there it is still to be read, line for line."

The second part deals with the historically, emotional and for the Dalits vital issue regarding separate electorates for the 'untouchables', elucidated through the polemic fraught with conflict between B. R. Ambedkar and M. K. Gandhi, which as a result of Gandhi's threat to fasten to death ended with the Poona Pact.

This controversy also reveals their different views on how to do away with caste based discrimination. Ambedkar saw the caste system so directly affiliated with Hinduism that it was impossible to break free from the inequality and discrimination without dissociating oneself from this religion. Gandhi on the other hand thought it possible to solve this problem within Hinduism.

The third part of the book introduces selected texts by activists from the beginning of the 1970's, when the Dalit Panthers published its manifest, up to the beginning of the 21st century, when the Dalit movement had become involved in the global justice movement. Among the authors are grassroots activists, journalists, academics,

politicians and theologians. The common cause for all of them is that they in the legacy of Ambedkar turn away from the caste system and Hinduism. The texts deals with different issues such as those concerning 'untouchability' and discrimination, the patriarchy and Dalit women as thrice alienated, the silence of indifference of the Indian nation and the surrounding world, enforced identity, political achievements, the reservation system for the depressed classes as a fraught of conflict, the Dalit movement as an effective lobby organization and the Dalits in the world of globalization.

- **This land which was never mother to us**



Savi Sawarkar; *Voice for the Voiceless*

In this book various poems by 17 Dalit poets and pictures by the Dalit artist Savi Sawarkar are linked together to portray the feeling of exclusion and alienation, the inhumane infamy that is the lot of the Dalits. But, the poems and the images also reflect over the causes to this invisibility, the awakening to awareness to see the rebel in oneself leading to the route of change; they convey a voice for the voiceless. The poems vary from rebellious and revolutionary poems and complementary poems to Ambedkar to lyric poems of love and affection.

The title of the book is based on a poem by Jyoti Lanjewar, 'Caves' (translated by Shanta Gokhale), that echoes the sentiments of many of the poets and sounds like a credo.

..I have been silent all these days
 listening to the voice of right and wrong
 But now I will fan the flames
 for human rights.
 How did we ever get to this place
 this land which was never mother to us?
 Which never gave us even
 the life of cats and dogs?
 I hold their unpardonable sins as witness
 and turn, here and now,

a rebel.

Savi Sawarkar was born in 1961 in Nagpur in a neighbourhood known as a stronghold for the Ambedkarian movement and the place Ambedkar had chosen for the mass conversion into Buddhism. Ambedkar's life and ideology of equality and social justice therefore became an inspiring source from the early days of Savi's life. He explains the prime mover for his way to express his solidarity with the 'untouchables' in this way: *My art and my ideas is an individual way to approach the social structure and religion in the Indian society and I feel challenged to start a revolution against Brahmanical aesthetics.*



Savi Sawarkar, *Untouchable in pune*

Street demonstration against caste based violence

In September this year a whole Dalit family was raped and murdered in Khairlanj village in Maharashtra, a state in eastern India following a dispute over land, or rather, upper caste people demanded the Dalit family to hand over a piece of their land to them. When they refused four members of the Dalit family were humiliated and brutally killed; only the father survived because he was not at home at the time of the incident. The mother and the seventeen year old daughter were stripped and forced to parade naked through the village and then gang raped until they died. The villagers tried to force one of the sons to have sex with his sister. When he refused they mutilated his genitals severely. Then the two sons were beaten to death with bicycle chains, axes and bullock-cart pokers.

This incidence made four Dalit students doing courses at the Stockholm University to take the initiative to mobilize a street demonstration against the violence and discrimination against the Dalits. The demonstration was supported by the Swedish network for solidarity with the Dalits. It took place on 1st December 2006. Twenty-seven people gathered at Sergels Torg in the centre of Stockholm and then marched to the Indian Embassy, where we handed over the Hague Declaration and an appeal

to the Indian government to take action to end the atrocities against the Dalit community.



Photo: Sheha Dicholkar



Photo: Sheha Dicholkar

The left banner reads: "According the United Nations conventions all people are born free and equal! Not so according to Hinduism!"



Photo: Sheha Dicholkar

The violation of Dalit human rights is one of the most serious and relentless human rights issues of our time – very much similar to that of apartheid in South Africa some time back – and which we strongly believe all nations and human rights organizations that claim to work for defending and implementing human rights must respond to accordingly.

The incident in the Khairlanji village is not the first of its kind and it neither to be the last. A 2006 study on untouchability in rural India covering 565 villages in eleven states has revealed the extent to which untouchability, officially banned under the Constitution of 1950, continues to be the daily reality for millions of Indians as the samples below indicate:

- 37.8 % of the villages – Dalits made to sit separately in government schools
- 27.6 % of the villages: Dalits prevented from entering police stations
- 33 % of the villages: health workers refuse to visit Dalit homes
- 14.4 % of the villages: Dalits not permitted to enter the panchayat building
- 48.4 % of the villages: Dalits denied access to water sources

According to official Indian crime statistics, averaged over the period 2001-2005:

- 27 atrocities against Dalits per day
- 13 Dalits murdered every week
- 5 Dalits homes or possessions burnt every week
- 6 Dalits kidnapped or abducted every week
- 3 Dalit women raped every day
- 11 Dalits beaten every day
- A crime committed against a Dalit every 18 minutes

Hans Magnusson