

# FOOTPRINTS ON THE SANDS OF TIME

Rasammah Bhupalan:  
A Life of Purpose

ARUNA GOPINATH



Kementerian Kebudayaan,  
Kesenian dan Warisan  
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Arkib Negara Malaysia



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Editor  
P.C. SHIVADAS



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**This book is dedicated to:**

**Nancy Gertrude Navarednam**  
*Mother and bedrock of the Navarednam family*

**Franklin Rajendram Bhupalan**  
*the tower of strength for Rasammah Bhupalan*

**Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose**  
*Head of Government and Prime Minister of Azad Hind (Free India)*  
*Commander-in-Chief, Indian National Army*

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MINISTER OF CULTURE, ARTS AND HERITAGE MALAYSIA

### Message

Throughout the centuries women have always made major contributions for the welfare and well-being of the family and home, the bedrock of all nations. The lives of our women witness a transformation with World War II and Japanese Occupation. The advent of Merdeka in 1957 under our beloved Tunku Abdul Rahman, Bapa Malaysia, saw greater reinforcement of the positive action of women in our country.

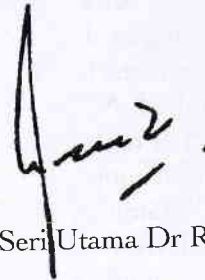
Having known Mrs Bhupalan since 1974 and in particular during the early years of PEMADAM (National Anti-Drug Association) which I led as its president for many years, this is one lady that must be counted. From anti-drug to women's rights, from education to social justice — she could be counted as a contributor. This book is thus timely.

The biography recognises the contribution of Rasammah Bhupalan who served the National Council of Women's Organisations, the Women Teachers' Union, Federation of Malaya, which played a leading role towards the successful achievement of equal pay for women, and in other various NGOs and National Committees.

The NCWO in its past 46 years had made outstanding achievements. Its multifaceted programmes and action have touched the spiritual, cultural, socio-economic, intellectual, legal and national developments. The Council throughout these past decades strenuously exerted its efforts to ensure the meaningful reality of the unity in our multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural nation. It must be congratulated for the indelible stamp of arduous leadership that it has left behind.

The Council, whilst it has worked with single-minded purpose on gender equality has cut across numerous barriers. It has ensured that all women, in particular our women from the lower income sector, be given and enjoy the respect and dignity which are their inalienable right. NCWO must continue to force a lead that women must be placed in the mainstream of the life of the nations as enunciated clearly in the 9th Malaysia Plan.

The biography of *Rawannah Bhupalan* acknowledge her leadership and the role she has played in NGOs which has brought major changes to the position of women. NCWO I am confident will continue to meet challenges which face our nation. Equality, Development, Unity and Peace will continue to be the on-going goals of our women as Malaysia marches forward to Vision 2020.



Datuk Seri Utama Dr Rais Yatim



## Foreword

Rasammah Bhupalan and I grew up in the same suburb of the tin-mining town of Ipoh before the Second World War. She was my favourite teacher's youngest daughter and we lived on the same street. Her mother, Mrs Navarednam, taught in the primary section of the Anderson School where I studied. My father was also in education and Mrs Navarednam thought well of my parents. She offered to keep a special eye on their only child and, for a couple of years, she took me to school every morning in her rickshaw. Rasammah would watch me come to her house each school morning and, from the start, she was someone I looked at with respect. I did not realise until later that I was only the first of many more who would, over the decades to come, learn to respect her for her leadership qualities.

This book outlines the reasons why she earned that respect at many levels. The most remarkable was her espousal of the cause of equal pay for women. She had begun by targeting the blatant inequality by which women teachers were paid and fought a long battle with the Malayan/ Malaysian bureaucracy on this issue. How she led women teachers throughout the country and persuaded her male equivalents in various teachers' organisations to join her cause and how by acting together they eventually won their struggle make a great story. Her dedication to the trade union movement in its efforts to better all kinds of workers, not least the women who are regularly taken for granted, reminds us that the movement has had a powerful and vital place in modern history. In our current era when the movement is less prominent, it is timely to underline the historic roles that some unions played in raising the position of labour and the standard of living of the working classes.

The few words here cannot do justice to Rasammah's active life and keen service to her country and compatriots. Let me highlight what are for me the two most moving features of her life. First is her devotion to what her parents stood for, the cause of education in the enhancement of the human spirit. She acknowledges their influence in guiding her always to be free from considerations of race, religion and class in whatever she did in all the schools she worked in. This is a key symbol of what Malaysia as a

country stands for in the world and her contributions here will long be appreciated for upholding that position unswervingly.

Secondly, she speaks with fervour of her youth as a supporter of the Indian independence movement and also demonstrates how that experience has actually made her better understand the complex nature of modern nationalism. If anything, it has sharpened her loyalty to Malaysia as her country of adoption. Hers is an unusual example of the immigrant dilemma that many Malaysians of non-bumiputra origins have had to face. That she has done so with deep feeling places on record how this can happen when a new country's ideals can win the confidence of its peoples of multi-origins. Her thoughts on her transformation will, I hope, inspire others to share the many-layered emotions that still underline the ongoing task of building the Malaysian nation.

When Rasammah and I lived in Green Town, a suburb of Ipoh that has now been transformed beyond recognition, the Kinta valley was one of the world's greatest centres of the tin mining industry. The town itself was then the leading city in Perak, the most important of the Malay states of British Malaya. It was a town in which the major communities, Malay, Chinese and Indian, together with smaller communities of other Asian peoples and various Europeans and Eurasians, lived and worked through a dramatic era of development from the end of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century. Rasammah knows as well as I do what underlies the following words by her sister Dr Nalla Tan:

*There in Green Town  
Hearts understood  
Warmth  
The simple pleasure  
Of giving and receiving  
Shared with kindred spirits...*

These words capture the mood that enveloped me when I read this story of Rasammah's purposeful life.

*Professor Emeritus Wang Gungwu  
Director  
East Asian Institute  
National University of Singapore*

## About the Book

History records the lives of both heroes and villains or that which has brought out the best or worst in them. But both have one thing in common — they provide lessons about good and bad for the rest of us.

This book is about the life of a Malaysian, who has acquitted herself on the good side of conduct. Rasammah Bhupalan was born and bred in this country and whose life has been a roller-coaster ride really, given her unflinching acceptance of the challenges she faced.

Even as a youngster she took on the mantle of leadership with her ingrained sense of right and wrong, fairness and justice she attributes to parental guidance. The chapter on her early years gives us an idea of the foundation upon which she placed her life.

The book as a whole records the difference she made not only to herself but those around her — at home, the workplace, non-governmental organisations and the political arena to boot.

It is also plain to see her achievements didn't come by chance. Courage, hard work, perseverance, a sense of purpose and commitment underscored her personality which biographer Aruna Gopinath has managed to draw out.

The war years and life in Ipoh, her hometown, provide glimpses of Rasammah's family history and school days. Her personal account of life as a soldier in the all-women Rani of Jansi Regiment will come as a surprise to many.

She was only 16 when she volunteered to join the regiment after hearing Subhas Chandra Bose speak on the Ipoh Club padang (years before this country's independence) urging Indians in this country to help free India from its colonial yoke.

The stint as a soldier served to steel her nerves and will for other battles she would face subsequently and which are recorded in different chapters tracing her life as a teacher, trade unionist and indefatigable fighter for women's rights.

There was no escaping politics for her. She was at the inaugural meeting of the Malaysian Indian Congress in 1946 but her outlook prevented her from becoming an ethnic-based party card-carrying member.

She speaks her mind on the side of Palestinians and has her own take on Singapore politics and the man who shaped it – former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew.

Much more recently she became a founding member of Party Keadilan and why is stated in the chapter on her political involvement.

But her calling was in teaching and she rose to the pinnacle of her profession by becoming principal while in government service and also after retirement when she moved on to the private Methodist College.

Her journey through schools is marked by her ability to motivate children to excel in their studies and co-curricular activities. She made a name for herself as a fund-raiser for school-building expansions.

The chapter on the Women's Teachers Union of which she was founder president traces her fight for equal pay for women teachers. There is record also of her bid to bring disparate teacher unions under one umbrella.

As advocate for the highest standards in the teaching profession she became the first Asian representative, and a woman at that, of a global teachers' organisation for two successive terms.

For her, travels abroad on union and non-governmental organisation work were no junkets but provided opportunity to gain new perspectives and ideas for the causes she espoused.

The chapter on her wholehearted involvement in the National Council of Women's Organisations will give readers an idea of the part she has played in furthering the cause of women on a broader front such as family and marriage laws and protection against exploitation and abuse.

Among the feathers in her cap is her success in realising her dream of an opportunity centre for women, under the aegis of the Young Women's Christian Association, to find self-respect through training for gainful occupations.

The historical context of the book has a value of its own and adds to what has gone into the making of this nation that otherwise might have gone unrecorded.

The rounding off comes as a chapter Rasammah also penned herself about the pivotal role her understanding husband and family played in everything she has been able to accomplish.

*P.C. Shivadas*  
*Editor*