

Mahakavi Subramania Bharati and Pondicherry

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It happened on a day in the last century. The guards in a zoo were on full alert. All the visitors to the zoo were held back from a cage wherein a newly trapped hungry lion stalked. Suddenly and unexpectedly, a short and lean man emerged from the crowd and dashed towards the cage; he quickly clasped its rails and thrust his head between them. Stunned, the ferocious beast glared at the intruder, then let out a thunderous roar as it charged at him. But unperturbed the man remained: standing, he stared into the eyes of the beast as though to burn holes through them. A moment of silence followed. The tense stillness was then shattered when he, without warning, burst into song. By the time he finished singing, all to the amazement of the spectators, the lion behaved like a cat. "You may be king of the forest," said the man, "but remember, I am king of the poets." Thus goes a true chronicle recorded in the visitors' notebook at Trivandrum Zoo, Kerala, in South India.

The lion-tamer was Subramania Bharati, widely acclaimed throughout the subcontinent as the poet who pioneered a new epoch of prosody at the turn of the century. His songs were at once soothing and provocative, capable, admirers claim, both of taming the wildest animal and arousing a phlegmatic populace to fight against social injustices propagated by British colonizers. Holding aloft the banner of an independent India, he sang of a utopia wherein men and women were equal and all traces of casteism eradicated. It was a religion of love that integrated the lowliest with the most exalted, the poorest with the richest. Enshrined now in the galaxy of poet-patriots, Bharati continues to elicit adoration from his countrymen.

Subramania was born on Dec, 11, 1882, in the South Indian principality of Ettayapuram (now a part of Tamilnadu), a region known for its artistic and cultural achievements. Young Subramania's love for poetry and music was nurtured by his grandfather, with whom the young boy spent endless hours, especially after his mother died. At the tender age of 11, he earned the coveted title "Bharati," conferred upon him by the learned courtiers of Ettayapuram for his poetic flair and clever repartee. Bharati means "Saraswati" – the Hindu goddess of knowledge and wisdom. Indeed, it seems to many as though the child prodigy were tutored by the deity Herself. When he was 15, his father married him off to a child wife by the name of Chellamma, eight years his junior. The next year, his father died a pauper as his textile mill folded. The orphan Bharati was left in the custody of an aunt in Benares (now Varanasi), where he stayed for

two years.

While in Benaras, he studied Sanskrit, Hindi and English. The Hindu holy city appealed to Bharati's poetic sensibilities. Fascinated with the charming scenery of the River Ganges, he was often seen in a long coat strolling along its banks. The moustache that he grew symbolized his coming of age.

In 1901, Bharati returned to his native principality and found a job as court poet to the Raja of Ettayapuram, but that was not the kind of work he really wanted. A few years later he left for a teaching post at a secondary school, where he stayed for several months only. He then met G. Subramania Iyer, editor of the leading Tamil newspaper *Swadesamitran*, and became his right-hand man at the journal. During this period, he attentively observed India's political scene and expressed support for the nationalists. The partition of Bengal in 1905, heavily-handedly executed by British viceroy in India, Lord Curzon, sparked nationwide resentment against foreign rule. One result was the transformation of the Indian Nationalist Congress from a middle-class pressure group into a mass movement. Bharati showed up at an All India Congress session at Benares, and on his return journey, he stopped at Calcutta, where he met Sister Nivedita, a disciple of leading Hindu spiritualist and reformer Swami Vivekananda who fanned Bharati's patriotic flame to white heat.

Being a moderate newspaper, however, *Swadesamitran* could not publish Bharati's inflammatory commentary. Therefore, when offered the editorship of the revolutionary Tamil Weekly *India*, launched in 1906, he accepted the job without hesitation, though he simultaneously stayed with *Swadesamitran* for another year. Soon the authorities took repressive measures to clamp down on all rebellious publications. The publisher of *India* was arrested in 1908, and Bharati had to flee to the French ruled territory of Pondicherry.

There is much to brag about the Pondicherry of today. Pondicherry may be just a dot on the map of India. Yet it has found its way to the tourist map of the world. Thanks to Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville. The fact that people speaking 55 different languages reside here and that Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, French and English are the five official languages certainly raises eyebrows. In spite of this linguistic plethora there is no confusion but absolute harmony. Call it unity in diversity. Festivals are recurrent here; people from all religions regardless of their caste and creed join the celebrations, and thereby spread a festive mood all around. In fact, there is no place in India where religious harmony is so natural as is seen in Pondicherry. The region that saw the confluence of different peoples has grown into a repository of a very high standard of art and culture. As it stands today, Pondicherry is a blend of the Occident and the Orient.

The French archaeologist Prof. Jouveau Dubreuil used to say that he had reasons to believe that the Ashram of Agastya was situated on the very spot where stands today the main building of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. To Sri Aurobindo, one-time Nationalist leader, Pondicherry was

something more than a political asylum. It was here he did his Integral Yoga and wrote his literary and philosophical works. With the advent of the French mystic, Madame Mirra Richard, later known as the Mother, who had followed the same spiritual path on her own, Sri Aurobindo started his Ashram to train others in his comprehensive and world accepting system of spirituality. The Samadhi that encloses the mortal remains of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, in the premises of the Ashram, is always decorated with a wide variety of flowers in charming patterns. Thousands of devotees visit this holy place every day. During the darshan days of the Ashram, the entire city is packed with pilgrims from all parts of the globe. The Ashram, a mini-township with its sprawling estate of 120 buildings, hums with activities, as work is an offering by the ashramites to the divine.

Not far from the Northern border of Pondicherry is Auroville. The foundation was laid on February 28, 1968, when a boy and a girl, representing each of the 124 countries of the world, poured a handful of their native soil into a concrete lotus, symbolic of their support for the project. The purpose of Auroville is to realize human unity. The late Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, in her message said: "Pondicherry was Sri Aurobindo's place of political exile and spiritual unfolding. His effulgent message radiated to different parts of the world from Pondicherry. It is appropriate that seekers of enlightenment from various lands should found a new city there bearing Sri Aurobindo's name. It is an exciting project for understanding the environmental needs for man's spiritual growth". This City of Dawn, as its name Auroville signifies, is expected on completion to accommodate 50,000 residents, the optimum population for harmonious urban development.

"Auroville wants to be a universal town where men and women of all countries are able to live in peace and progressive harmony" – such was the Mother's vision of it. The time is ripening to make the Ashram and Auroville examples to the world of a new life in which men will realize their souls and find no use for their weapons with which they are fighting today.

That much for the Pondicherry of today. More is said in my two books *A Concise History of Pondicherry* and *Glimpses of Pondicherry*. But the Pondicherry that gave refuge to Subramania Bharati was quite different from what it is today. That was the time when the French and the British were at loggerheads. While the whole of Tamilnadu was under the thumb of the British, just two specks in Tamilnadu – Pondicherry and Karaikal—were under the command of the French. Political rivalry, caste politics and religious fanaticism were on the rise.

To escape from the tightening net of the British Government, Mahakavi Subramania Bharati reached Pondicherry in 1908 and spent ten years as a political refugee in this peace loving land. He lived here under the patronage of Kavalai Kannan, Swaminatha Dikshidar and Sundaresa Iyer, Sankara Chettiar, Ponnu Murugesapillai – all admirers of Bharati.

Kuppusamy Iyengar looked after the new political refugee in Pondicherry for a time. Very soon the patriotic Mandayam brothers,

Tirumalachariar and Srinivasachariar, who launched a new Tamil weekly, *India* in 1906 with the main purpose of providing a free outlet for Bharati's flaming words, shifted to Pondicherry from Madras and continued publishing *India* from here.

After moving from British India to French India, Bharati felt that he was no more in shackles and that his pen could flow freely. Every piece he wrote in his weekly was satirical to the core. The British, the spineless moderates in politics and the self-centred Indians who still kept out of the freedom struggle were the targets of his attack. The weekly favoured nationalism, welfare of women and mass education. In every issue what actually took the cake was the cartoon on the cover page. In the history of Tamil journalism, *India* brought out every Saturday, was the first to enjoy cartoons. It is said that every cartoon was drawn under the able guidance of Bharati. Those cartoons spoke in fitting terms of the policy of the journal.

Bharati's deep involvement in Indian politics gave him the power and strength to voice his opinions boldly. *India* began to enjoy a tremendous popularity. The public loved the cartoons so much that they cut the page, pasted it on a cardboard and displayed it in front of their houses. The British took several measures to stop the printing of the journal. But all such efforts publicised the journal all the more. The French Government in Pondicherry said 'no' to the request made by the British to ban the journal. It was during his period of stay in Pondicherry (1908 – 1918), Bharati wrote the best of his poetical works like *Panchali Sabatham*, *Kuyil Paattu* and *Kannan Paattu*. These three verse masterpieces have a common theme: the gloom of tyranny is dissipated at the dawn of India's emancipation, when Panchali's vow is realized, the reigning despot is dethroned in favour of Dharma Rajyam. *Kannan Paattu*, however, differs in that it harmonizes rebellious zeal with a love for the arts. While his people are impatient for war, King Kannan indulges himself in music and dance. But when the time to fight comes he takes up arms to rid his kingdom of tyrants so that it can continue to prosper. *Kuyil Paattu* is an idyllic romance that juxtaposes political hypocrisy with an affectionate relationship among the *Kuyil* (nightingale). *Kurangu* (monkey) and *maadu* (bull).

This communion among all creatures is a recurring motif in Bharati's oeuvre. He believes:

The crows and sparrows are our clan | The seas and hills are our kin
We behold none but ourselves | Wherever we turn our eyes.

By extension, women should be “liberated” and casteism eliminated in the Indian utopia that he envisaged. “All citizens without any exception are Kings of India,” he insists. Though he might seem idealistic, Bharati also offers specific proposals for the implementation of this ideas. He writes:

“Let us walk amidst the silver snow-clad mountains,
while our ships sail all the western seas.

Let us bridge the gaping gulfs and
 harness the turbulent waters of Bengal to nourish our crops.
 We shall delve deep into the land and
 coax the hidden treasures of the earth
 to bring us prosperity.
 We shall dive deep into the southern seas and
 fish for pearls as bright as wisdom.
 Let us exchange the tasty wheat
 grown on the banks of the Ganges
 for the tender betel leaves of the banks of the Cauveri.”

Bharati's friendship with a like-minded political refugee-cum-intellectual, Sri Aurobindo, made him write his essays in English for the monthly journal, *Arya*, edited by the latter. Sri Aurobindo for his part learnt the Tamil language and translated excerpts from Tamil Classical literature with the help of his poet-friend. Both of them being well versed in the Sanskrit language, they joined their heads for the study of the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*. The result was the birth of *Vachana Kavithaigal* in Tamil, all of which I have translated into English and gathered between covers under the title *The Sun and the Stars*. These prose poems of Subramania Bharati liberate Tamil Literature from the tyranny of prosody. The influence of Walt Whitman's poetry made him enrich Tamil Literature with soulful poetry. His prose poems pulsate with life and are a real feast for the meditative readers. Here is a small chunk from his prose poems, to serve as a sampler of Bharati's reflections on 'Wind':

Look at the ant. How tiny in size! How well its legs, hands, mouth and stomach are made and set aptly in its body!
 Who did it? Who else but Mahashakti! Every part of the ant has its own function to perform. The ant eats. It takes rest. It makes love and brings forth offspring. It runs about and tireless are its searches. It fights and safeguards its territory from its foes. And it is the wind who supports the ant for all its actions.
 Mahashakti, backed by the wind, sports with lives. We sing songs in praise of the wind. It is the courage in our wisdom and it becomes in our hearts our likes and dislikes, and in our soul, the soul itself. We know and we do not know its actions in the outside world. Long live the God of Wind.

That is the power of Bharati's prose poems. Bharati found a soul mate in Sri Aurobindo. In those days the elites of Pondicherry thronged to listen to Sri Aurobindo's 'Sat Sang' every evening. While many left after the spiritual discourse, a few intimate ones stayed back with the Yogi for their evening talks. Bharati never missed such an opportunity. From spirituality to philosophy, from literature to psychology, from sex to super consciousness, from sociology to what not...their discussions meandered and branched out and the two literary giants thereby enriched each other.

Sri Aurobindo called Bharati as 'Ba' and Bharati called Sri Aurobindo as 'Ghosh'. Such was their intimacy. It would be appropriate to record here

an interesting episode that took place in Sri Aurobindo's house. One day after the evening talks, when everybody left, Sri Aurobindo found his shoes missing. It took little time for him to guess who had walked away with them. He pulled out his letter pad and pen and began writing a letter to his brother Barin in Calcutta: I am in need of a pair of shoes very urgently, for Bharati has bagged the one you have sent me a few days ago. His need is greater than mine. It was only during this period, Bharati wrote his Tamil short stories, the well-known among them being 'Aaril Oru Pangu' meaning 'One-Sixth'. He wrote this story to tell the world of his keen interest in the Harijan upliftment. R. Kanagalingam of Pondicherry, an ardent admirer and disciple of Bharati had the good fortune of moving closely with his master at the various stages of his life. Bharathi adorned this Dalit with the Sacred Thread and told him: "You are a Brahmin hereafter. Never remove that sacred thread I have bestowed on you. If any high caste Hindu asks you who gave the courage to wear the thread, tell him sternly, 'It was my guru, Bharati'. Be bold and never bend down your head."

R. Kanagalingam was not the only Dalit in Pondicherry to be blessed with the sacred thread. Bharati performed the sacred thread rites to Kanagalingam's friend, Nagalingam too. It is also very heartening to note that this noble brahmin conducted a feast in his house for five Harijans, when in 1914 these five Indo-French youths were sent on compulsory military service to the first world war. One can but only envy the bold and courageous act of Bharati to conduct a feast for the five at his residence in Easwaran Dharmaraja Koil Street, at a time when caste politics was very much in the air, and Pondicherry was never second by any means, to any other orthodox State, in observing caste differences. Even in those days, Bharati imbibed the revolutionary ideal of totally uprooting caste differences. He was a revolutionary to the core. And to say that Bharati buried all caste distinctions and paved way for the religious harmony prevailing in Pondicherry today can never be an exaggeration.

Two of the five Dalits to whom Bharati hosted the rebellious party were closely associated with the Mahakavi. One of them was Antoine Arloque from whom he learnt the French National songs. James Samuel was the other young man who accompanied Bharati on the violin, during his singing. Bharati, as reported by his listeners, sang the French National anthem, like a native Frenchman. Perfect was his French accent.

Pondicherry not only gave the Mahakavi a new life but boosted his career as well for he had patrons, friends, and admirers in plenty. He made a small coterie of disciples too. Kanaka Subburathinam who later became famous as Bharatidasan, was the chief of his disciples.

In Pondicherry Bharati had a guru too. He was short statured. Dark was his complexion. His head was too small for his well built body. He wore nothing but a towel that rarely reached his knee. People called him Kullasamy (a dwarf saint). Once it so happened that the disciples of Sri Aurobindo made fun of this saint who passed for a comic figure in their eyes. Sri Aurobindo chastised the ignoramuses and told them that the

short man was no ordinary man. He further related to them how he helped Sri Aurobindo when the latter experienced some difficulty with his divine aspiration. "He appeared before me, upturned a goblet kept before me, than turned it back to its proper position and disappeared very fast. His action helped me in finding out a solution to my persisting problem".

That was the greatness of Kullasamy, revered by eminent men. Bharati chose him as his guru. Readers may ask 'What about Sister Nivedita?' She was only Bharati's political guru. But Kullasamy was the poet's friend, philosopher and guide. In his long poem 'Bharati Arupatharu' (Bharati Sixty Six) Bharati showers encomiums on four of his friends – Kullasamy, Govindasamy, Yazhpanathusamy and Kuvalai Kannan, all of them Pondicherrians, who became friendly with the poet after his self-imposed exile.

In this poem Bharati confesses that he had a darshan of Kullasamy at Rajarama Iyer's house in Easwaran Dharmaraja koil Street and became a realized soul after listening to his 'Gnanopadesh'. Kullasamy looked like a fifty-five or sixty year old. But people believed that he had already crossed one hundred.

During his last days in Pondicherry, Bharati's life was not smooth and he had to face one family problem or the other. In order to escape from such clutches, Bharati resorted to drugs. And the poet's other friends V.V.S Iyer and Parali Su Nellaippan invariably said that Bharati's addiction to drugs was the result of his friendship of Kullasamy. Bharati's stay in Pondicherry turned out to be the most creative period in his lifetime. The government of Pondicherry has not only honoured Bharati with a statue and named the Government Park after him, but also preserved as a national monument his house in Easwararan Dharmaraja Koil Street, where he lived and preached the religion of love.

Finally Bharati tired of his exile in Pondicherry, left for his homeland in 1918. He died on Sept 12, 1921 unable to recover from a shock. It is ironic that the poet who sang of equality among all creatures and fearlessly tamed the king of the forest should be fatally struck by the trunk of an elephant at Parthasarathy Temple, Triplicane, Madras. He was feeding the animal with coconut and bananas when it, excited at the sight of food, pushed the poet on to the ground. As if embarrassed by its own action, the elephant stood still in front of his victim. Though a friend of Bharati rushed to the poet's rescue almost immediately, the poet never recovered from the shock. Since Bharati's death, distinguished writers have paid him tribute. Among them was poet-politician Sarojini Naidu (1879 – 1949), known as the "Nightingale of India." She remarked "Poets like Bharati cannot be counted as the treasure of any province. He is entitled by his genius and his work to rank among those who have transcended all limitation of race, languages and continent and have become the universal possession of mankind."

