



Patriotic and Devotional Poetry of Subramania Bharati

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Abstract

(It is an attempt to show how Subramania Bharati's genius was essentially lyrical. He wrote ceaselessly on Man, God and Nature. For him, Nationalism without social reform was like the shell without the kernel. The strident power of his songs alone woke up millions of Indians from their slumber of sloth and complacency. He kindled the souls of men and women by the million to a more passionate love of Freedom and a richer dedication to the service of the country. He entered into the spirit of Shakti-tattva, the identification of Shakti or the Divine Mother with the universal energizing Creatrix.

Key Words: Patriotism, Mother India, poise of wisdom

Introduction

The poet was born at Ettayapuram in Tamilnadu on 11th December, 1882. Subramania as a precocious boy, began composing verses in Tamil, was crowned with the title 'Bharati' for his felicity of improvisation. In Hindu College at Tirunelveli, he was initiated into the ineluctable charms of English poetry, especially Romantic Poetry, although his commitment was to Tamil. He often astonished his teachers and fellow students with impromptu verses on various occasions. He tried to master the difficult prosodic technique of Tamil poetry. When his father died, he went to Benares to stay with his uncle Krishna Sivan. He enrolled himself at the Central Hindu College at Benares and passed the entrance exam of the Allahabad University and in the process mastered Sanskrit, Hindi and English in an incredibly short time. When he returned from Allahabad to his native place Ettayapuram, he had launched the new poetry – "at once radiantly autochthonous and bracingly modern" in Dr.K.R.Srinivas Iyengar's words – had been launched into the world by the genius of this born poet warming up to the compulsions of the Time Spirit.

Then the circumstances made him to work for a while in 1904 as a Tamil Pandit at the Setupati High School at Madurai. Fortunately, he impressed the formidable G.Subramania Iyer, the Editor of the Madras Tamil Daily paper "Swadesa Mitran" and during a chance meeting became the Assistant Editor of the paper. This event was to have far-reaching consequences as it involved Bharati in extremist nationalist politics with all the predictable consequences of fame, hardship and exile. On the other hand, his active involvement in politics, gave Bharati a new sweep of comprehension and his journalistic writings acquired an edged power that set his readers' hearts aflame, while his poetic utterances glowed with a steely strength and purity and shine, a sudden tempestuous outflow from the nationalist 'mantra', "Bandemataram".

Then he was appointed as Editor of the monthly journal, "Chakravarthini", which offered a free outlet for his more serious and more spontaneous efforts. Then he published a translation of Bankin Chandra's celebrated song "Bande Mataram", with an explanatory introduction. And when he became the Editor of "India", the weekly paper of Extremist Party, Bharati, the poet and



social reformer became also the apostle of extremist nationalism. His first published book of poems, "Songs of Freedom" (1908) was having an incendiary effect on the people's consciousness and sensibility. Within a period of four years of daily journalism and political involvement, he had been hailed as the poet of patriotism and prophet of nationalism. As an electrifying political journalist, he was not only the fiery propagandist of the national gospel; he was also the uncompromising critic of the alien bureaucracy.

In this way, he made his mark as a patriot, journalist, social reformer and poet. He belongs to the golden years of India's political and literary renaissance. It was an age of heroes in almost every walk of life. As a social reformer, Bharati boldly stationed himself undaunted at the centre of the field of action and poured out his poems of patriotic idealism and visionary power, exhorting his countrymen to fight for their freedom, redeem the weak and the down-trodden and take a proper pride in their native speech and their national heritage. His confident hope was the deliverance of India and all mankind from their present ills and budget of discontents, and also

the ultimate divinisation of human life upon the earth. Thus his poetry is quintessentially spiritual.

Poet of Freedom and Patriotism

The patriotic poetry of Bharati must needs take precedence in any survey of his poetry. It was as a 'freedom poet' that he won instant popularity and established rapport with the people of India especially Tamil Nadu. It can hardly be disputed that Bharati's patriotic poetry has a permanent place in the saga of the Independence struggle, for the strident power of his songs alone woke up millions of Indians from their slumber of sloth and complacency. As Sarojini Naidu said in 1947, soon after the coming of Independence, it was Bharati who "kindled the souls of men and women by the million to a more passionate love of Freedom and a richer dedication to the service of the country."

The astonishing thing about his poems is that they are not 'dated' at all. Everywhere Bharati transcends the mere 'now', and gathers his sweep of imaginative vision all our yesterdays and the unborn tomorrows as well. To call these songs political or propagandist poetry is surely off the mark: freedom in Bharati's songs is an elemental thirst, a basic aspiration and a primary need of the human soul:

When will this thirst for freedom slake?
When will our love of slavery die?
When our Mother's will fetters break?
When will our tribulations cease?

Freedom for Bharati meant freedom for a living concept of India, not the inert geographical area. Bharat as the Mother was no mere metaphor, but an article of religious faith, an experiential reality. Bharati had a high opinion of Whitman, and felt not only attracted to his

masculine verse without metre or rhyme, but also to its primordial force and precipitancy, and its urgent concern with the varieties of common humanity. As Whitman said in 'I Hear America Singing':



I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong.
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plant or beam
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work or leaves off work...

So too, in poem after poem, Bharati described the varied, vast, bounteous land of India, and the many races that mingle to give its inhabitants a variegated complexity of accomplishments and charter. For Bharati, India is Bharat the Mother who struggles, hopes, despairs and will ultimately master and transcend the current budget of limitations. This mother is ageless, ever young; she is sworn to righteousness, and can attain the poise of Yoga; she is a demoness in revenge, and a lover of poetry and music; she glows in freedom's image, and she is the lighthouse of the Spirit for the whole world. Bharati's vision dwells not alone in the broader outlines, but also, like Whitman's, on the personal and the particular. The warriors of Tamilnadu and Andhra, the valorous Rajputs, the indomitable Mahrattas, the self-sacrificing Tulus, these at their best have been half-divine. With such examples to inspire, endless indeed were the unfolding future possibilities, for brawn and brain would together create a great New India:

Umbrellas and implements of farming:
gunny bags strong and iron nails:
quick-moving vehicles of all kinds:
earth-shaking ships: we'll make them all!

And yet, before the people could turn to the task of creating such a new world, the country's freedom had to be won first. Freedom was the golden bough, it had to be grown by sacrificing – if need be – everything else. The thrilled delight of freedom raged in Bharati's blood, and through his songs he transmitted it to everybody. Freedom, then, had first to be fought for and won – then cherished and safeguarded with anxious care:

We fed with the ghee of our thoughts
this beautiful lamp
in our soul's sanctuary;
can we see it extinguished now?

The true patriot will not be daunted by difficulties and setbacks, but strive unmindful of the sacrifices demanded by the cause:

Although divorced from the joys of the hearth
and consigned to dungeons dark;
although forced to exchange
a time of cheer for days of gloom;
although ten million troubles raged
to consume me entire;
Freedom! Mother! I shall not forget
To worship you.

Bharati was not, of course, unmindful of the conditions that had to be established if freedom was to come and endure. But what he saw actually about him greatly depressed him: a country with hoary traditions, but infested with poisonous



superstitions; a people endowed with native bravery, but now afflicted with fear and *tamasic* indifference; a history of self-sacrifice and resignation, but lately disfigured by the play of avarice and pettiness; a land united by Nature from Himalayas in the North to Kanya Kumari in the South, but now fragmented by race, caste, creed and language. Bharati could hardly fail to castigate such falsity, such fear, such folly:

The heart can stand this no more –
look at these will-less folk,
frightened, ah! There's nothing
they do not fear.
Imagining ghosts they cry –
on this tree, in that tank!
It's lurking here, they shout.
Of their own fears they die of terror.

In many lyrics, Bharati spoke scathingly of the reigning ills, and in 'Bharat the Past' his frustration and anger blaze forth against current disabilities and discontents, perversions and prevarications. On the other hand, 'Bharat Dying and Resurgent Bharat' is a paean in praise of the future citizen who will arise like the phoenix from the flames of the present:

Come, come you with the shining eyes,
Come, come you with the steely heart;
Come, come you with honeyed speech,
Come, broad-shouldered Titan, come!

It was in some of the political leaders of his time – Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, V.O.Chidambaram Pillai, Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi and others – that Bharati saw clear glimpses of the race of future Indians with the glow of freedom in their eyes and the poise of wisdom in their lives. While lyrics in praise of Dadabhai Naoroji, Tilak, Lajpat Rai and Chidambaram Pillai bring out their patriotism and readiness for sacrifice, the advent of Mahatma Gandhi gives the poet the assurance of victory. Besides, in a pair of heroic poems, Bharati placed before his countrymen two shining examples of Indian manhood: Chatrapati Shivaji and Guru Govind Singh. In the former, Shivaji's powerful exhortation to his army is a call to action which is touched with universality, while the 'Guru Govind' poem is a veritable grammar of total loyalty and supreme self-sacrifice.

When Bharti was in Pondicherry, he came into fruitful contact with French poetry and he admired in particular La Marseillaise, which he translated into Tamil verse. As a political journalist, Bharati had to comment on freedom movements in foreign countries, and these interests were crystallized in the poems on Belgium and Russia, and the well-known poem on Mazzini's oath before the Association of Young Italy to free the country from alien rule. In fact, 'Mazzini's Oath' can be read as Bharati himself taking an oath to free his own motherland from the burden of British rule:

My wealth, body, soul itself
I cede to 'Youth Association'
founded for patriots
determined like myself.
Our *dharma* will unify



The motherland, make it free,
independent of others,
and a Republic now! . . .
I shall make my people
realize for their good
unity is the sole means
to achieve our Goal;
righteousness the only way
to make victory endure.
I shall see that the alien
rules my land no more.

Certainly, Bharati's vision extended beyond the confines of India. While he was thus in no sense a parochial figure inspired by narrow loyalties of region or language, it was nevertheless inevitable that some of his finest songs should be in praise of his language and his homeland and his people. Rajaji (Rajagopalachari) has rightly remarked that Bharati was Agastya incarnate, who gave us Tamil afresh. Sage Agastya of legend created Tamil long ages ago in the first instance, Bharati re-created it in the image of the modern world, and taught it a virile modern idiom. In just a few verses, Bharati memorably limns Tamil Nadu and recalls her imperishable heritage:

As I think of my dear Tamil Nadu,
sweet honey flows in my ears;
a new strength charges my breath
and I sing of my ancestral land ...
Kaveri, Palar, the south Pennar,
the Gaigai, Tambravarni –
such perennial rivers make the land
an emerald landscape ...
The Cape is in eternal trance
edging the blue seas;
from there to Venkata Hill
the spread of Tamil glory . . .
Her fame rose sky-high
with Valluvar's advent –
and the Epic of the Ankle
sets hearts aflame.

But with all this love for his land, people and culture, Bharati was no chauvinist, for Tamil was but one of the splendid instruments Mother Bharat used for her self-expression, and the land of the Tamils too was not more than an integral important part of Bharat's manifold puissance and majesty. In such a poem as 'Bharat our Land'-

The mighty Himavant is ours –
there's no equal anywhere on earth;
the generous Ganga is ours –
which other river can match her grace?

Bharati is engaged in projecting India as a whole before our consciousness, a unified vision of India in all her physical beauty and grandeur, and with all her intellectual



and spiritual qualities and powers. This is the reason why Bharati's poetry becomes the authentic voice of India speaking to the whole world. For a pluralistic country like India so fatally prone to cultivate narrow loyalties based on religion, caste, sect, region or language, this projection of the physical, intellectual and spiritual power and personality of United India, is perhaps Bharati's greatest contribution as our poet of patriotism.

His Devotional Poetry

Bharati was a singer with many voices. There was the secular poet of patriotism, there was the devotional poet, there was the epic and dramatic poet, there was the spiritual explorer and there was the pure poet of simple joys and familiar things – example of ray of the moon, a sparrow's twitter or the swing of rope. But next only to his patriotic poetry, it is for his devotional poems that Bharati is universally celebrated. These are about seventy in number, to which may be added the twenty-five 'knowledge hymns'. Many of these have been set to music and popularized by accomplished musicians, and are now part of the popular culture of Tamil Nadu.

Throughout his life, Bharati delighted in the Puranic lore of India and he was an intense *bhakta* as well. He was conscious of the spirit in its diverse manifestations and *vibhutis*. Avoiding mere bigotry, he sang melodiously the praises of Ganapati, Kartikeya, Rama and Krishna – as also of Allah and Jesus Christ. His most sustained devotional poem, however, is dedicated to the Manakkula Vinayakar at Pondicherry. It is the cry of a devotee in distress, which is at the same time the ecstatic thanksgiving of a soul whom no sorrow can daunt or overwhelm. This extraordinary poem is a garland stung with verses in four different metres – *venba*, *kalithurai*, *virutham* and *ahaval* – following one another in cycle after cycle. His fond praises of the deity are frequently interspersed with the lights of the higher knowledge as under:

Duty be this:
self-control,
removing others' sorrows,
praying for others' welfare:
Praising that one God-
Vinayaka, Muruga with the lance,
Narayana, Siva austere –
and known elsewhere
as Allah, Jehovah.

Difficulties do not dampen his spirits, for Bharati sees his path clearly. "My work is poetry, service to the Motherland, and eternal vigilance", Bharati assures Vinayaka:

I have sought guidance
at your holy feet
to rule my heart,
and live in gladness
with sun-lit
Knowledge.

"Love is the greatest penance", says Bharati, and he almost laughs at the grinning fates:

No fear, no death by water:



no shame, no body's trembling;
no sin no hiding;
we shall nothing fear.
Let the earth quake, yet fear not!
Let the sea boil and rise, be not afraid!
We shall fear none and nothing
nor place nor time.
The sky is here, and the moon too;
The Sun, wind and water,
fire, earth, the moon and stars;
We have body, life and mind,
food for life and maids to love,
songs to hear, and the world to see
And Ganapati's name to chant –
eternal these ...

Apart from the Krishna songs in the sequence *Kannan Pattu*, Bharati wrote occasional verses on Krishna whom he characterised as the fount of knowledge, honey of life and the seed within:

When will you rid me
of this sense of insignificance?
How shall I grow one with you
O Govinda,
only seeing you
in air, bird, tree,
clouds, fields,
the immense sky,
the deep ocean,
and on earth
and in my home?

The doubling of private poverty with his passionate love of freedom and poetry led Bharati to indite 'Three Loves' in which he evokes Saraswati, Lakshmi and Kali. He had fallen in love with Saraswati the goddess of knowledge as a child, and this love had taken entire possession of him:

Have I ever slackened?
Since that entranced meeting
I have been as one mad –
talking during the day,
dreaming at night –
All my thoughts in her!
Nothing dislodged this love
of Saraswati
till I was
twenty-three.

From twenty-three the cares of a householder involved Bharati in a game of hid-and-peek with Lakshmi the goddess of bounty. The poet seeks her company, and would gladly embrace her, but she keeps aloof with a tantalizing smile! His freedom from



both loves and hates was achieved only when he beyonded, as it were, both Saraswati and Lakshmi and was vouchsafed a vision of the Divine Mother as Kali. As the supreme creatrix, Kali held Bharati's heart in thrall for the rest of his life.

The lyrics Bharati composed on Kali form a group of themselves. Indeed the Shakti idea pervades all his later work. As early as 1906, when he met Sister Nivedita in Calcutta, he had at a glance recognized in her the manifestation of Shakti. In his poetry, he may also have been influenced by Nivedita's vision as memorably described in her *Kali, the Mother*:

But Kali comes closer to us than these. Others we admire; others we love;
to her we belong. Whether we know it or not, we are Her children,
playing round Her knees. Life is but a game of hide-and-seek with Her, and if, in
its course,

we have the chance to touch Her feet, who can measure the shock of the divine
energy

that enters into us? Who can utter the rapture of our cry of 'Mother'?

During his early first creative spell at Madras when he was rapidly turning out
patriotic songs he also began equating India with Shakti herself:

Where was the dead bow
that laid low the Lanka hordes?
It was our terrible Mother's-
the Aryan Queen, Mother Bharat.

Shakti is the power we recognize behind the movements of history and dreams of
mythology; and Shakti inspires our hopes and achievements, our dreams and visions.
It was Her bow that destroyed Indrajit, Her hand that wrote the Veda, Her shoulders
that held the Gandiva. In the years of his exile at Pondicherry, Bharati was initiated
into the mystical tremendum of *Shakti-tattva* during his close association with Sri
Aurobindo whose Yoga was based upon an absolute surrender to the Divine Mother.
Bharati himself was to approach Her, now as Lakshmi, now as Saraswati, Kali,
Gomati, Valli, Kannamma, Radha or Muthumari, but behind the veil it was Shakti all
the time. A whole passage is devoted to Her in Bharati's prose poems:

In the flood of Shakti the Sun is a bubble.
In the lake of Shakti the Sun is a blossom
Shakti is all pervading endless, limitless.

All the rainbow tints of her personality are explored by Bharati: She is lovable, gentle,
auspicious, maternal; but at other times she is but a tease she is an irritant, she
assumes a terrible form. She is also part of Nature, and part of ourselves. If she is
long suffering like a Hindu woman, she can also unpredictably turn into a volcanic
force or avenging fury, like Panchali Draupadi in the Court. But why waste words on
descriptions that are only *circulus in definiendo*?

Shakti-Mahashakti-Parashakti- Shivashakti: the names are powers and
incantations and presences, and fill and charge all life and the universe. In the poem
'Shiva Shakti', Bharati writes:

Some describe You as Nature,
others see in You the elemental Five;



Some equate You with the primordial Force,
and some call you fire, wisdom, god.
O wondrous Mother mine,
'AUM' is all the homage
That we can offer to You!

Enlighten and bless us, Mother.

In other long poem 'Self-surrender to Shakti', Bharati offers hand, eye, ear, tongue, shoulders, feet, heart, mind, thought, all of himself – every limb, every faculty – to the service of Shakti. The mere utterance of the word 'Shakti' can be an auspicious spell and bring about a sea change.

I have faith in Veda that teaches
The Way of Faith...
O mind, only say 'Shakti',
And Shakti gives us
Life here and hereafter,
guards us from fear
Of shaft and fire,
Poison and sickness.

All energy is the play of Shakti, and all life and knowledge flow from Her. 'Shakti-k-koothu' is a call to dance with Shakti's name on one's lips, for that will win the nectar of delight.

Bharati's Shakti poetry reaches the very acme of apocalyptic recordation in 'Oozhi-k-koothu'. Life, death and renewal, creation, destruction and resurrection, these cycles are part of Shakti's cosmic dance and drama of the play of manifestation. In this great poem, Bharati captures the *terribilita* of the mother's dance the terror and the glory of the world's destruction, which is the inevitable prelude to the resurrection. Word and rhythm coalesce to produce here a multi-dimensional effect. Mother Shakti's divine frenzy of cosmic destruction is arrested and spent only with the intervention of Shiva in his auspicious form. Together they now take up the task of rebuilding the world on new foundations.

But while the manifestations of Shakti may be manifold and even seemingly contrarious, the Mother is *one* and not many. The ultimate secret is Brahma-knowledge, not sectarian half-truths and sparks of controversy. Thus while the prayer-songs feed the hungry heart and soul, the knowledge-hymns turn the mind towards illumination so that the cloud of Illusion, the miss of Maya, may pass away. Here Bharati speaks almost in the Vedantic voice of Vivekananda:

Having vanquished the demon Fear,
and killed the reptile Lie,
We have embraced the Veda's path
that leads to Brahma-knowledge.

The same Vedantic defiance of Death may be heard also here:

Life's Illusion!
You may confront me
with a million ills.
But you cannot face
my illumined mind.



Illusion!
When we're ready to die,
the sea itself is nothing.
And death is nothing
for the body is false!

Bharati the poet of freedom and Bharati the laureate of the Spirit as Parashakti were really one and same person. He was a patriot as well as universal man, the worshipper of Bharat, the Mother as well as Parashakti the supreme world-creatix. To win national freedom no less than to achieve the soul's liberation, the recipe was the same: banish fear, worship Mother, serve her with single-minded devotion, and make total surrender to her. Bharati was conscious of his mission with the unfaltering vision of the future. His head was ever unbowed, his faith in his vocation as writer and poet was unwavering, and his consecration to the Mother – to Parasakti – was absolute. And he died as he had lived, the hero as patriot and poet, and the great poet was doubled with the true *bhakta*. But when he died he had already given his name to a whole Age and imparted to it the fervor and hope and puissance and dynamism of the New Life. And it is gratifying that the great Age of Bharati has overflowed to the present day.

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