

Bharathi - A Multi-dimensional Personality Fighting for Freedom and Love

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Subramania Bharathi (1882-1921)

Courtesy: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Subramania-Bharathi>

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to highlight a national poet Bharathi, whose writings are universally recognized, appreciated and considered as national literature, through his writings, he attempts to project his fighting spirit for freedom of the nation and spreading the message of freedom and liberty all over India. Bharathi's radical views were originally restricted, moreover he acquired full power to express his political fervour and humanitarian

ideals. So, he foresees the world, which becomes enlightened and freed from ignorance, sufferings, superstitious beliefs, corruption and fought for breaking up of all barriers.

Keywords: Bharathi, Multi-dimensional Personality, Freedom, Love Patriotism, Humanism, Spirit of Language, Liberty, Equality

Universally recognized as a national poet whose writings are now appreciated, understood and recognized as national literature, Subramania Bharathi (1882-1921) occupies a significant place carving out for himself a niche in the history of Indian literature and stands supreme among poet-patriots. What is generally known and understood is that poets are those who write and sing to please and enlighten people, while patriots serve their country. But only a few are gifted with patriotic fervour and Bharathi is one among the few who sang and wrote poems with patriotic fervour. Even though he lived only thirty nine years, he had left behind a legacy of which the whole nation feels even now proud. In spite of his span of life on this earth being very short, his impact and influence was found to be so great that the twentieth century was labeled as 'the Age of Bharathi'.

To attest to the fact that Bharathi was 'a popular Makkal Kavignar', such various titles as 'Puthumai Kavignar', 'Navayuga Kavignar' 'Poet of the New Age', 'People's poet' 'Marumalarchi Kavignar' and 'Makkal Kavignar' were conferred on him. He is said to have qualified himself in such languages as Sanskrit, Hindi, Urdu and English. He was gifted with the art of translation. He did translations from English into Tamil and in due course, he started writing in English. Those articles got duly published in *New India*, *Common Weal* and *Arya*. His essays, poems, and translations were collected and published in two volumes titled *Agni and other Poems* and *Translations and Essays and other Prose Fragments*. As a journalist, Bharathi felt the dire need of spreading the message of freedom and liberty all over India and so used translation as a media for translating his ideas into English. Moreover, he wanted the cultural heritage of Tamils to be realized and felt all over the world. So, he made an earnest attempt to translate some of the verses of Nammalvar, Andal and Arunagiri. His English poems, though limited in number, did prove his mastery over the language.

Subramania Bharathi started his literary career very early in his boyhood. He is said to have had a native flair for writing verses even at the age of seven and his verse compositions won the admiration of the Raja and renowned scholars of Ettayapuram. The very title 'Bharathi', a name of Goddess of knowledge, was "conferred upon him by Sivajagna Jothi, in appreciation of his ability to compose poems on any subject at any moment" (Sachithanandan 13). Like Kalidasa and Kumaraguruparar, Bharathi was not educated in a scholastic tradition but he wrote verses rather effortlessly. Due to his admiration for Shelley, the English Romantic poet, Bharathi formed an association of admirers of Shelley in the name of Shelleyan Guild and he himself assumed the pseudonym 'Shelley Dasan'. (BVN 124).

It is understood from various sources that Bharathi began his literary career primarily as a translator rather than as a creative writer by translating modern ideas into simple, lucid, non-literary Tamil so as to make the common average Tamils understand rather clearly. His enduring efforts and hard systematic work to give his translations, the quality of original compositions of his made him proficient both in Tamil and English and enabled him to form a unique style of his own in Tamil, thereby leading him to become the editor of the monthly *Chakkravartini* published by Swadesamitran office. The very first poem of Bharathi, which saw the light of publication as ‘Thanimai Irakkam’, in the form of a sonnet that came out in the journal *Viveka Bhanu* from Madurai in 1904.

Nivedita, the disciple of Vivekananda, was chosen as a preceptor for Bharathi who found Bharathia Devi in her, for he was out and out fascinated towards her rare vigour, force of love and strength of wisdom and that is why he is said to have dedicated his national poems to his guru, Nivedita, who “advised Bharathi to give importance to women’s freedom”. As a result, Bharathi became interested in the emancipation of women. He praised the lands like Russia where women folk were given due freedom and respectable position. He made a plea “for such a freedom for the women of South Africa and passionately sympathized with the Indian women folk in the plantations of Fiji lands” (VS 57). Luckily, the Mandayam brothers, Thirumalachariar and Srinivasachariar invited Bharathi to be the editor of their Tamil weekly *India*, that was published with the revolutionary motto, ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity’. Bharathi’s radical views were originally restricted. But as the editor of *India*, he acquired full power to express his political fervour and humanitarian ideals. He did invariably exercise his imagination in order to make the paper more interesting and instructive to the common man, for he was fully aware of the fact that continued propaganda through the press was more effective than occasional platform speeches.

Besides being the editor of *India*, Bharathi published a daily called *Vijaya*. Along with these two, he engaged himself as an editor of an English monthly titled *Bala Bharathi* or *Young India* founded by Nanjunda Rao. Bharathi’s stay at Pondicherry for ten years from 1908 to 1918 might be described as the golden period of his literary career because most of his famous, noteworthy productions were composed, during this period. Bharathi’s ‘Gnana Ratham’, a highly imaginative prose fiction pictured an ideal world, created with all fundamental principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. He was lucky enough to have to his credit the composition of such four major works as 1. *Panchali Sapatham*, 2. *Kuyil Pattu*, 3. *Kannan Pattu* and 4. Translations of *The Bhagavad Gita* into Tamil. He wrote poems, stories, sketches and essays and also recognized Gandhiji as the only dependable guide for the achievement of Independence for India. He tried hard to bring out a collected edition of all his own works so as to reach the hands of ordinary man. Bharathi’s composition of *Long Live the Indian Commonwealth* in 1920 called for a new society that would hold all property in common, a golden age for the humanity.

Bharathi's English, like his Tamil, had a native power as well as conversational ease which enabled him to be a successful editor of an English monthly, ***Bala Bharathi*** founded by Nanjunda Rao. Coming into contact with various political leaders of the time, Bharathi had a firm belief in the emancipation of Indians and so predicted of Kruta-yoga, which would give new life to his motherland. 'Courage Terrible' does resemble his own Tamil poem, 'Achamillai, Achamillai'. In his poem, 'Toil, Toil, Toil', he reveals the necessity for hard labour and prays for doing eternal work.

The article 'The National Congress' was published in 1914 in New India wherein all are of one creed and one religion. Though he appreciated the exquisite beauties of English literature, he still ascertained that no other literature could boast of works like 'Kural' 'Kamba Ramayana' and 'Silappadhikaram'. As a prophetic seer, Bharathi predicted that India would be recognized by the world in course of time through his essay 'India and the world'. The essay 'In Memoriam' was considered to be a glorious tribute paid to Gokhale who worked for Hindu-Muslim unity. Being influenced by sister Nivedita, Bharathi blew his conch to announce the revival and uplift of women's status and as such we have three articles on 'Place of Woman', 'Women's Freedom', and a poem namely 'The Kummi of Women's Freedom'. As a devotee of Shakti-cult, he is said to have written an essay in English on Mother-worship in the form of Matri-Puja. Greatly intoxicated by the songs of Andal and Nammalvar, Bharathi translated some of the most famous songs from Tiruvaymozhi. Even though he belonged to a very orthodox Hindu Brahmin family, various anecdotes from his personal life prove that he was against such religious differences and caste demarcations. Hence his essay titled 'Patriotism and Religious Differences' gave a clear picture of his broad-minded nature in all respects.

Bharathi showed himself as the prophet of the age in his essay 'The Coming Age' in which he anticipated the ideology of Bhoodan Movement. He defined socialism and dreamt of Krita-yuga. Despite his indulgence in aesthetics, he made contributions to the political field also. In the essay titled as 'India and the War', Bharathi elaborately explained the reasons for India loving Europe and for being friendly to the cause of allies. Thus, Bharathi was a versatile genius, who could write on any subject at any moment. In his essay 'Reflections', Bharathi revealed his admiration for Tagore and made an appeal for due recognition of great journalists. Bharathi's association with Aurobindo and Kullachami had made him ponder over self-realization which resulted in the form of a dedication 'To the Being of Universe'. His deep faith and firm belief in ***Gita*** made him write about 'Fatalism', combining religious element with that of the existing political situation. He went to the extent of considering life, a *rasa* the key-word in which he found a harmonious blend of aestheticism with culture and religion. Bharathi's yearning to make his literary works immortal and his thirst for freedom had made him translate two hymns to Kumara by Arunagiri.

As a journalist, Bharathi became well-versed with the currents and cross currents of national life and political problems, which got well reflected by him in the columns of

Swadesamitran. His political understanding was enriched by his discussions with his friends like Doraiswamy Iyer, Chakkarai Chettiar, Jayaram Naidu and G.S. Ragunatha Rao. Bharathi was immensely inspired by the Russian Revolution of 1905. In Irish struggle for Independence became a living example for Indians. Certainly, Bharathi's vision extended beyond Tamilnadu and he was far ahead of his contemporaries in realizing that the Indian movement for freedom was a part of the world struggle against imperialism. "**Bala Bharathi**, a journal of national resurgence come out in 1907 with its motto as 'Arise' awake and step not till the goal is reached". Being influenced by Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo and Sister Nivedita, Bharathi edited their speeches in this journal where Bharathi showed himself as a class editor in English. Due to the prevailing conditions in British India, Bharathi was compelled to go to Pondicherry to continue his work as a political thinker and as such, he dedicated himself in working for various papers like *Vijaya*, *Survodayam* and *Karmayogi*. As an editor, Bharathi understood so well that only captions and cartoons could convey patriotic fervour and vigour better than long articles and speeches. During his stay at Pondicherry, the poet came into intimate contact with the French language and literature. For the French, liberty meant freedom from the tyranny and oppression of their rulers. Naturally, Bharathi was attracted towards the slogan, 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity'. Dr. V. Sachithanandan observes:

"As a dogged fighter for the Independence of India, Bharathi used them as political slogans to rouse his countrymen against the tyranny and injustice of British rule" (109)

Bharathi resumed the use of the journal *India* for the propagation of patriotic ideas. In 1909, he wrote under the caption, 'Love of the Motherland':

"The thirst for freedom has of late become acute in our country... out intense desire is that India should be a free country and no alien nation should dominate over it. The flag of independent India should soon be fluttering on the country's flag mast" (Raju 22)

Bharathi was an ardent admirer of Lokamanya Bala Gangadhar Tilak, the leader of extremists. When the First World War broke out in 1914 Tilak himself pleaded that India should support the Allies against Germany. But his political opponents were clever enough to use this opportunity, to criticise him severely and considered his attitude as a climb down of the new party in their struggle against British imperialism. Tilak provoked Bharathi and he wrote an article in support of Tilak's plea on the ground that Britain would live up to the promise of guaranteeing the freedom of the nations:

“In peace of time, we shall be uncompromising critics of England’s mistakes. But when trouble comes, we shall unhesitatingly stand by her and if necessary, defend her against her enemies” (Agni 108).

Bharathi loved Gokhale too. He praised him as an inspiring example for every Indian and said that Gokhale lived and worked for two ideals – Indian nationhood and Indian Self-Government. He also worked with zeal and earnestness for Hindu-Muslim unity. Bharathi proved himself to be unbiased because he wrote that a man must be respected and remembered for his life work, though one may disagree with his opinions and doctrines. In the letter titled ‘The National Congress’ published in *New India*, Bharathi proved to be a skilful politician. He wrote:

“Party differences are inevitable in all politics” (Agni 90).

But he was also a social reformer and a humanitarian. His versatile personality strongly condemned politicians who brought religious sectarianism into their political life. He firmly believed that in the service of the Motherland, we are all of one creed and one religion:

“If at all, the politicians bring in the caste difference, they commit political suicide”

(Agni 91)

By this article, ‘The National Congress’, Bharathi made his Congress Party realize its duty of giving importance to every citizen, thereby emphasizing the democratic principle to be followed in future. Similar ideas opposing caste and creed differences find a place in another article, ‘Patriotism and Religious Differences’ (88). In India’s struggle for freedom, while politicians were fighting against the foreigner’s law and statute and armed might, the poet fought the harder fight against the languor of the spirit. He gave his brethren the vision without which people perish and the will without which a vision is but an idle dream. Like Gandhiji, Bharathi wanted freedom to be wrought not through bloodshed, but through peaceful means, the democratic means of conscious will and determined action, through force of persuasion and disciplined organization. Bharathi was not unaware of the conditions that had to be established in India if freedom was to come and remain forever. He was outspoken in his condemnation of caste systems. R.A. Padmanabhan writes:

“His concept of Bharathi was a unified symbol; It is not the geographical entity that he sang about, but India, the mother of us all, the sustainer, the savior” (Chitra Bharathi 502).

No other compliment would be so effective as Sarojini Naidu's message paid at the time of the opening of the Bharathi memorial Building at Ettayapuram on 13 Oct 1947:

“Poet Bharathi has fulfilled the true mission of a poet. He has created Beauty, not only through the medium of glowing and lovely words but has 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” (qtd in Mahakavi Bharathiyar 21).

Bharathi's humanistic approach deserves really appreciation. He lived upto the definition of humanism as defined by Edwin H. Wilson who wrote thus:

“All humanists, whether they are Marxists, existentialists, liberals or Christians, declare “that they are man, that they wish to actualize human potentialities, enhance human experience and contribute to happiness, social justice, democracy and a peaceful world That they are opposed to authoritarian or totalitarian forces that dehumanise man” (P 6).

On the whole, the humanist views man as full being and man in his universal dimension. The chief concern for man, his growth, fulfillment and creativity. Bharathi takes a step further for he attached more importance to love.

“We live because we love
Love is life” (Agni 87).

Bharathi felt one with Valluvar in the idea that the nucleus of life is love; “those devoid of it are only bones overlaid with skin”. To Bharathi, life is holy, and love is its greatest beauty and strength. Love kindles the sublime in the soul. Love being the aspect of the divine in man becomes the symbol of immortality. In an article titled ‘To the Being of the Universe’, he wrote:

“I may become Love Himself, that I may love all men and creatures as Thyself, love my neighbours and relatives as I ought to ...” (Agni 56).

In Bharathi's vision of man, one can find the total recovery of humanity, its strength, beauty and power by gently tapping the inner springs of love which remain hidden with divinity. It was Bharathi who first raised the call for an equal status to womankind and an end to the exploitation of women through child marriages and cruel discrimination and treatment towards widows. Influenced by Shelley's treatment towards widows. Influenced by Shelley's concept of womanhood, one can find resemblance between Shelley's 'Cythna' and Bharathi's 'Puthumai Penn' for besides being a devotee of Parasakthi, Bharathi was influenced by the greatness of woman. In fact, the weaker section was not the weaker one but the source of strength for man.

As a Sanskrit student of no mean scholarship, Bharathi could go direct to the fountain head of Vedanta, *The Upanishads* and *Gita*. He was a vedantist by conviction, a deeply religious Hindu who devoutly believed in the authority of *The Vedas* by calling himself a vedantist of the Advaita School. Bharathi experienced Lord Krishna's presence as the inner truth in every relationship.

“In the raven's sable hue
Nanda Laala,
The proper tint I view
Nanda Laala;
All nature's lusty green
Nanda Laala
Reflects your divine sheen
Nanda Laala:
Every sound that comes to me
Nanda Laala,
Is a hymn in praise of thee
Nanda Laala” (Nandakumar 38).

Even the Alvars sang the glories of Krishna as a child and lover. But Bharathi's imagination was a new for he sang ecstatically of Krishna as a friend, mother, father, king, servant, teacher, student, child, lover, lady-love and deity. This is a novel approach to God showing that love dares anything, and God is omnipresent and omnipotent. He was able to perceive God through intimate human relationships and to enjoy the bliss of union. Dwelling deep into Vedantic philosophy, Bharathi developed a better understanding that the distinction between 'I' and 'Thou' should be completely eradicated. He accepted the fall of his pride, for the poem 'Peace' concluded with the proverbial saying: “The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom” (46).

As an ardent follower of *Gita*, Bharathi considered all religions of the world as different paths leading to the same ideal, Truth. As a true vedantist, he accepted the divinity of Christ and Allah. In an article entitled ‘The service of God’, he wrote:

“We find that the Aryan and Christian realisations have been polar, denying each other at their ends; while united at the base” (Agni 57).

To conclude, as a reformer, politician, humanitarian, vedantist, patriot, Bharathi fiercely fought for breaking up of all barriers – political, social and religious and in the true vedantistic spirit, he sang of the coming age in which he anticipated a joyous world free from sufferings, a world of enlightenment unmarred by ignorance, a world which rejected superstitions, a world of progress without corruption.

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