

The Reputation of C. Subramania Bharati 1921 to the Present

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C. Subramania Bharati was born in 1882, and died at the young age of 39 years in 1921. Bharati did not enjoy a lot of public attention during his short lifetime. His life was not a life of noticeable, or spectacular, or sensational events. He was born the son of a prosperous middle-class Brahmin; lost his mother when he was barely 5; was brought up by relatives on the maternal side of his family; married at 15; put himself through the semblance of a university education; as a passionate advocate for India's liberty, exiled himself to Pondicherry; courted persecution at the hands of the British; was sporadically employed as a journalist; until death claimed him due to a casual illness. But, during this eventless life, Destiny conspired to create through Bharati the 20th-century Renaissance in Tamil language and literature. The aim of this brief article is to study this phenomenon, and to assess the reputation of Bharati during the past century and a quarter.

Young Subbiah had a gift for words, and was known to make poetry at 6 or 7 years of age. As a boy, he seems to have made friends among the learned pundits of the Zamindari of Ettayapuram. A group of admirers endowed the young Subbiah with the title Bharati, which means Saraswati, the Goddess of knowledge. It is noteworthy that Subbiah carried the title Bharati for the rest of his life, and, in fact, came to be known by the title and its adaptations, Bharati and Bharatiyar. For the following 30-odd years, Bharati wrote a steady stream of poetry, prose, plays and articles for newspapers in Tamil, and some in English. Nothing *definitive* is really known of his reputation during his life of 39 years.

After his death, and his unimaginable and inexplicable hold on the Tamil imagination, a great deal of speculation about his status during his lifetime has been reconstructed.

Bharati knew Aurobindo, VVS Iyer, VO Chidambaram Pillai, G Subramania Iyer, and V. Krishnaswamy Iyer who arranged to get his 3 poems in print (for free distribution!). He lived in material poverty, subjecting his wife and his two daughters to constant anxiety about day-to-day living. That his mind was untouched by material want is quite another matter! Bharati's poetry reached a small number of people, and those who tripped upon his writing were somewhat moved by it. The situation is not unique, in that the same sort of statement may be made about Aurobindo, a prolific writer, and VVS Iyer, a gifted short-story and prose writer, who remains known only for his translation of the *Tirukkural*. But, the small, intellectual, reading public in Tamil knew Bharati's poetry and prose. And the ordinary folk, especially during his years in Pondicherry, delighted in his song and music. I have heard VVS Iyer's son, the late Dr VVS Krishnamurthy, a physician in Tiruvanaikoil near Tiruchirappalli, tell me many times that his father "Iyer" was passionate about Bharati's writing and acknowledged him as a master. *Il miglior fabbro!* The better craftsman!

It was shortly after Bharati's death in 1921 that people who had known him began to write short accounts about him and their memory of the contact. A group of Bharati acquaintances – S Somasundara Bharati, V Sakkarai Chettiar, and Parali Su Nellaiyappar – published a *Bharatiyar Charithiram* by *Bharati Prachuralayam*, the company that owned by members of the Bharati family. Bharati's half-brother, C Visvanathan, a Manamadurai schoolteacher, wrote in 1929, his book, *Bharati and His Works*, also published by Bharati Prachuralayam. Similar books were published by Suddhananda Bharati, Akkur Ananthachari, Ku Pa Rajagopalan, Pe Ko Sundararajan (Chitty), Sakthidasan Subramanian, Thi Ja Ranganathan and a few others. This publishing activity lasted through 20 years roughly, until 1940. In 1941, Bharati's widow, Chellammal, published her ¹*Bharatiyar Charithiram*, which has remained a Classic in Bharati Studies. And Va. Ra. (Va Ramaswamy Iyengar,) a close disciple of C Subramania Bharati, published his ²*Mahakavi Bharatiyar* three years later, in 1944. Va. Ra. had known Bharati in person, a credential which has nothing to do with skills or training in literary criticism. His book, like many another of this genre, is simply gushy, expresses uncritical admiration for the poet, and focuses on stray events of the poet's eventless life, much of it hearsay. Bharati's wife, Chellammal's book describes the poet's brief life story, the intricacies of his family life, his relationships with his wife and children, and his many relatives and friends and associates; we will be hard put to find another equally authentic source. Then there is the style of her book, which emanates from the heart!

Soon after India attained her freedom from British rule, the poet who sang,

Aduvome pallu paduvome
Ananda sudanthiram adainthuvittom enru

began to be paid attention to, and there is a whole range of writing on Bharati during the 1950s and the 1960s. Every educated Indian, regardless of how badly educated, had to write on C Subramania Bharati's writings, in English and in Tamil. If you were a High Court judge, with time hanging on your hands, you used up your life with a learned treatise on the poetry of Bharati. Books by K S Ramaswami Sastriyar, P Thirukoota Sundaram, M P Sivagnanam, known popularly as Ma. Po. Si, Pa Mi Sundaram, M S Subramania Iyer, P Mahadevan, Sami Palaniappan, and scores of others repeated the same stuff about Bharati being a great patriotic poet, who "gave his life for the country." In any case, not a single piece of writing on Bharati, during the 1950s and the 1960s, shows any understanding of how the words work, and why his poetry created the Renaissance in 20th century Tamil literature. Yadugiri Ammal's book ³*Bharati Ninaivugal* is an atrocious book, with many errors of fact, the objective of the writer being to establish herself as a dearer person to C Subramania Bharati than his own two children,

¹ *Bharatiyar Charithiram*, Chellamma Bharati, Edited by S. Vijaya Bharati (Chennai: Amudha Surabi Publications, 2003; originally published by Shakti Karyalayam, 1941).

² *Mahakavi Bharatiyar* Va Ra Chennai: Shakti Karyalayam, 1944

³ *Bharati Ninaivugal* Yadugiri Ammal Chennai: Amudha Nalayam, 1954

Thangammal and Sakuntala. My wife, Bharati's granddaughter who was brought up by her grandmother Chellammal has mentioned that this book, written by Yadugiri Ammal, had aggravated her grandmother as it was a bunch of lies and wrong interpretations!

The Hindu, under the title, ⁴*This Day that Age* writes about the following news that happened on March 11, 1954:

“The poems of Subramania Bharat(h)i have been brought out by the Madras Government and copies are available with the Publications Depot in Madras city. Giving this information in the Madras Legislative Council on March 10, Mr. C. Rajagopalachari, Chief Minister, showed the House a sample set. . . . Mr. V. Chakkarai Chettiar enquired if the family of the poet would get a share of the proceeds of sales or profits. The Chief Minister replied: we provided for certain benefits to the family when we took up this business. There is no profit likely to be made by Government on the publication.” Notice the ignorant assertion of the then Chief Minister of Madras, that Bharati's books are not likely to be profit-making!*

It is against this background that the poet's granddaughter, S Vijaya Bharati, produced the first-ever systematic study of C Subramania Bharati's Works. This was a thesis submitted to Annamalai University for a PhD degree in Tamil, written in English; and it was examined by Professor L. P. KR. Ramanathan Chettiar, and her guide, Mu Varadarasanar, the Tamil scholar of this time, and externally, by Kamil Zvelebil of Czechoslovakia's Charles University. Subsequently published both in English and Tamil versions, the book systematically studies Bharati's poetry and prose.

With the advent of S Vijaya Bharati's thesis, an interest towards Bharati was roused among academics. Contemporaries of S Vijaya Bharati, K Meenakshi Sundaram and V Sachidanandan commenced the practice of studying Bharati with Western poets, such as Walt Whitman. There have been sporadic studies of Bharati's Works with reference to Shelley and other English Romantic poets, according to established principles of Western literary criticism. While Tamil scholarship of the 1980s was not able to sustain the momentum of these earlier attempts, an awareness has been created by these theses as to the credibility of reading C. Subramania Bharati systematically.

⁴ The Hindu, March 11, 1954

* S. Vijaya Bharati's comment: When the copyright of Bharati's writings was bought from C. Viswanatha Iyer, the Government paid Bharati's wife and two daughters a sum of Five Thousand rupees (Rs. 5,000); at that time, Bharati's family did not get any additional benefits other than that. Neither the Government nor the agreement that Chellamma made with *Bharati Proachuralayam* did recognize that any share of the profit would be paid to the family in the future. The Chief Minister's reply to Chakkarai Chettiar's question that the Government had already paid some "benefits" was not true; and the Chief Minister's expectation that there was no profit to be made on the publication of Bharati's works is totally unacceptable.

The 1980s also commenced the centenary year of Bharati's birth in 1982. By this time, Bharati had taken firm hold of the Tamil imagination world-wide. Scholars in Malaysia, Singapore, the United Kingdom and the USA began to write a steady stream of books and articles on Bharati. The political situation in Sri Lanka and the exodus of the Sri Lankan Tamils to countries like the UK, France, Germany, Canada, Australia and the USA brought with it the spreading of Bharati's word and his reputation. To the Sri Lankan Tamils, there was breathing to enable them to live, and then, there was Bharati to sustain life! The explosion of the Internet during this time also played an important part in the dissemination of Bharati's writings. Indifferent to quality, there was a huge wave of writing and publishing on Bharati, and, equally significant, publication of the poet's own writing in new media.

In India, the Sahitya Akedemi, the flagship publishing company of the Indian government, celebrated Bharati's centenary year with a slew of publications. These included translation of Bharati's poetry into most official languages of India, Malayalam, Telegu, Kannada, Hindi, and of course, into English. But the essence of Bharati's poetry is the use of the Tamil word in his genius-touch! The word then becomes essentially untranslatable into any other language. There appears to be no understanding of this particular factor among Bharati's translators, whatever be the language of their choice. Nevertheless, book production sometimes requires the acceptance of the second-best option! These Sahitya Akademi books serve such a purpose. An interesting phenomenon of the last 25 years under review is the ascent of Everyman on the Bharati bandwagon!

Exploitation of Bharati's name for self-aggrandizement continues well into the 2000s. Innumerable people, who will otherwise remain non-entities, add the name of Bharati as an appendage to their names in order to advance themselves in their careers.

Together with public celebrations characteristic of Tamilnadu, where the promotion of the "sponsor" to market silk saris or "Mysorepahu" is linked subtly to the name of Bharati to ensure credibility!

Publications by persons of questionable credentials, reconstructing history, often on false pretences, associating a politician, dead or alive, with the Bharati name has been generally seen to happen. These books extolling C Rajagopalachari's "contribution" for the "spreading" of Bharati's fame, for example, are absurd in their content and reach!

The past quarter century has seen the proliferation of books and magazine articles on Bharati in much the same strain. While the worthwhileness of an article may be in question, the immense volume of the material itself bears testimony to the ever-escalating reputation of Bharati. Academic scholarship and publication of research on C Subramania Bharati's writings appear to be promising for the 2010s.

Bharati has now come to occupy the unquestionable status of Mahakavi, the Supreme Poet!