

BERNARD BATE

Bharati Style and the Tamil National Popular

காக்கைச் சிறகினிலே நந்தலாலா - நின்றன்
கரிய நிறமந் தோன்றுதையே நந்தலால

பார்க்கு மரங்களெல்லாம் நந்தலாலா - நின்றன்
பச்சைநிறமந் தோன்றுதையே நந்தலாலா

கேட்கும் மொழியிலெல்லாம் நந்தலாலா - நின்றன்
கீத மிசைக்குதடா நந்தலாலா

தீக்குள் விரலைவைத்தால் நந்தலாலா - நின்னைத்
தீண்டுமின்பந் தோன்றுதடா நந்தலாலா.

Your darkness shines in the wing of a crow, Nandalala,
Your greenness in the leaves of trees.
Your music plays in all the words I hear, Nandalala,
And the bliss of touching you when I hold my finger in a flame.

Subramania Bharati is everywhere in the Tamil world. He spoke the popular political, the devotional, and the social-critical since he first began publishing his songs during the Swadeshi movement. His words have been set to dozens of cinema songs even though he died a decade before films began to sing.

Bharati came to embody the Tamil world through poetic brilliance, to be sure. But a key element of that brilliance was his singular style which merged vernacular motifs and even folk musical forms into his songs making them available to the widest possible audience – not merely an audience of literati, but a national-popular of the Tamil People, an imaginary and an agency just coming into existence in the first few decades of the twentieth century.

Among the first reports of his political activity come on 9 March 1908 as revelers sang and danced their way towards the Marina beach in Madras where Swadeshi activists had gathered to celebrate the release of Bipin Chandra Pal from prison. There, amidst speeches by young extremists of the Presidency Bharati sang a ‘Psalm to Sri Krishna’:

என்று தணியும் இந்த சுதந்திர தாகம்?
என்று முடியுமெங்கள் அடிமையில் மோகம்?
என்றெம தன்னைகை விலங்குஅல் போகும்?
என்றெம தின்னல்கள் தீர்ந்துபொய் யாகும்?
அன்றெஒரு பாரத மாக்க வந்தோனே,
ஆரியர் வாழ்வினை யாதரிப் போனே!
வென்றி தருந்துணை நின்னரு ளன்றோ?
மெய்யடி யோமினும் வாடுதல் நன்றோ?

பஞ்சமு நோயுனின் மெய்யடி யார்க்கோ?
பாரினில் மேன்மைகள் வேறினி யார்க்கோ?
தஞ்ச மடைந்தபின் கைவிட லாமோ?
தாயுந்தன் குழந்தையைத் தள்ளிடப் போமோ?
அஞ்சலென் றருள்செயுன்க் கடமையில் லாயோ?
ஆரிய நீயுனின் அறமறன் தாயோ?
வெஞ்செய லரக்கரை வீட்டிடு வோனே,
வீர சிகாமணி, ஆரியர் கோனே!

When will our thirst for freedom be quenched?
When will our love for slavery die out?
When will the chains on our mothers' wrists be broken?
When will our sufferings end?
O, Lord of the Mahabharata!
O, Protector of Aryas!
Is it not by you alone that we are victorious?
Is it right that your true devotees should languish without your aid?

Should famine and disease be the fate of your devoted?
For whom else are the good things of this world?
Will you forsake those who have sought your refuge?
Will a mother cast away her own children?
Is it not yours to soothe our fears?
O, Noble Lord! Have you forsaken us?
O, Slayer of evil rakshasas!
O, Crescent Jewel of Warriors? O, Lord of the Aryas!

The song was set to khamas, a raga sometimes described as 'tuneful' or 'folksy.' All of his songs were set to familiar tunes often expressly considered 'folksy' by contemporary standards.

Bharati was borrowing from another new form in early twentieth century Madras, the bhajan. Home-, temple- or even street-based worship sessions involving singing bhakti songs to their deities, in particular lord Krishna, and his consort Radha, set amidst scenes of the old stories, the puranas. Among the most common of these scenes is Krishna's teasing and forsaking of the cowherds, the young women who pine for his love.

Though in practice bhajans were restricted to Brahmins, at least ideologically they cut across caste, sect, and lineage divisions among higher caste organizations. Ideally, their practitioners saw themselves as engaging in a universalizing discourse that was, like the public meetings, probably a great deal more restricted than one would have supposed from the ideology's own terms.

Regardless, a major theme in bhajans, especially those involving Krishna, was the theme of erotic longing by Radha, or more commonly, by the gopis. Men singing these songs cast themselves in the role of the gopis, each hoping to be Krishna's lover. But Krishna is mercurial, fickle. He often fails to do what he says, to show up for the secret meeting arranged with his lover. Bharati actually composed a cycle of songs describing how Krishna – as both male and female lover, Kannan and Kannamma – fails to meet for agreed-upon trysts.

தீர்த்தக் கரையினிலே - தெற்கு மூலையில்
செண்பகத் தோட்டத்திலே,
பார்த்திருந் தால்வருவேன் - வெண்ணிலாவிலே
பாங்கியோ டென்றுசொன்னாய்.
வார்த்தை தவறிவிட்டாய் - அடி கண்ணம்மா!
மார்பு துடிக்குதடி!
பார்த்த விடத்திலெல்லாம் - உன்னைப் போலவே
பாவை தெரியுதடி!

You told me to wait there,
On the other side of the river,
In the southern-most corner
of the Chenbaga garden,
that you would come there
with your friend in the pale moon light.
You lied, Kannamma! My heart is broken.
And I see images of you everywhere I look.

This same feeling of longing is now cast in a nationalist idiom, an idiom clearly understood and taken up by nationalists over the course of the freedom movement and into post-colonial democratic politics. And, like so many powerful poetic images, this one, too, is polysemous, refracting several possible senses at once: on the one hand, Krishna is the mercurial god who may or may not fulfill our longings. At the same time, while Bharati plays the role of gopi, of a pining girl waiting for her fickle lover, Krishna is also cast as The People – who could, if only they willed it so, shake off the shackles of British rule in a day. Indeed, such a call to action by 300 million people was a standard figure in so many of the speeches during this day throughout the Madras Presidency. It was a democratic movement that Bharati longed to lead, if only The People would rise up and exert the power they had in their hands.

As it turned out, Krishna would fail him.

Shortly after the events celebrating Pal's release, Fort Saint George began to arrest the leaders of the Swadeshi movement in Madras. Fearing for his freedom, Bharati fled to Pondicherry where he remained in bitter exile until 1918.

And it was indeed bitter. Bharati's exile in Pondicherry ultimately broke him in many ways. He and his family were reduced to poverty. They often went hungry. He took to opium. He continued to write brilliant poems, but most of these would be *bhakti pattu*, devotional songs. He would never write political songs again.

And though he would not engage in formal politics when he finally returned to the Madras Presidency in 1918, there were several reports of him showing up at various kinds of political meetings at which he sang devotional songs.

Among the final reports of these strange apparitions comes in the famous memoir by newspaperman, editor of the nationalist paper *Desabhaktan*, and labour activist Thiru.Vi.Ka. It was 6 April 1919, the first great satyagraha in the Madras Presidency. Thiru.Vi.Ka. describes how bhajan groups came singing and dancing their way to the beach – just as they had eleven years before, to celebrate the release from jail of Bipin Chandra Pal, only on this great day the crowds were ten to twelve times larger than before. Thiru.Vi.Ka. joined in with a group that was

passing his newspaper office, and they made their way toward the beach, singing and dancing along with everyone else. At some point in Royapettah, a few blocks away from the beach, Thiru.Vi.Ka. noticed that Bharati had joined the procession:

As soon as he appeared, our ears were enslaved to his song. I asked Bharati to sing. The great Tamilian began singing the song, 'Muruga, Muruga...'

This is another hymn, a short song set to a folksy raga called nattukurinji. It was almost certainly composed as a bhajan: a simple tune with simple idea, that enables a group of non-specialists to embody the devotional mood in music and song. Again the song is sung to the beautiful young god Murugan, the son of Siva, a hunter and warrior – and like Krishna, a god of passion. Unlike Krishna, however, Murugan is not so unreliable.

The first stanza of this tune:

வருவாய்மயில்மீ தினிலே
வடிவே லுடனே வருவாய்
தருவாய் நலமுந் திறமுந் தனமுங் கனமும்
முருகா, முருகா, முருகா!

You come riding a peacock
With your bright spear
And you give us your goodness, worthiness, and praise
Your penances, your divinity, your quality, your renown,
Muruga, Muruga, Muruga!

Thiru.Vi.Ka. continues:

The song – a Tamil song – a Murugan song sweeter than honey – stirred the Murugan in the picture to start moving. It appeared as though the form in the portrait came surging out. The devotees' bodies began to sweat and shake; some fainted; some fell down; everyone was enraptured in joy. And Bharatiyar became the figure in the painting. I saw with my eyes and my heart the true unity of the song and the image in the portrait. Then, after a little while, Bharatiyar took his leave and left us.

Was it merely the collective passion of the moment? Here the quintessential Tamil deity, Murugan, the son of Siva, seems to be awakened from his merely representational avatar in a framed print and merges with the poet who, more than anyone, spoke to the Tamil people. Here, too, an image of a deity to whom Tamils all over the world perform awesome, trance-inducing austerities in order to become (in Malaysia) the peacock vehicle of the god, dancing for hours on end with a palanquin festooned with peacock feathers upon their shoulders. Or – swinging above a crowd in Jaffna, from hooks piercing the muscles in their backs, as their wives and children dance below them. Like them, Bharati danced the god that day in midday sun near the height of the Tamil summer as Bharati.

The dreamlike quality of this description is not merely an expression of Thiru.Vi.Ka.'s creative force, though it was certainly that: we know that Bharati was not in Madras that day. What does it mean, if anything, whether Bharati danced the god in Royapettah that day or Thiru.Vi.Ka. dreamed it?

I don't think it makes the slightest difference. It is clear that these kinds of austerities and passions would be a part of the formation of the Tamil modern from the beginning of mass politics into the Dravidian movement and beyond. Ranajit Guha famously argued that such shows of enthusiasm in the political realm were elements of the elite's demonstration of their own legitimacy in the face of British rule. It is also the case that such enthusiasm cannot be reduced to the mere machination of elite political will but was the modality in which the political – the modern national popular – would be danced, sung, imagined. Whether dreamed or not, the account tells us the same thing about Bharati and the Tamil modern.