

The Mahakavi and the Mahayogi: Their Interpersonal Relationship in Pondicherry

P. RAJA

The partition of Bengal in 1905, heavily executed by the 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. Subramania 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.

When offered the editorship of a revolutionary Tamil Weekly *India*, launched in 1906, Bharati accepted the job without hesitation to publish his inflammatory commentary, though he simultaneously stayed with *Swadesamitran* for another year in Madras. Soon the authorities took repressive measures to clamp down on all rebellious publications. The publisher of *India* was arrested in 1908, and Bharati, to escape from the tightening net of the British Government, had to flee to the French ruled territory 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. Yet Bharati lived here under the patronage of Krishnaswami Chettiar, Kuvalai Kannan, Swaminatha Dikshidar, Sundaresa Iyer, Sankara Chettiar and Ponnu Murugesapillai—all admirers of Bharati.¹

Kuppusamy Iyengar looked after the new political refugee in Pondicherry for a time. Very soon the patriotic Mandayam brothers, Tirumalachariar and Srinivasachariar, who launched the 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 publish 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.²

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 only during this period that Sri Aurobindo, an arch revolutionary from Bengal, obeying a divine command 'Go to Pondicherry' sought political asylum in this little port city. That was in the year 1910. Four persons—C. Subramania Bharati, Srinivasachari, Suresh Chandra Chakravarti and Shankar Chetty—all admirers of Sri Aurobindo's fiery speeches and writings, welcomed the new refugee and escorted him to Shankar Chetty's house where he lived incognito for six months.³

As to the sort of place Pondicherry was in 1910, Nolini Kanta Gupta, an immediate disciple of Sri Aurobindo, has drawn a weird picture:

The place was so quiet that we can hardly imagine now what it was really like. It was not quiet, it was actually dead; they used to call it a dead city. There was hardly any traffic, particularly in the area where we lived, and after dusk there was not a soul stirring. It is no wonder they should say, 'Sri Aurobindo has fixed upon a cemetery for his sadhana'.

It was a cemetery indeed...It was like a back-water of the sea, a stagnant pool by the shore...

A cemetery it was no doubt, but one with its full complement of ghosts and ghouls.⁴

Sri Aurobindo in his letter dated 5 January 1920 addressed to Joseph Baptista, a well known barrister of Bombay and one of the leaders of Tilak's Nationalist Party, confessed:

I came to Pondicherry in order to have freedom and tranquillity for a fixed object having nothing to do with present politics—in which I have taken no direct part since my coming here, though what I could do for the country in my own way I have constantly done,—and until it is accomplished, it is not possible for me to resume any kind of public activity. But if I were in British India, I should be obliged to plunge at once into action of different kinds. Pondicherry is my place of retreat, my cave of Tapasya, not of the ascetic kind, but of a brand of my own invention. I must finish that, I must be internally armed and equipped for my work before I leave it.⁵

That was the reason for his coming to Pondicherry.

Bharati's friendship with this like-minded political refugee-cum-intellectual, Sri Aurobindo, made him write his essays and stories in English too. Bharati learnt the Rig Veda from Sri Aurobindo.⁶ Nolini Kanta Gupta writes: 'Sri Aurobindo came and took his seat at the table and we sat around. Subramania Bharati, the Tamil poet, and myself were the two who showed the keenest interest. Sri Aurobindo would take up a hymn from the Rig Veda, read it aloud once, explain the meaning of every line and phrase and finally give a full translation'.⁷

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*.⁸ 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 language 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.⁹

That is the power of Bharati's prose poems.

Bharati found a soul-mate in Sri Aurobindo. In those days the select 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.¹⁰

Sri Aurobindo addressed Bharati as 'Ba' and Bharati addressed Sri Aurobindo as 'Ghosh'. 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 Motilal Roy, his unique host in Chandernagore: '...Please also get us some clothes sent from Calcutta, as they are very urgently needed, especially as I may now have to go out from time to time breaking my old rule of seclusion. I am also in need of a pair of shoes as Bharati has bagged the pair I had.'¹¹ His need is greater than mine—that was the tone of the letter. Such was their intimacy.

Bharati, as reported by his listeners, sang the French National anthem like a native Frenchman. Perfect was his French accent. And who would have perfected Bharati's French accent, if not Sri Aurobindo?

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. At times he was naked but for his loincloth. 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, then turned it back to its proper position and disappeared very fast. His action helped me in finding out a solution to my persisting problem'.¹² That was the greatness of Kullasamy, revered by these two eminent men.

The two literary giants' stay in Pondicherry turned out to be their best creative period in their lifetime. To say that both began their life in Pondicherry as fellow-sufferers is far from exaggeration. In a letter written by Sri Aurobindo in 1912, there is a reference to the grinding poverty they invariably faced: 'The situation just now is that we have Rs. 1½ or so in hand. Srinivasa is also without money. As to Bharati living on nothing means an uncertain quantity. The only other man in Pondicherry whom I could at present ask for help is absent *sine die* and my messenger to the South not returned... No doubt, God will provide but He has contracted a bad habit of waiting till the last moment. I only hope He does not wish us to learn how to live on a minus quantity like Bharati'.¹³

This is how the Mahayogi paid tribute to the Mahakavi's power of endurance. And Bharati, as we learn from his several biographers, was not cowed down by poverty. His poetic career was not allowed to suffer and the poet in Bharati became aware of the boon that had been conferred on him in the form of Sri Aurobindo's friendship. In this connection Prof. P. Marudanayagam avers: 'The greatest contribution of Sri Aurobindo to Tamil literature is what he did to Subramania Bharati, the inaugurator of modern poetry in Tamil. It was during his stay in Pondicherry as a political exile from 1908 to 1918 that Bharati's creative vigour reached its peak yielding the best of his writings in verse and prose. If Bharati entered Pondicherry as a political revolutionary, he left it as a *Gnani*.

And Sri Aurobindo played an extraordinary role in this profound transformation: their frequent meetings brought about this alchemy'.¹⁴

Bharati must have been very much impressed with Sri Aurobindo's vast learning of very many languages, the realms of gold he had travelled and many goodly states and kingdoms he had seen. We are given to understand that Bharati did not have much of formal education that would have exposed him to the great English classics. Hence it may not be wrong to believe that his contact with the Bengali intellectual would have put him on the right track of studying the English poets. Sri Aurobindo felt that 'Shelley was a greater poet by nature than any of the romantics'¹⁵ The fact that Bharati used a pen name 'Shelley Dasan', a devotee of poet Shelley, is proof enough that both the Mahakavi and the Mahayogi thought along the same lines.

The Mahayogi's favourite poet was Walt Whitman. In his *Future Poetry* he wrote: 'He is a great poet, one of the greatest in the power of his substance, the energy of his vision, the force of his style, the largeness at once of his personality and his universality'¹⁶. No reader of Bharati's poetry would ever fail to see the deep impression that Whitman's cosmic vision, nationalism, sympathetic attitude to women and conception of free verse had left on the mind and poetry of Bharati. As a translator of Bharati's prose poems, I would say his *vachana Kavithaigal* is a mixture of *vedas* and Whitman.

Individual progress and collective progress are interdependent. Before the individual can take a leap forward, it is necessary that something of an antecedent progress be achieved in the collective life. A way has to be therefore found in which the two-fold progress can go on

simultaneously. That way is the spiritualised society. A spiritual human society would start from and try to realize three essential truths of existence—God, Freedom, Unity—without which our material life cannot reach its highest fulfillment. These three, in essence, are one. The first aim of all its activities is not to renounce life but to make life perfect with a Divine perfection. It is to this great future that Sri Aurobindo invites us. It must be noted that Sri Aurobindo is no armchair philosopher. His programme includes not only a better individual but a spiritualised society and world unity in an organized diversity.

Sri Aurobindo took the trouble of learning the Tamil language, studying its literature and mastering what the Tamil mystics and intellectuals have to say on the mystery of life. The first chapter of ‘*Thirukkural*’, a few stanzas each by saint poets like Nammalwar, Kulasekhara Alwar and Andal were all that Sri Aurobindo had rendered into English. Bharati was his teacher.¹⁷

Subramania Bharati learnt the Bengali language from Sri Aurobindo. That helped him translate several short stories and essays of Rabindranath Tagore from Bengali into Tamil.

All life, according to Sri Aurobindo, is yoga. Sri Aurobindo’s yoga postulates the eradication of ego. Aurobindo’s choice of the poems of three Alwars from the vast body of Bhakti poetry in Tamil indicates that he found kindred souls in them. Through such translations Sri Aurobindo introduced to the West some of the best Tamil classics. In fact, he showed the way to the future translators of Indian classics into English. Now look at the way Sri Aurobindo pleads for a lot of freedom in translation: ‘A translator is not necessarily bound to the

exact word and letter of the original he chooses; he can make his own poem of it if he likes, and that is what is very often done. This is all the more legitimate since we find that literal translations more completely betray than those that are reasonably free, turning life into death and poetic power into poverty and flatness’¹⁸

But Sri Aurobindo does not take too much of liberty with the original Tamil but tries to keep as close as possible to it. Here is an example from Sri Aurobindo’s rendering of Andal’s *paasuram* that immediately captures the spirit of the original in simple and exquisite lines:

I dreamed a dream, O friend!
 There were beatings of the drum and
 Blowings of the conch; and under the
 Canopy hung heavily with strings of
 Pearls He came, my lover and my lord,
 The vanquisher of the demon Madhu and
 Grasped me by the hand.
 I dreamed a dream, O friend!
 Those whose voices are blest, they sang
 The vedic songs. The holy grass was laid.
 The sun was established. He who was
 puissant
 Like a war-elephant in its rage, He seized
 My hand and we paced round the flame.

The inspirer, of course, was the Mahakavi.

Both the giants, being well versed in Sanskrit language, translated *Bhagavad Gita*—Bharati in Tamil and Sri Aurobindo in English. Comparing the contents of both the translations, one can easily say that they had discussed shloka after shloka, arrived at a conclusion before they penned down their translations in two different languages. Had the Mahakavi stayed in Pondicherry for a few more years, the Mahayogi, triggered by his friend’s inspiration, would surely have translated some more of the deserving Tamil writers into English and introduced them to the West. ■

REFERENCES

- 1 K. Amrita, *A Pilgrimage to Sri Aurobindo*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2015, p. 4.
- 2 A. R. Venkatachalapathy, *Cartoons of Bharati: India 1906-1910*, p. 190.
- 3 K. Amrita, *A Pilgrimage to Sri Aurobindo*, p. 25.
- 4 Nolini Kanta Gupta & K. Amrita, *Reminiscences*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1969, p. 42.
- 5 Sri Aurobindo, *Autobiographical Notes & Other Writings of Historical Interest*, Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2015, p. 255.
- 6 K. Amrita, *A Pilgrimage to Sri Aurobindo*, p. 59.
- 7 Nolini Kanta Gupta & K. Amrita, *Reminiscences*, p. 62.
- 8 P. Raja, *The Sun and the Stars*, Sivaganga: Agaram, 1982.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 40-4.
- 10 K. Amrita, *A Pilgrimage to Sri Aurobindo*, p. 6.
- 11 Sri Aurobindo, *Autobiographical Notes and Other Writings of Historical Interest*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2015, p. 205.
- 12 Sambandam, *Pudhuvayil Bharati*, Chidambaram, Manivasagar Pathipagam, 1982, p. 166.
- 13 Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library, Vol. 27, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972, pp. 426-27.
- 14 P. Marudanayagam, *Across Seven Seas*, Delhi, B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1994, p. 59.
- 15 Sri Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1985, p. 122.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 145.
- 17 Sambandam, *Pudhuvayil Bharati*, p. 126.
- 18 Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Poetry, Literature and Art*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972, p. 431.

* Dr P. Raja, former Professor of English, Kanchi Mamunivar Centre for Postgraduate Studies & Research, Pondicherry is a bi-lingual author. He has contributed special articles to *Encyclopaedia of Post-colonial Literatures in English* [London] and *Encyclopaedia of Tamil Literature in English*. At present he is a Board-member of 'Shabdana' (Centre for Translation), Sahitya Akademi, Bangalore.

Life and Death

Life, death,—death, life; the words have led for ages
Our thought and consciousness and firmly seemed
Two opposites; but now long-hidden pages
Are opened, liberating truths undreamed.
Life only is, or death is life disguised,—
Life a short death until by Life we are surprised.

—Sri Aurobindo