

**Life and Works  
of  
BHARATIDASAN**



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## Foreword

In the history of modern Tamil Poetry. Bharathidasan occupies a supreme place. His contribution to the enrichment of Tamil Literature has been unanimously acclaimed by the scholars and literary critics. His erudition and creative genius in the trifurcation of Tamil prompted him to write epics, narratives, lyrics, poems on nature, musical compositions and dramas. He has been both a poet and a prose writer. His essays on current problems and revolutionary themes deserve special mention. His diction is both literary and rustic. Since he desired that the common man also should understand his writings, he preferred to effectively present his thoughts in an easy and intelligible language, which is both lucid and powerful. His style is simple, straight but majestic. He is famous for his sense of humour, invective and irony. He ridiculed the social foibles. He repudiated the system of Varnashrama Dharma that lead to the creation of castes, and tribes. He was against blind beliefs and superstitions. Though he had been initially religious, he wrote lyrics on God Muruga; after his association with the Self Respect Movement organised by Thanthai Periyar E.V.R., he became a staunch advocate of rationalistic thoughts. Through his pen, he forcibly introduced revolutionary views and reformatory ideas in order to

realise an egalitarian society, in which liberty, equality and fraternity should prevail. It is often said that Bharathidasan was a bard of local cult. To some extent, this may be true. Nevertheless, he has been basically a humanist and hence he treated the whole of humanity as a family and his poems on universal themes bear this global perspective.

The greatness of the poet is limitless. Hundreds of blossomed and budding poets who imbibed his ideology and techniques of literary creation styled themselves as a separate group known as Bharathidasan Paramparai, the Lineage of Bharathidasan. Even his worst critics never failed to identify his original and wonderful creative genius as manifested in the different genres of his literary creations. The regional political parties headed by Periyar E.V.R. and Perarignar Anna utilized the stuff and substance of Bharathidasan's revolutionary poems to awaken the slumbering Tamils, to realise their worthy heritage and to regenerate and restructure an ideal society. Due to the potency of his poems, the followers of these two great political and social leaders were able to form governments, winning the confidence of the public. Recognising the due merit of the poet, the then Honourable Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, M.G. Ramachandran named the new University at Tiruchirapalli after the poet Bharathidasan. The Government of Tamil Nadu constituted a committee in 1990 to celebrate the centenary of Bharathidasan for one year. It is essential to record here that scholars, professionals, politicians and public from all over India wholeheartedly participated in various seminars and meetings on Bharathidasan, organised by the educational and So-

cial institutions. The Tamil University has got plans to bring out books both of research value and public interest in this year of Bharathidasan Centenary Celebrations.

A detailed account of the life and works of Bharathidasan has been written by many scholars and poets both in prose and verse. The poet's son, Thiru Mannar Mannan has written an elaborate and interesting biography of his father entitled *Karuppukkuyilin Neruppukkural*. The poet Murugu Sundaram has collected various accounts connected with the life and letters of Bharathidasan and presented in an interesting prose under the titles *Paavendar Ninaivukal* and *Paavendar Palkalaikkazhakam*. But this is the first book in English to present the biography of the poet, bringing forth the salient and significant aspects of the life and works of Bharathidasan. The author Dr.P.Arangasamy, Professor and Head of the Department of Translation has based his book on the materials available in the Tamil sources along with his relevant comments. His knowledge in Tamil and English is worth mentioning. He has narrated the life sketch of the poet under twelve headings. They are really interesting and inspiring. I congratulate the author for this monograph on the life and works of Bharathidasan.

Thanjavur-5  
Date: 11.10.1991

C. BALASUBRAMANIAN



## PREFACE

Pleasure is mine in authoring this monograph, that introduces Bharatidasan, the dynamic Tamil poet to an exclusive non-Tamil audiences for the first time in English both, within India and without. Surprising it is that the poet is almost unfamiliar even among hundred-thousand Tamils domiciled in the north of India. Even their awareness, if any, is only partial and their views almost jaundiced. To remove these setbacks is also one of the aims of this volume. The Poet's nationalistic fervour and his close association with V.V.S.Iyer and Bharathiyar in pre-Independence days are given adequate coverage. The impression that prevails in certain quarters is that he was a fanatic of Tamil and Brahminophobic. Sooner these coloured notions are dispelled, the better. If the portrait of the poet is viewed objectively and found to be truly convincing, I shall feel amply rewarded.

Even though there is no dearth either of the history of the poet or of critical evaluations of his numerous works, it is keenly felt that his prose works and poems meant for juveniles have not been given adequate coverage in Tamil. It is to fill this void that separate chapters on these two aspects have been added. Even among these, the essay based on the Literature for the Young is an after-thought. In serialising the contents, it ought to have preceded the penultimate essay. This slight discrepancy in the order of the chapters may kindly be condoned.

Strictly speaking, this is neither an authentic nor an exhaustive biography on Bharatidasan. The materials that it contains are drawn from all the hitherto available life-histories, Tamil critiques and memoirs that revolve around his life. More than anything else, the life-sketch of the poet and other books on his various aspects by no less than his only son Mr. Mannar Mannan were of ready reference. I must confess once again that this monograph is only a slender introduction to the poet and his works. An omnibus biography in English plus an elaborate and a balanced critique on all types of his composition is the prime need of the day. This booklet is bound to provoke scholars to embark on those lines in the days to come. The State Government of Tamil Nadu may as well initiate the task as a project or request the quasi Governmental bodies such as National Book Trust or Sahitya Academy to undertake this, besides persuading the philately committee at the centre to commemorate the poet.

This book would not have seen the light of the day but for the kind permission of Dr. C. Balasubramanian, Vice-chancellor, Tamil University. Not only he entrusted me with the job of narrating this life-sketch to coincide with the Birth Centenary of Bharatidasan but also graciously sanctioned a sum of rupees thousand to foot the bills of the secretarial assistance and a few latest books on the poet. I take pleasure in heartily acknowledging his munificence and his scholarly appreciation.

This attempt was made possible in a short period of about five months, thanks to the unstinted assistance of my junior colleague Dr. S. Rathakrishnan,



Lecturer in the Department of Translation, Tamil University. It is he who laboriously went through a number of books in Tamil in the process of collecting materials. Though I took liberty to screen them out, delete, comment in between and to add a few chapters, it is he who gave me hints and points in the order in which I wanted him to provide. I heartily thank him for all the help rendered.

My thanks are due to Pulavar C.Elangovan, Assistant Director, Publication Department, Tamil University and his staff, particularly Mr.M.Balakrishnan, D.Balasubramanian and Miss. K.Hemamalini for having gone through the proof and expedited the printing of this monograph.

7\_10\_1991.  
Thanjavur-5.

**Palany. Arangasamy.**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Among the modern Tamil writers, Bharatidasan is pre-eminently known as a great thinker and a reputed poet. His contributions include poetry, prose, *kavyas*, plays and criticism in social and literary aspects. Spontaneous expression, lucid language, dynamic thinking and outspoken approach are some of his characteristic features. His deep scholarship in ancient and mediaeval Tamil literature is clearly discernible in his literary output. His poetical pieces, couched in a language which can be easily understood by learned and gentry need no commentary to comprehend them. As a poet among poets, Bharatidasan wrote for the poorest of the poor and championed their cause. Many of his poems breathe his ardent love for Tamil, its ancestry, cultural purport and lasting eminence. Devoid of chauvinism, they objectively highlight the heritage of Tamils and call for an awakening among the masses in every walk of life.

Contemporary society found in his poems innumerable, a panacea for evils such as religious bigotry, blind dogmatism and bewildering superstitions. Following the footsteps of Subramanya Bharathi, the bard of the Nation and herald of modern Tamil poetry, Bharatidasan spared no pains to outrightly condemn the foolish notions and meaningless rituals of the contemporary society. In some respects he went ahead of his mentor and unequivocally

cally ~~stared~~ the evil practice of child marriage and persuaded the widow-remarriage. Surprisingly Bharathi's poems maintain a passive silence about widows' marriage. Perhaps the national poet was reticent to openly defy the tradition-bound society. But such a fear was out of question for Bharatidasan who was known for his conviction of thought, courage and dare devilry.

Bharatidasan's poems throb with an urge and immediacy to revive and rejuvenate the society to the core. In highlighting the cause of widow remarriage and insisting on it, Bharatidasan did a social revolution and stood apart from many of his contemporary poets. A number of his women-characters in minor *kavyas* and narrative poems are made to take a leading role over the men. The women-characters persuade, counsel and chasten their male counter-parts and prove themselves equestrian warriors when occasion demands. It is how Bharatidasan upheld the virtues and qualities of women. With undaunted courage, he braved the social evils and took cudgels to set them right. His being revolutionary is not only because of his political association but also due to his loud thinking in cutting across many unwanted social taboos and religious barriers.

Bharatidasan championed the cause of labourers, agrarian and industrial and pleaded a better treatment for them. Those who were oppressed and depressed in the tradition-bound society found in him a strong advocate for them. He waged a war against illiteracy and pleaded for women's education. Apart from these mundane affairs, he is at his best in graphically portraying various aspects of nature.

Bharatidasan could rightly be called a landscape poet. Innumerable of his poems bear witness to the fact that he was penetrating in his observation and passionately endearing in picturing the flora and fauna of the wooded surroundings. Nothing seems to have escaped his notice from the conglomeration of nature. Silvery cascade, gentle and smooth flowing of perennial rivers, the vast expanse of blue sky and oceans; blooming orchids and greenery, torrential down-pour of rains, steep hills and lofty mountains are brought within the purview of his broad-based poetical observation.

It is unfortunate that such a poet of perennial interest, more often than not, is seasonally and at times topically presented among the public. Adequate coverage of Bharatidasan, as a social reformer, nature poet, prose-writer and a linguist is yet to be given even among the literary circles. His being a consummate poet is yet to be highlighted among the scholarly and literate. No doubt the modern literature abounds in voluminous writings on Bharatidasan. But invariably they are all in Tamil language. In fact, the essence of the poet is such as to be taken far beyond the frontiers of Tamil and to be made known among the non-Tamils also. It augurs well that of late, a few doctoral dissertations in English on Bharatidasan have been made in Madurai and Madras Universities. Some have analysed him in comparative perspective also. Such advanced theses have not emerged out of their academic shelves but started gathering dust as usual as archival materials. In view of the Bharatidasan Birth Centenary Celebrations, the University in Trichinopoly named after him has now embarked on a representative collection of his poems translated

into English in chronological order. The Madurai University is understood to have brought out a set of critical essays in English on various poetical contributions of Bharatidasan. These are all no doubt timely contributions by these higher institutions in the cause of perpetuating and immortalising the memory of the poet. Along with this, but in a slightly different angle, it was felt that a suitable life sketch of Bharatidasan is also the prime need of the day. This seemed an ideal step to take him among the non-Tamils all over India and abroad. It is exactly to fulfil this need of the day in the service of disseminating his life and letters in a brief canvas, this biography is written. The aim is to give an authentic picture of the poet with materials drawn from as many sources as possible. As an appraisal of the poetry in him belongs to the domains of criticism, an objective portrayal of the poet in every aspect as far as possible in a chronological sequence is aimed at.

## 2. BIRTH AND EARLY LIFE

Pondicherry is a small harbour-town, roughly eightyfive kilometres south of Madras on the shores of the Bay of Bengal. This historic place played a hide-and-seek game during the carnatic wars and even subsequently, when the French and the English vied with one another in having a foot hold in the coromandel coast of India. Finally when it came to be possessed by the French, Lord Dupleix established there, a permanent Head Quarters for the French territory with Mahe, Chandranagore, Yenam and Karaikal as the pocket-boroughs of the French empire. These tiny pockets continued to be under the Head Quarters of Pondicherry even when the whole of India came under the Union Jack. These tiny French territories in India were under the administrative control of a French Governor at Pondicherry. No wonder that there had been a political and commercial contact mainly with France for the subjects of Pondicherry. A number of native traders were importing to and exporting from France and other overseas French territories, commodities such as rice, onion, groundnut on the one hand, silk fabrics, consumer articles, gold and silver on the other.

There lived in Kamatchiamman Street, Pondicherry a mediocre merchant Kanagasabai Mudaliyar son of Subbarayar. The family's main income was from the export of onion and groundnut. Dealing with merchandise, be in export or in import will always be

risky and as such Kanagasabai Mudaliyar's family had to undergo the ups and downs in its business career. Kanagasabai led a bigamous life, an accepted social practice in those days. It was to his second wife that two sons and two daughters were born. The third issue, a male was born on the 29th of April 1891 at about 10.40 pm. This male child was destined to be singularly reputed as a revolutionary poet in the years to come. According to the traditions of the family, the third child was partially named after his grand-father Subbarayan. In fact, Kanaga Subburathinam was the proper name of the poet in his early days and even after, when he began his work as a school teacher in Pondicherry and Karaikal regions.

In recollecting his childhood, the poet used to say that there were occasions when they ate luxuriously the cakes made of powdered cashew, fried in ghee. When the wheel of fortune turned otherwise, the family had to struggle for a mere survival simply with rice gruel and sauce made of cheap vegetables. The poet was thus so frank and humble as to retrace his early life with neither hesitation nor any compunction.

Father Kanagasabai is said to have been a connoisseur of fine arts. Almost regularly he used to attend dramas even when they were performed in places away from Pondicherry. Many dramatic troupes, he is said to have brought to Pondy and made them enact dramas, in and around. This gentleman was kind-hearted and affable. No wonder that his house was therefore frequented by scholarly pandits every now and then. It is this early association with artists, playwrights and scholars that



enabled his son Subburathinam to be in good stead with dramas not only in creative writing but also in making arrangements for their theatrical performance.

Subburathinam's early education was imparted not in a recognised academic institution. Those were the days of traditional learning under the tutelage of some elderly scholars or pandits who would generally teach the tiny tots by making them recite poems and scribble the alphabet on the sand-spread floor of the verandahs of houses. As a recompense, these self-styled and self-employed elderly teachers would be supplied with all homely needs by the parents of the wards in respective localities. It must be pointed out that these traditional elderly teachers usually held in high esteem in those days. It is in such a school, Subburathinam has memorised the whole of *Tirukkural*, a number of *Sadagams* and Tamil Thesarus known as *nigandu*. Assignments that inculcated into the wards a practice of memorising, were very much encouraged in traditional schools. This healthy habit and an essential pre requisite for learning are conspicuously absent now-a-days among the school-going children.

Subburathinam was a child prodigy. In the art of writing poetry, he has never been ill at ease. He was spontaneous in composing praise-worthy poems on the spur of the moment. One day his step-mother brought ripe bananas and gave each one to young Subburathinam, his brother and to his sisters. But one cluster of bananas, she has kept hidden exclusively for her own son. Having sensed this, clever Subburathinam unearthed the entire lot of fruits and clandestinely ate them too. It was a deliberate mis-

chief indeed. Enraged at this, the step-mother complained about it to her husband. On enquiry, Subburathinam did not orally answer but hurriedly scribbled some lines and tacitly handed them over to his father. It was a fine piece of Tamil blank verse in single octet. His argument in that was "why should the step-mother be biased to him. Should she not be fair to all of us?" Braving heavy odds was thus a quality innate in the future poet.

Tiruppulisamy was a popular teacher in the neighbourhood. It was under him that young Subburathinam learned his alphabet and gradually showed his academic progress. That teacher was a maestro of songs. He had a group of songsters and also a troupe. This group used to come around the streets of the area in the early morning, singing hymns, aubades and songs with devotional fervour especially on the Navarathri days and on other holy occasions. The dramatic troupe was similarly active in enacting dramas on festive occasions. Subburathinam, besides being studious, showed his keen interest in music and drama sponsored by his teacher and earned a good name. The teacher too earnestly paid an individual attention to his industrious pupil and laid a solid foundation for his learning and knowledge. If Tiruppulisamy inculcated in Subburathinam a discipline and methodical study, there was one more teacher who taught him the art of organisedly writing poetry. That was Bangaru Pathar who served as President of the Pondicherry Tamil Sangam for a number of years.

Having passed out of his early studies under Tiruppulisamy, young Subburathinam stepped into the

portals of Culvey school founded by patron Subbaraya Chettiar. It was here that Bangaru Pathar was the poet's Tamil teacher. As mentioned earlier, the Tamil teacher taught Subburathinam the art of Tamil prosody. Subburathinam's optional study was Brevet de Langue Indigene' to entitle himself to become a teacher at a later stage. Among the forty students of the class, Subburathinam stood first in the overall performance and thus became a merit scholarship student.

Periyasamy Pillai a friend of his father, was also partly responsible in developing the poetical talents of Subburathinam. The Pillai used to call on him in his house every now and then. One Venu Naicker of Pondicherry ran a wrestling unit at one end of Kamatchiamman street. Young Subburathinam enrolled himself as a member and regularly practised himself in the art of wrestling.

Back at home, Subburathinam everyday proved himself an exceptional boy of the household. Critical in temperament, he never hesitated to indulge in verbal duel with his father and brothers. Among his class-mates who used to gather in the beach in evenings, he would argue that his mother-tongue is Tamil while they professed themselves as French-speaking citizens of overseas France. They never identified themselves as Tamils, much to the chagrin of Subburathinam. When he was hardly eighteen years of age, an event unexpectedly marked a turning point in his life. That was his historic meeting with Bharathi, the famous nationalistic poet.

Pondicherry the French enclave was the hub of

patriotic activities of India's freedom-lovers. It proved to be a resort for patriots and an ideal haunt for them after they secretly escaped from the clutches of British police. At one time the famous patriots like Bharathiyar, V.V.S. Iyer, Mandayam Srinivasa Achary and a host of others were almost the domiciled citizens of Pondicherry. In local parlance they were the 'Swadeshis.' Subburathinam had many an opportunity to move with them and to observe them at close quarters in social gatherings. One Venu Naicker, a young wrestler and a friend of Subburathinam got married. In an informal chat after the wedding-feast was over, Subburathinam as requested by his friends recited a patriotic song of Bharathiyar. The song sung by Subburathinam in a mellifluous voice was to everybody's liking. But the songster did not know that the composer of the song was also in the same gathering. Bharathi had come to Pondicherry in 1908 and he was not more than twenty six years of age. After a formal introduction, Bharathiyar invited the younger man to his residence. It was thus, their acquaintance grew into a deep-rooted intimacy and at one stage, Subburathinam changed his proper name as Bharatidasan the adorer of Bharathi.

Subburathinam's pseudonym was not merely a token of his love and reverence towards Bharathi but also a historic necessity. Subburathinam, the Tamil teacher was a servant of the French Government. The rules did not permit him to openly indulge in seditious activities against Englishmen however much the English and the French were antagonistic to each other. Thus the pseudonym served the purpose of the young teacher to aim his poems against the British. Many scholars in these days are critical of the choice

of the word Dasan -- a Sanskrit suffix. Such an appendage along with the name was the fashion of the day. Sankara Dass, Bhaskara Dass, Viswanatha Dass were the popular champions of theatrical arts at Madurai and known for their veiled invective-songs against the British. Hence Bharatidasan should be taken to mean an adorer of Bharathi.

The irony is that nobody would move with Bharathi, as he was a Swadeshi who had sought refuge in Pondicherry for the fear of punitive action by British police in the Indian territory. Subburathinam was unmindful of these hurdles. He was one of the frequent callers of Bharathi to legibly rewrite what has been already written by him and to read aloud the poems of his choice. Once Subburathinam sat in a chair and scribbled something in the table wherein Bharathi used to work. Another of a casual friend of Bharathi made satirical comment on Subburathinam's action. Bharathi remarked forthwith, 'Subburathinam could write nice poems.' "If that is so, let him do write a poem now itself," pat came the demand from that casual friend. In a few minutes Subburathinam composed two Cintu Songs each consisting of 4 metrical kannis and recited them also in a rich and resonant voice. The meaningful song, sung in a melodious voice was a source of great wonder to all those who had gathered in the house. Bharathi copied the poem with his own hand and posted it for publication in a Tamil daily 'Swadesamitran' with a note of commendation that "it is composed by Kanaga Subburathinam of Bharathi's poetical group." Similar timely help Bharathi is said to have never extended to anybody. Young Subburathinam won such an immediate recognition from

Bharathi when he was hardly 18 years of age. This was also one of the reasons why Subburathinam renamed himself as an adorer of Bharathi. Ironically, this pseudonym Bharatidasan has become life-long and so familiar that his original name has fallen into oblivion.

Other reasons, enumerated as far back as 1961 by Subburathinam himself are as follows: "He has won my heart in those days. It was only Bharathiyar who solely and firmly opposed casteism. None in the previous centuries has opposed it so vehemently as he did. E.V.R.'s campaign too against casteism started only later on. I supported Bharathiyar and took a pseudonym Bharatidasan not because of getting support from a particular group. I did so only to propagate the eradication of casteism and also to remind the Pandits to write poems on current and relevant matters in an easy style as much as Bharathiyar did."

It is therefore no wonder that we find a lot of similarities in the thought-content, stylistic pattern and dynamic outlook between Bharathi and Bharatidasan. Their friendship lasted until Bharathi left Pondicherry in December, 1918. But the patriotic fervour ignited in him by Bharathi did not get itself extinguished in the younger poet. Certain vested interests in Pondicherry betrayed Bharatidasan and saw to him suspended of his teaching profession and even put him behind the bars. It was on the very day, the father of the young poet's fiancée arrived at Pondicherry. He, one Paradesi Mudaliar from Perumathoor near Chidambaram was dumb-founded when he heard that his prospective son-in-law was in gaol. He was

about to retract his original decision of giving his daughter in marriage to the young poet.

Luckily a local gentleman and a good Samaritan Sabapathi Pillai interceded in the matter and convinced Paradesi Mudaliar of young Subburathinam's bonafides. He also promised that he would undertake the case of the young man legally and see him exonerated of the cooked-up charges. He kept his promise subsequently and thus smoothened the process of Subburathinam's marriage without further handicaps.

The marriage between Subburathinam and Palaniammal was solemnised with all the customary rituals and ceremonies at Perumathoor on the 13th of June, 1920. Very close relatives from Pondicherry attended the marriage at the bride's house. No doubt the newly wedded couple were happy as usual in Pondicherry. A few months have passed. Subburathinam started feeling a boredom in a marital life with no job or income. He, therefore decided to start a business of his own and planned in favour of clandestine transport of gold coins and diamonds into British India. These precious metals were available comparatively at a cheaper rate in French territory. Many traders and local bullion-dealers were in need of young, energetic and reliable young men to help them doing this clandestine business. The *modus operandi* was to keep the gold coins or dollars in between the leather sheets of the chappals and walk with them on through the country-side into British India. Thus the land-customs will be hoodwinked in practice. This was of course not to the liking of the young newly-married man but there was no other al-



ternative to make both ends meet. Reluctantly, but continuously Subburathinam did this work as a self-styled trafficker but gave it up altogether when he was restored to his teaching job after he won over the legal battle.

Though the entire pay and arrears he received, after the assumption of office, he was transferred to Tirumalairayanpattinam near Karaikal, another French enclave at a distance of about hundred and odd kilometres from Pondicherry. The authorities transferring what they call the unwanted and undesirables to a far-off place was a customary practice in those days also.

Subburathinam went there with his wife and began his life in that small village. A few days afterwards on the 11th of September 1921, he heard with a tremendous shock that Subramania Bharathi, his mentor breathed his last. More than anybody else, it was he who personally felt a great loss in the demise of the national bard.

Family life in Karaikal region was routine and uneventful excepting the birth of a girl on 15th September 1921. He named the new-born babe Saraswathi and ceremoniously donned her with a waist-band made of yarn that he himself spun. He was in those days a typical patriot, methodically undertook to the spinning of Khadi yarn as any other patriot would have done. Moreover what he presented to his wife on the eve of Deepavali was a handloom saree woven with coarse khadi-yarn. Such was his patriotism unswerving and so also that of his friends at Pondicherry.

One of them was Jegannathan, a printer and bosom-friend of Subburathinam. He was a typical Gandhian even in his sartorial habits. Himself and a host of others including Saigon Chinniah made sincere attempts to get Subburathinam transferred to Pondicherry region. They felt a sheer necessity to get him back to Pondicherry for the simple reason that they would discuss with Subburathinam anything under the sun, right from local politics up to the freedom struggle of India.



### 3. TEACHING CAREER

A word about his teaching career retrospectively is not out of place here. Years back, Subburathinam academically qualified himself to be a teacher when he had just attained the age of 17. Competent he was, no doubt but what stood against him from becoming a teacher was his young age. As per the rules of the Government, he ought to have completed eighteen years of age and hence the colonial Government of Pondicherry declined to recognise his application for a teacher's post. The Vice-President of the Chamber of Commerce, Pondicherry, Pullappavu Mudaliar pleaded with the Educational authorities to grant an age-exemption to Subburathinam. Once this was acceded to, thanks to a chief official Kayyar who was kind and considerate, young Subburathinam got himself appointed as a teacher.

The first posting was at Neravi in Karaikal region on 26, July 1909. The young man went with his father to that village nearly eighty miles away from his home-town to join and report for duty. Seeing him accompanied with his father, both the teachers and the taught were under the impression that the young man was to join there as a student. As it was a small village, certain elderly men too felt unhappy after knowing that a 'very young boy' had come to teach their children. But this initial disharmony gradually disappeared. The villagers very soon understood that the young teacher was of a high

calibre and fairly competent.

Once an occasion arose for the young poet to prove his mettle and intelligence. One Viswalingam Pillai was locally known for his literary discourses. A proud and haughty man as he was, he made fun of Subburathinam stating, 'Is he the person to teach Tamil? What could he teach?' At times, he put questions that were deliberate, intriguing and puzzling, mainly to derive a malicious pleasure out of a consternation at the other end. Periodical literary and mythological discourses, to an exclusive local audience this Pillai used to deliver at his residence. At the time of one such occurrence, Pillai was giving lectures on *Thiruvilayadal Puranam*. Young Subburathinam, the teacher was one of those who assembled there.

In the course of the lecture, the Pillai quoted from the Puranam, a stanza which ended with an imperative, 'kela' but he recited kelai -- a slight difference but an opportunity to testify the accuracy and perfectness of one's own memory. The faculty of retentive memory has been acclaimed in those days as an essential component of an individuals' mental ability. Subburathinam, the young Tamil teacher waxed bold, stood up and corrected the speaker. A tacit blow to the puffed-up and scholarly arrogance of the Pillai. A verbal duel ensued and at the end of which, the text of *Thiruvilayadal Puranam* was brought in. What was said by the young teacher was found to be the correct version. This effected a great change in the very attitude of the Pillai towards Subburathinam and thereafter he himself used to speak very highly of the newly posted young teacher. How-

ever the verbal duel that had taken place did not prevent the young man from respecting that elderly gentleman whenever they met with each other. Even though the young poet was said to be emotional and at times spicy-tongued, he never failed to pay due respects to elders.

The reaction of the local residents to Subburathinam was almost the same dislike when he was posted at another tiny hamlet, Koonichampattu. Conservative, dogmatic and adamant as they were, the villagers did not like a very young man to teach their wards. No accommodation there and nobody came forward to provide him food, even on payment. After the school-hours were over, he therefore went to a few nearby villages and fended himself with eatables such as appam, rice-cake, boiled tapioca and fruits. When he went to the same village for the second time on a routine transfer, there had been no appreciable change in the attitude of the villagers. This time the young poet's wife was expectant. Local ayah or a midwife declined to attend on the pregnant woman. She, after two days delivered a baby which was unfortunately short-lived. Subburathinam sought the help of his personal friends from a neighbouring village to perform the last rites of the deceased babe.

Despite these obstacles, Subburathinam continued his teaching career for over thirty years in both the Karaikal and Pondicherry regions. Thirupuvanam is a small village within the jurisdiction of Pondicherry. In a local election in 1913, one Kepley stood for the chairmanship of the municipality. The young teacher undauntingly stood in favour of the opposite group. The opposite group

succeeded in the outcome with a thumbing majority. Kepley was ill at ease and not able to brook the role played by the young teacher in inflicting a crushing defeat on him and his lieutenants. Using his official influence, he took revenge by putting the young teacher behind the bars. The case went on for a few months. Lawyer Sabapathy Pillai took up the cudgels on behalf of the poet, pleaded in a court of law and won the case. The court ordered the authorities to pay to Subburathinam, the entire cost of the litigation with the salary impounded until then.

As per the orders of the French Government, midday-meal was provided to the students of the school. The young Tamil teacher was to monitor the arrangements ever since the system began and instil a sense of discipline among the wards. Provision had been made for non-vegetarian food on every Wednesdays and Saturdays. One day the students en bloc neither did go in for lunch nor did create any disturbance. The news of this passive resistance, the Tamil teacher heard and forthwith swung into action. On enquiry, he found out that the dhall-sauce was too brackish to tolerate.

He also tasted it found it to be so and hence enquired the cook about it. His reply was not proper and satisfactory. He simply said that it was because of a bottle-gourd which they had cooked with dhall. In a few moments, all the students went in a big procession under the leadership of the Tamil teacher to see the Educational Officer and to submit their grievances.

"The Government of France, under whom we all



serve gave to the whole world, the very principle of democracy. Keeping it uprightly besides developing it on healthy grounds is possible through education. Fully realising this, the Government of France have launched a compulsory elementary Education in this French territory. If only the students are hunger-free, they could concentrate on their studies and hence the midday-meal scheme. But our school nullifies the munificent and lofty aim of the Government."

An account from the Tamil teacher so impassioned as this and a request to set the matters right was very well appreciated by the Educational Officer. Incidentally it may be recalled that as an acclaimed poet later on, he was to underline the importance of education at all levels. A house wherein prevails illiteracy is gloomy and the life of illiterates is inert and vacuum, he says categorically. He is forthright in asserting that neither religion nor caste nor poverty should stand in the way of an individual's education. The power to remove illiteracy should be vested with the Government and not with the religious leaders as they are invariably biased and dogmatic. These were the contents of a small rhythmic blank-verse which the Tamil teacher composed on the centenary celebrations of Jules Fery.

During Subburathinam's tenure of office as a warden-cum-teacher at Nettappakkam, an Inspector of Schools came on an official visit. After his inspection was over, he queried the teacher informally, "How are you getting on here in a village, Subburathinam? I have heard of your poetic talents so admired by Professor K.Swaminathan in his talk, broadcast by AIR, Madras. Such a respectful Tamil poet should

not be kept dumped in a tiny village where even a postal article would take, days together to reach. I shall take efforts to get you transferred to Pondicherry soon." Accordingly transfer order to join in a local school at Pondicherry came, in about a couple of weeks.

It may not be out of place to quote-what was commented on, about the young poet by K.Swaminathan, the then Professor of English at Madras. "Among the living poets in Tamil Nadu who is true poet? Who is an active poet? Who is an immortal poet? To these series of questions, we could answer undoubtedly, it is none other than Bharatidasan. He deserves this pseudonym in more than one respect. The chief characteristics of his poetry are an agility and force." He is not a versifier clinging on to a mere prosody. He is a spontaneous poet. What a force the poem *ulagam unnudaiyadhy*, has! The first part of it has an abusive language and what comes subsequently is a typical heroic utterance. Such an upsurge Bharatidasan alone can disclose." Bharatidasan's poetic talent reminds us of Alexander Pope who lisped in numbers for the numbers came.

There had been an order of the Education Department of the French Government that, of the total strength in any school within the territory, not less than ten percent of the students should be from the scheduled castes and tribes. Having sensed that the conservative Headmaster of the school at Nettappakkam was lackadaisical in implementing this order, the young Tamil teacher personally went to the residential colonies of the Harijans and requested them to send their wards to the schools. There was,

of course a bit of positive response but even that poor strength gradually trickled out. The reason was that unless these young ones go along with their parents to do all sorts of out-door work, the entire family might, at times be deprived of their earning.

Then the young teacher took a bold and unusual step to set things right. He adopted a novel method of his own. Diseases like cholera and small-pox were almost endemic in those days. There was some procedural delay in the arrival of the public health and sanitary staff to individual villages for disinfecting and vaccinating purposes. Subburathinam took advantage of this and spread a false news. That those villages that do not abide by and co-operate with the G.O. of the Department of Education in sending the Harijan boys to schools will not be visited by the sanitary staff. It was tantamount to a mandate to the villages that only if they drive out the disease of caste, they could weed out the infectious diseases. The benevolent ruse worked very well and there has begun a steady flow of Harijan boys to the school. The falsehood of the teacher, in this context must be deemed a truthful word for it was not only free from fault but also aimed at the welfare of the young Harijan boys. This singular effort of Subburathinam continued to be ever since for the educational welfare of the young ones of the oppressed community wherever he went.

What basic text-book that was prescribed for elementary schools in Madras state was the same in Pondicherry also. The *Balachitchai* was the Sanskrit title of the Tamil text-book in which the first Tamil alphabet 'அ' had been printed in bold letter under the

colourful picture of a squirrel or 'Anil' in Tamil. Of the three letters in this monosyllabic word, the second letter 'ஊரி' is too difficult for young learners, Subburathinam pointed out and added that comparatively an easier word for pronunciation 'Amma' may be introduced. The young poet was equally unhappy at the subscription of a word 'Vannan' (washerman) for introducing a vowel-consonant 'va' (வ) and 'Iyer' (Brahmin) for a long vowel. 'Iy' (ஐ). He shunned the very idea of exposing the letters through the words and phrases that are of caste-names. As a result, the young Tamil teacher opposed the continuance of this questionable book as a text in the schools.

Moreover the very first lessons in the text began with sentences like these: "He is our king. He is the Emperor of England. His name -----" A bust of the king of England had been printed above. "We are French citizens. What lesson should we learn at the outset? A lesson about the King of England? If this lesson is taught, our small children will think that even in our French democracy, there remains a king. They may even mistake England to be our nation." This critical observation of the Tamil teacher about the prescribed Tamil text-book reached the Educational authorities and they effected a change during the very next year. The Educational Officer thanked the young teacher for having driven home an essential point on time.

As a teacher, what Subburathinam felt it essential for teachers was that the job of a teacher is to develop a sense of knowledge, patriotism and love towards one's own mother-tongue. Because Pondicherry was a French enclave, the French-language

teachers were highly respected and were receiving a scale of pay higher than the Tamil-teachers. As a corollary, a sense of inferiority complex prevailed among those who taught Tamil and there had been no symptom of unity among them. They were like pack of cards scattered. Legally also it was not possible to form any association among themselves and they were dumb in not revealing their professional grievances. The Tamil teacher Subburathinam took up the cudgels and spoke on behalf of all of the Tamil teachers. Even then many of them did not come forward to support him. Many were afraid that a mere following of Subburathinam might lead them to a risk of losing the job. Unmindful of this lack of support from his colleagues, he struggled for their improvement and unity. As a result of his relentless fight for the solidarity of Tamil teachers, the Government of France ultimately permitted them to form an association among themselves.

A customary practice in those days on the eve of Deepavali and New Year's Day was to call on the Educational Officers at their residence and to offer them fruits, sweets, flowers and other sumptuous presents. The total expenditure thus incurred will be divided and borne by the teachers themselves. This was not to the liking of the young Tamil teacher and he did not relish it. He did not make a secret of his dislike. In his opinion, it was a mere slavishness. A headmaster, under whom he worked once spent a considerable amount of money perhaps in anticipation of the approval of his colleagues. During the first week of the next month, the headmaster sent the acquittance register to Subburathinam for his signature. All the deductions, both official and unofficial were

found noted in a slip of paper which accompanied the register. One of the deductions made therein was found to have been incurred towards the presentation to the educational officer. The young Tamil teacher not only did not sign the register but sent it back with a threat that he would submit the pay slip to the Educational Officer and have a discussion with him on the deductions made without his concurrence. The headmaster silently surrendered to the Tamil teacher and arranged to hand-over the entire salary minus the official deductions. Such a bold defiance on the right lines by Subburathinam was very well appreciated by his colleagues and friends.

Subburathinam was made an examiner for valuing the papers of the Tamil Vidwan Examination and that particular year about ten students only failed. Until then, about ten students were normally declared to have passed every year. Such a liberal valuation of Subburathinam was a mild shock to the other conservative Examiners of the Board. The young man also advocated this liberality to other colleagues by explaining certain difficulties faced by the Tamil examinees. No less was his help extended to the examinees in the viva voce also. But such benevolent action of this Tamil Pandit was not in any way acceptable to the other die-hard examiners and they saw to it that Subburathinam does not become an examiner at all thereafter. He did not mind about this tacit reaction from and rejection of the authorities.

In all, Subburathinam served as a school teacher for nearly thirty five years. Either because of a professional jealousy or certain manipulated reasons, he had to work mostly as a teacher for the First

standard. But Subburathinam never deemed it to be a disgrace. He did his service with a deep sense of devotion and love. The elementary sections commenced their forenoon sessions at 8 a.m. Hence he used to get up early in the morning, complete the ablutions, wear the coat, as it was a practice in those days and walk towards the school. Even though he handled primary classes, he meticulously prepared his notes of lessons and taught the tiny tots methodically. To introduce new words, he used to draw on the black board small pictures of plants, animals and articles. However he was a hard task-master to those who were idle and a kind-hearted and a loving teacher to those who were bright and clever.

He made the young pupils understand the difference in pronunciation between 'zha' and 'lla'. This he did by giving individual boys a drill in pronunciation and insisted on a perfect reading and understanding.





#### 4. DEVOTION, PATRIOTISM AND SERVICE

In the early thirties of the twentieth century, Bhāratidasan was a pious devotee and a patriot. His adoration of God Muruga is explicit in an *Anthology of Hymns and Songs* which he published in 1926. This ardent devotion and a deep desire for patriotism are perceptible in his poems of this period covering a couple of decades. These poems are known for their variety in technique and theme. *Patriotic songs for children*, *Lyrical songs* for walking-volunteers and *Songs for charka* were the contents of a few of his short poetic anthologies. Apart from these metrical compositions, what the poet was actually doing in a spirit of patriotism was his selling of hand-spun Khadi cloths in the streets of Pondicherry. In other words, he hawked them with a fervent desire not merely to sell them for profit which was negligibly very little, but to propagate the spirit of khadi among the populace. The khadi movement among the Indian patriots was a crusade, initiated by Mahatma Gandhi. Though this activity of the poet was not to the liking of some of his relatives and friends, he did not mind their resistance.

Innumerable of his songs pertaining to patriotism and piety, the contemporary periodicals of both Pondicherry and Madras published with relish. But the poet used his pseudonym in all these con-

tributions. Pondicherry in those days was the centre of political activities for Indian freedom-fighters. The French enclave afforded them a safe asylum. Veteran freedom fighters such as V.V.S. Iyer, Aurobindo, Poet Subramanya Bharathi and Varadarajalu Naidu took refuge in this coastal town and clandestinely indulged in anti-British activities. V.V.S. Iyer ran a periodical, *Desabhaktan* in which Bharatidasan was a regular contributor. The young Tamil poet himself edited a few periodicals and journals such as *Atma Sakthi*, *Thai Naadu*, *Puduvai Murasu* and *Dupleix* but they were all short-lived for want of an effective patronage. Of these journals, the *Atma Sakthi* was a vehicle of socialist principles which the poet ardently cherished in those days.

It may rightly be inferred that Subramanya Bharathi's close association must have been an added factor for Bharatidasan to contribute patriotic songs. As a young poetic protege of Bharathi, he moved closely with the freedom-fighters who frequented Pondicherry. He was very much moved by and viewed with concern all the sufferings and privations of V.O. Chidambaram in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu. When Aurobindo from Bengal and V.V.S. Iyer from Chermadevi sought refuge in Pondicherry, Bharatidasan extended what all help he could. Induced by patriotic impulses and also at the behest of Bharathi, he did what all assistance he could do to those freedom-fighters.

A breath-taking episode revolving around such an timely assistance is worthy of mention in this context. Bharatidasan's timely help was not, only extended to the top-ranking freedom-fighters but also to

the rank and file among them. One Madasamy, a lesser-known freedom fighter sought refuge in Pondicherry. He was indicted as an accomplice in the murder of Ash, a die-hard English collector of Tinnevely. The murder had created a great hubbub in those days as the haughty white collector was shot dead in broad day-light when watched by plainclothes policeman. To evade such a shadowing of the British police, Madasamy changed his halting-places every now and then, a few days in the residence of Subramaniya Bharathi and a few more days in that of Subburathinam.

One day this Madasamy was found to have been closely followed by the British police. Subburathinam was just then proceeding to hand-over a copy of an English book *Volcano* by Veer Savarkar to Madasamy. With a decision to hoodwink the police, he neared the house where Madasamy was staying. The British policemen were waiting outside. In an attempt to make them believe that it was Madasamy who emerged and ran out of the house, Subburathinam in a lightning speed rushed out through a bye-lane within the visibility of the police. The ruse worked well. Believing that the fleeing person was the culprit, the policemen were running behind. Subburathinam ran very fastly into the Kamatchi Amman temple, hurriedly concealed the book somewhere and in a couple of minutes, climbed on to the tower and jumped down in the next street. It is how the real Madasamy was saved from being caught by the British Police. The vigilant police was thus made gullible, thanks to the cleverness of Bharatidasan. The presence of mind and the quickness with which he acted in the ruse was very well appreciated the next

day by Aurobindo and Bharathi. It may also be recalled that the revolver used by the heroic Vancinathan to shoot Mr. Ash the British Collector at Maniyachi Railway Station had been arranged to be sent to him by Subburathinam, a nationalistic youth of Pondicherry.

A few days afterwards Madasamy had to go on a voluntary exile to Saigon, then the capital city of Indo-China. The young poet helped him disguise as a Muslim professor. The arrangement was to nocturnally see him off in a cargo ship somewhere at a distance from the harbour. Subburathinam ensured the safety of Madasamy by accompanying him in the dead of night and waited in the mid-sea until he boarded the ship. To avoid suspicion from the authorities, the young poet roamed about in the sea itself until sun-set and returned to the harbour at night. Such timely help he extended to Madasamy not only because of patriotic sentiments but also because of the request and persuasion of Bharathiyar.

During the non-co-operation movement initiated by Mahatma Gandhi, Bharatidasan, as a devoted congressman wrote about twenty booklets highlighting the importance of the said movement. One of the songs induced moderate congressmen to become extremists. Besides underlining the nationalistic spirit, some of the songs which he wrote outrightly condemn the caste-prejudices. His role as a freedom fighter and the consequent imprisonment, he brings out in one of his poems.

All these songs and poems of topical importance came out in the pages of *Desa Sevagan*, a periodical

run by Saigon Chinnaiah. Occasionally he wrote poems that could be termed picturesque and natural.

‘High on the sky did I see the laughter  
of lightning  
Down below the pair of your palms gentle;  
And on the plain space of faultless air  
Stands erect loftily your majestic physique’

- *Song of Sakthi* - 8.5.1923.

Subburathinam was working as a teacher in Thirupuvanai village. Himself, his wife and his children were returning to that village after a short vacation at Pondicherry, their home-town. They all boarded a passenger-train at Pondy in an evening hour and reached a small station Pallineliyanoor from where their destination was at a few miles distance. No hackney-carriage was available for them at the railway station. Subburathinam somehow managed to arrange a bullock-cart from a villager nearby. But the cart-man was hesitant as the black clouds were threatening with an impending rain. The budding poet however persuaded him to drive the cart and the lethargic journey began. It was pitch-dark. As they feared, a drizzling that began grew into a thunder storm. The lightning was frequent followed by heavy downpour and thunder. The whirl wind was so heavy that at one stage, unable to move about, the bullocks disropeed themselves and ran helter-skelter leaving the cart to capsize on the road. The poor cart-man helplessly ran to a nearby shelter. But the teacher-poet did not lose his heart; he ran behind the bullocks and brought them together unmindful of the hazards. Consoling his wife and children, he set right the capsized

cart in a minute and properly fixed its bamboo covering also. Moreover, he himself started driving the cart. Gaining strength thereafter, the cart-man simply followed the cart with a meaningful silence. On reaching the village, the young poet took out an oil lamp from the lamp-post of the temple but it went off due to the cold wind. He rushed to a nearby-house, handed-over the lamp with a request that it must be restored to its place, the next morning. Thus the young Subburathinam was known for braving ordeals in any circumstance.

The hospitality of the poet was highly remarkable. Whoever that comes to his house, the first question the poet customarily puts forth is, 'Would you mind taking food?' If the guest hasn't taken food until then, he would soon arrange for an immediate meal.

Once he was working in Pondicherry itself, in a Government school at Pappara Street. The Government of Pondicherry had issued a General circular that Amavasya Day be declared a holiday for all commercial concerns and shopping establishments. Certain local merchants blissfully ignored that G.O. and continued to run their shops as usual. This amounts to a deprivation of the rightful holidays legitimately due to the labourers. Bharatidasan could not brook this. He issued a leaflet in the name of his bosom-friend C.M.Samy and urged the traders that declaring a holiday is in fact a concession for certain people to go to the temple on Amavasya is not tenable.

Their argument had been on those lines. He also

added that flouting of the labour laws and rules is illegal. He sent a complaint to the Government through a lawyer-friend Chellam Naicker. The traders in Pondicherry were very furious and it did not take time for them to understand that the brain behind this propaganda-war was none other than Subburathinam. They, the kepley-group organised a band of musclemen to attack the poet. But luckily, his bravery plus the physical stamina kept him in good stead to come out unscathed of that ordeal.

It was at Nettappakkam that the poet worked in a school. Certain local elements with vested interests were enjoying an undue advantage of the officials and the police. As a consequence, factions arose among the villagers and a restiveness prevailed all around. Anti-socials, in between began thriving and petty thefts were not uncommon. A long wooden pole from an innocent peasant's field was found stolen. Charges and counter-charges began multiplying. Small cottages were put on fire. In such a restless period, Subburathinam was determined to restore law and order. Alone, during nights, he used to come around the streets of the village with an eye on the safety and security of the villagers. Keeping two unsheathed swords under the arm-pits, a figure covering from head to foot with a green shawl was none other than that of the poet. The villagers knew this and in general they all appreciated the selfless and dedicated service of Subburathinam.

A trader from Pondicherry had a handicrafts show-room at Anna Pillai Street, Madras. Subburathinam, on a trip to Madras was just helping him to arrange a set of clay images of Bharatamata

hoping that these female figurines would be sold like hot cakes in those days of ardent nationalism. All of a sudden, a local bully appeared there and started intimidating the young Subburathinam. The trader, a Chettiar was afraid of the rowdy. Subburathinam for a while, pretended as if he was timid, turned around and suddenly showered on his face a few heavy punches. The rowdy fell below, down the gutters. A short while afterwards, he came back with a band of local ruffians to retaliate. While the Chettiar was in jitters, Subburathinam ran behind the shop and came back with a rifle in hand -- the one he had smuggled from Pondicherry. That worked a miracle and the rowdies disappeared in no moment. It may be recalled that this young nationalist used to smuggle French-made handguns to Madras by keeping them intact within the figurines made in Pondicherry by a craftsman Vaidyalingam of Kuyavarpalayam.

A presence of mind, boldness and a grit were a few of the characteristic traits of Subburathinam. At Neravi where he worked in a Government school, he used to go in the early morn, to bathe himself in the cool waters of the gently-flowing river Arasalaru. Once a young cow got itself entangled in a muddy part of the river. It struggled in vain. Subburathinam swam to the spot and tactfully went underneath the body of the animal and gently hit it upwards, twice or thrice. The quagmire slightly gave way and the poor beast was thus rescued, thanks to the timely effort of the young poet. But in the process of rescuing the poor beast, what the rescuer lost was a rich asset-- a golden ring which he had worn in the second finger of his right hand.



While serving at Tirunallar in the Karaikal region of Pondicherry state, he was on his regular morning-walk in the main road leading to Karaikal town. A cargo-laden bullock cart was on its way to the town. In a quirk, a child that was playing on the roadside found itself in front of the rushing wheel of the cart. In a splash of the moment, Subburathinam, with all his might gripped the back portion of the cart and curbed its progress. The driver too pulled up the strings of the bullock in his attempt to stop the vehicle. As a result, the child was luckily saved on time.

Once in Muthialpet, a suburb of Pondicherry the hand-loom merchants, on the pretext of a glut in yarn-trade and suspension of export did not provide jobs to hundreds of poor weavers. The weavers began virtually starving and started migrating to other places in search of jobs. But the crisis in the yarn-trade did not affect the traders at all. They were enjoying a life of luxury as usual. A few leading yarn merchants along with few rich men of the locality were celebrating the temple festival. The car festival with a highly ornate glass palanquin in which placed the presiding deity was in progress. The deity was coming in procession all through the big streets. The young poet was not enamoured of all this ostentatious ritual. He thought it better to give a piece of his mind to the organisers in the form of short poems which he not only composed but also made them sung by like-minded men of the area, wherever the procession moved. The young men, accordingly sang those veiled invectives within the hearing distance of the rich traders.

As a peasant takes care of bullocks  
Provides fodder even in out of season,  
Is it not your duty to feed the labourers  
Even when there is no labour for them?  
Should the poor be run off from the hearth?  
Lend your helping hand, O, rich traders!  
How long will they brook, your noisy festivities  
Which you do at the sweat and toil of the poor!  
When we make the loom alive with our labour  
Growing spectre-thin we were, but alas!  
The rich traders never looked into our misery!

Voluntary service was the in-born nature of Subburathinam. Poor people from the rural areas would bring in periodically their hay-stacks in small head-loads and sell them in the town. With the proceeds thus obtained, they would buy rice and prepare food in the late hours and sleep under the trees in the street corners. The balance-money they would tie up in one end of their dhoties and sleep. Knowing this habit of the villagers, some one in the night picked up the amount and gone. Only the next day, the villagers knew and cried bitterly. Subburathinam not merely sympathised with their lot but decided within himself to catch hold of the petty thief. A week afterwards, he secretly made the poor rustics deposit their balance amount to him for safety and asked them to go for their nocturnal rest. This went on for a few days. All these days, he concealed himself nearby and kept himself awake until at last he caught the thief red-handed.

Alankuppam is a small village on the Pondicherry-Madras highway. Once in the month of Karthigai of the Tamil year Nala, there had arisen a

terrible whirlwind. Alankuppam Vaidyalingam and a servant Velayutham of Culvey College fell down on the road itself, unable to walk on foot. Such was the tremendous impact of the storm. Accidentally Subburathinam, then a teacher of the local school took both of them with his sturdy arms and moved them further on. But another bout of the storm, still heavier blew all the three down. Subburathinam found himself in a ditch with thorns and bushes. Without giving up his hopes and courage, he gave both the men, his hands and brought them home. Such a feat of Subburathinam against heavy odds was very much appreciated by his mentor Subramaniya Bharathi and Aurobindo.

The three watch words of democracy Liberty, Equality and Fraternity hail from the French soil is a fact, universally known. The equality enjoyed by the citizens of France in French Republic is not to be so in Pondicherry, one of her overseas territories. In French-India, those who were treated as class one citizens include the Frenchmen and their accomplices numbering about eight hundred. Those who were *de facto* second class citizens were none other than 3 lakhs of Tamil-speaking population. The line of demarcation was found to be glaring despite the fact that both the groups were supposed to enjoy equal representation in the French Assembly. Yet in practice, the former were domineering over the latter. But the well-informed and scholarly public did not take any cognizance of this wide gap.

Exceptionally a famous lawyer R.Chellan came forward to put an end to this artificial division among the citizens of Pondicherry. Subburathinam joined

hands with this lawyer and worked for the right cause. Monsieur Jules Ferry's Annual Day celebrations provided an opportunity to ventilate their ire. The assemblage included high-ranking French citizens, officials and their accomplices, besides the general public. Subburathinam kept ready a song composed to be sung on this occasion. The discrimination shown between the unofficial and self-styled first class citizens on the one hand and the commoners on the other was movingly highlighted in a song. The song was purported to have been a request to koel, the Indian Cuckoo.

Would you not attune your voice, O black  
cuckoo,  
That all are equal on the earth O black cuckoo?  
Under the shadow of the French Republic  
That has shown equality to the world entire,  
Who could withstand a fiery concept if  
one were  
To say that one is high and another is low?  
Just below a single conopy bending  
Should some have shade and others the sun?  
Upper strata is one and the rest are underneath,  
Should this be the destiny in the exalted  
Republic?

The song created a great hubbub among those who had gathered there. His Excellency the then Governor of Pondicherry rightly understood the feelings of the commoners conveyed through the song and promised in the function itself that he will take all steps to see that the discrimination is gradually done away with.

Even after Subburathinam became widely known as a Tamil poet, he has never hesitated to extend a helping hand to Brahmins. Though he is dubbed an anti-Brahmin, the fact was otherwise. There was one Vaidyanatha Iyer, an Educational Officer in the service of the French Government of Pondicherry. He was not well-disposed to non-Brahmins, especially to Subburathinam. On many occasions, it is this Iyer who had taken a malicious glee in transferring Subburathinam from one place to another. The Iyer gave the young man a lot of problems by inducing higher officials when he was serving as a teacher. Just after retirement, this Iyer and his wife came to the residence of Bharatidasan quite unexpectedly. The poet did not keep in mind what all the retired man did while in service. He welcomed the Iyer and his wife and enquired what brought them to his house.

The retired official was hesitant. On persuasion, he stammered a few words:

"My son is good in studies --- desires to go in for Engineering studies --- "

"Educate him very well" - persuaded, the poet.

The Iyer wanted to say something but words did not come out. But the poet volunteered to say,

"Shall we admit him in Annamalai University?" The retired official's joy knew no bounds. He was simply flabbergasted. Tears of joy welled up in the eyes of his wife.

The poet, the next day went straight to the

Registrar of Annamalai University and arranged Engineering admission and also hostel accommodation to the son of Vaidyanatha Iyer. Then only the Iyer knew that the mind and heart of Bharatidasan are the repositories of genuine love and affection.

"We had a doubt whether we could seek your help at all. We doubted whether you would ..... keeping in mind the past ---"

"That is a different matter. This is the education of a boy. I don't see anything in it excepting the welfare of a boy."

This is an example to show that the poet never harboured any ill-feelings towards anybody. Anything is wrong, he would then and there react and even retaliate. That was his nature. But at the same time, devoid of hypocrisy and cunningness, the poet was second to none in extending help to those who come to him irrespective of caste and creed. What was innate in him was a tendency to help others to feed the poor and to extend an assistance to those who are in need of it, even voluntarily.

## 5. THE POET IN SELF-RESPECT MOVEMENT

Subburathinam began his professional career as a school teacher. As the poetic talent was innate in him, he continued to write poems innumerable in the thick and thin of his life. As any other conventional poet would have done, he too composed a lot of hymns and songs in the whole of the twenties of this century. He was found to be a devotee of God Muruga who is also spoken as Karthikeya. In the life and mind of this God-fearing young man, a historic change took place some where around 1928. It was not an over-night change, but gradual after hearing a lecture of E.V.Ramasamy Periyar at Pondicherry. The impact of Periyar's lecture was so deep that the young poet found himself gradually changing into a rationalist.

Periyar, as he was popularly known, was a leading nationalist and a congressman to begin with. He could rightly be called an extremist among the Congressmen in the beginning of the twentieth century. In fact he was one of the front-ranking congress leaders in the whole of Tamil Nadu and worked along with the political stalwarts such as C.Rajagopalachariyar, Varadarajulu Naidu, V.V.S.Iyer and T.S.S.Rajan. He could have continued as a congressman until the last, but for some intolerable and irksome caste prejudices prevailing within. The Brah-

mins within the Congress party discriminated the non-Brahmins in social gatherings. The communal education was highly welcomed. Moreover, the Ashram at Shermadevi was found to be a breeding ground of Brahminism. The communal apartheid rigidly practised by the Brahmin zealots was far beyond anybody's toleration. Periyar did not mince matters and so he proved himself unequivocal in outrightly condemning Brahminism.

Do we not work with the concept of secular and classless society under the Congress party? he asked. No proper reply was forthcoming. Periyar voiced his protest, came out of the congress party and raised a banner of his own separately. Added to these were his total advocacy of women's education, widow remarriage, nationalism, removal of superstition and self-respect. He needed a platform of his own to disseminate his progressive views and wherever he went and addressed the general public, mostly the backward and oppressed thronged in thousands.

A word about Periyar's method of oratory is not out of place here. As one who was brought up in the background of non-formal education, he would not quote literary passages. His lecture wouldn't be an emotional and loud harangue. But he would catch hold of the attention of the audience with his sheer commonsense and originality. In addressing from dais, he was not like a swash buckling hero to die down on the stage but prove to be a veteran warrior to withstand a lasting battle. He would go on speaking for hours together keeping the audience spellbound. There won't be any ornamentation in his lectures. Flowery rhetoric was totally alien to him.



His lectures were slow but steady, incisive and piercing. One cannot but marvel at the force of his argument. His style would be colloquial and hence capable of conquering the mind and spirit of the rustics but still even an urbanite cannot neglect it. His approach to any problem, be it social, political or religious would be original and objective. His attack sometimes would be darted into Brahminism but never has he insulted any individual Brahmin.

Periyar's respect to C. Rajagopalachariyar can be cited as an example to his dignified quality. A socio-political lecture which Periyar delivered at Pondicherry sometime in 1928 wrought a miraculous change in the attitude of Subburathinam. No longer he wrote devotional songs on gods and goddesses. Hymns and songs have gone off the record. Rationalistic songs, stories, skits and poems flowed out of his pen profusely. He got them published in rationalistic periodicals *Kudiyarasu*, (Republic) and *Pakuddarivu* (Rationalism). These were the official organs of the Self-Respect Movement in those days. In 1931, he brought out a booklet of poems that voiced forth in essence all the principles that Periyar stood for. A state-level conference under the aegis of the Self-Respect Movement took place at Madras in 1933. M. Singaravelar, a reputed leader of the oppressed classes presided over that state-level conference. Subburathinam not only participated in that historic meet at Madras but also officially declared himself as a member of the Self-Respect Movement by signing an open register meant for enrolling the rank and file. He publicly declared himself an avowed atheist. This is the story how god-adoring Subburathinam became an ardent follower of Periyar,

an iconoclast and a leader of atheists.

Periyar at one stage recognised the innate poetic talents of Subburathinam and pointed out that he was the first to courageously voice forth the revolutionary ideas in Tamil Nadu. On another occasion, he asserted that if only the rationalistic poems of Bharatidasan are graded, anthologised and included in the syllabi of the school classes, there would certainly be an awakening among the pupils even at elementary level. In another context, he said that if there had been Tamil poets in Bharatidasan's calibre, the Tamils would not have undergone so much of humiliation. Such was the encomium paid by Periyar to Subburathinam. It was roughly from this period of his life, the poet came to be known as *Puratchikavignar*, Revolutionary poet. He has already been well-known in literary circles as Bharatidasan. For the sake of convenience, he will be referred to as such, hereafter in this monograph also.

Bharatidasan is the only poet in the entire canon of Tamil poetry, deservedly named revolutionary. This unique appendage placed before his name sums up the totality of spirit that envelops the entire gamut of his literary productions. His endearing love and attachment to Tamil have already been referred to. It may as well be remembered that Bharatidasan's love towards Tamil is so deep and his knowledge of ancient Tamil literature is so solid that they provide a base for a major portion of his imaginative writings. Let it be repeated once again, not that Bharatidasan disliked other languages but he loved Tamil more. He was not blind to the wealth of other languages. He kept the doors of knowledge open and adapted a

story of Bilhana, a Sanskrit poet. He was very much conscious of the French authors and thinkers and their contribution to the spirit of democracy. But what irked him was that Tamil, in spite of its ancientry and richness is discriminated and at times looked down upon, in comparison to an equally ancient Sanskrit language.

Bharatidasan was conscious of the fact that a section of Tamils, mostly Brahmins in their heart of hearts and sometimes vociferously felt and expressed their allegiance to Sanskrit, despite the fact both these are classical languages from time immemorial. He constantly believed that it is the interaction of the Sanskrit culture and its concomitant rituals and superstitions that were responsible for the decay of ancient Tamil civilization. The Tamil ethics and moral codes, as elicited from *Tolkappiam* and *Tirukkural* are not only secular but also far superior to the unequal laws of *Manu*, the ancient law giver. It is in this background that Bharatidasan's love of Tamil language and literature must be viewed.

No less is the poet's endearment and love towards the pristine purity and unalloyed cultural norm of the ancient Tamils. Polyandry, ritual beggary, animal sacrifice to Gods, idolization, humiliation of women, propitiating gods, believing in destiny, belief in re-birth, law for every creed and caste and a hatred of romantic love may have had a Vedic sanction but they have nothing to do with the pristine culture of Tamils and their civilization, Bharatidasan thus believed and asserted it in no uncertain terms.

By temperament, Bharatidasan was a revolutionary. His was not a habit of mincing words and beating about the bush. Because a particular practice was custom-ridden and traditional, he would not accept it. Liberal in thinking, frank in expression, this unique poet of spontaneity was desirous of everything modern without compromising the essence and spirit of ancientry. To iron out the ups and downs in society, to remove casteism, to uphold the rights of women and to highlight, the sufferings of labour-class, he took up his cudgels.

After he embarked himself to the Rationalistic campaign, he never deviated from it until his last breath. Innumerable of his poems prove to be an effective medium to the causes of the self-respect movement. His poems are so well known that hundreds of lines of his poetry are quoted in literary platforms of today. The modern Tamil society for its renaissance and rejuvenation owes a lot to the revolutionary poems of Bharatidasan. The poet wanted the Tamils to lead a life of purity and bravery. Fearless life they must lead, whatever obstacles they confront, he asserted. To enthuse and activate his brethren and fellow-beings, he belches fire and smoke in some of his poems.

To do away with the actions of evil-mongers  
 Take up lethal sword in hand;  
 O my Tamils, known for qualities exalted  
 As much as a tiger that inhabits a dingy cave.

Bharatidasan has no qualms about the futility of a life in what is known as Hades, the other world, gossipped upon by the metaphysician. In philosophical parlance, his is a typical materialism. In this concept, there is no talk of heaven and hell. The materialists have no belief in them. Bharathi his mentor is unequivocal in condemning them as a sheer nonsense.

They're the madcaps who say  
One could reach after death the abode of  
Siva and Vishnu  
Shastras of whom are of ghostly utterance,  
O, ye all, blow your conches affirming these!

- *Poems of Bharathi.*

No less is the condemnation and rejection of Heaven and Hell in the poems of Bharatidasan. A poem on Sanjeevi Hills in the First Volume of his poetical works exemplify this. Bharatidasan does not believe in writing about matters that are doubtful and questionable. What he perceives, sees and feels that make up the thought-content of his poems. He does not refer to the matters that he was not aware of. Would not write about Gods which he does not believe. Matters that are relevant to the modern society, problems that are acute to an ordinary citizen and an agrarian labourer occupy his poems. In a full throated ease, he champions the cause of labourers, much against the dogmatic argument that what a man or woman does has already been ordained by God. In other words, Bharatidasan is diametrically opposite to the calvinistic predestinarianism.

Four-anna coin to a labourer who transplants  
Fabulous rich does no work but roam about  
the world;  
If this is destined by God as exemplified by  
dogmatic rogues  
Tear off the barrier of God and let labourers  
hail!

- *Poems of Bharatidasan Vol.I.*

Casteism is an abominable virus acutely eating into the vitals of Indian society from time immemorial. In a way it is almost a parallel situation in India as much as internecine warfare among African tribals. Many reformers from various religions, within and without have attempted to bring in religious amity but casteism has not gone off. Sects and sub-sects, especially in Hindu religion have given room for a destructive effect on modern society. Though the modern man can have a complacency in a facade of cosmopolitan out-look in society, he cannot blissfully ignore the glaring fact that this hydra-headed monster raises its ugly appearance on the eve of elections. Casteism and an ignoble role played by politicians to inflame it for personal ends deserve a lengthy treatment elsewhere. But let us not forget the fact that as any other contemporary litterateur, Bharatidasan spared no pains to harshly condemn casteism in his poems, articles and plays. He was painfully aware of the miserable fact that those who till the land to the sweat of their brow were branded as low caste Panchamas and looked down upon. Manu Dharma Sastras under which the social hierarchy functioned for centuries together were responsible for this sorry state of affairs.

Bharatidasan anathematizes untouchability in unequivocal terms.

A Phantom called untouchability  
Wildly roams about in this country only!  
Is there a defilement among human beings?  
How to express alas! the grave injustice  
Heaped on a few in this worldly life!  
Four-fold division not at all among our men  
And nobody was a born-king here!  
Has the quartet division, a sanction of ethics?  
Tamilians are a class by themselves here!

It is this venom called untouchability is found to have extended its pernicious influence not only in social gatherings but also in temples and other public places. The poet condemns these in no uncertain terms. In a minor *kavya Puratchik-kavi*, 'The Revolutionary poet', he makes a princess marry a commoner Uthaaran.

Bharatidasan asserts that both religion and caste have to be done away with, as they are to a large extent responsible for all superstitions. To those who follow truth, no religion serves any purpose, he observes. The role of mutts, the poet skeptically views and condemns the lavish rituals they perform on the occasion of various festivals. When people are steeped in poverty, these ostentatious temple ceremonies have no relevance and are wholly untenable, he opines.

The *Manusmiriti* is subjected to a harsh criticism in a few poems of Bharatidasan. With the help of Noel, a friend, the poet has brought out,

*Camathuva-p-pattu*, a song of equality. This booklet sums up the anti-religious and rationalistic views of Bharatidasan. Not only the Hindu conservatives but also a host of Christian pastors joined together to intimidate the poet. His atheism was a bull's eye for the orthodox men to attack in every possible way. With the connivance of religious zealots, the then Government of Pondicherry transferred the young teacher from place to place -- an action for bureaucrats to wreak vengeance upon their targets malevolently even today. Mr. Noel, who partially financed the publishing venture of what they call the atheistic poet was indicted in a court of law. Both of them were imprisoned for irreligious activities and then released. When Noel's appeal went to the High Court in France, the supreme judiciary took a lenient view of the charges and exonerated both of them from a number of cooked-up accusations.

Both the friends began writing articles on social and religious topics in *Puduvai Murasu*, a very popular journal in those days. The journal was sold among Tamils in overseas territories of France. In January 1944 a literary organisation, Muttamil Nilayam was founded by Bharatidasan. Periyar E.V.R. presided over the inaugural function and warmly congratulated the poet.

"History has proved even in Western countries that any campaign for reformation of the society has had to confront many set backs and obstacles. Bharatidasan is an asset of our country. This Nilayam founded by him graphically portrays, the conditions of common public. Let me, not only to congratulate him but also assure him that I would extend all pos-



sible assistance to his great rationalistic efforts."

Periyar E.V.R. had a great amount of respect to Bharatidasan. Certain vested interests that attempted to make a rift between the two met with a dismal failure. Both Periyar and the poet were not bound by any formalities. They were informal, kind and courteous to each other. An incident evidencing their mutual respect may as well be cited here. Trichy Vedachalam, the District organiser of the Dravidar Kazhagam requested the poet twice in his letters that he should preside over a proposed Kazhagam conference at Trichy. Bharatidasan gave his concurrence and to this effect, an announcement came in the party organ *Kudiarasu*, dated 17 June, 1944. But in the very next issue, another announcement came that it is E.V.R. Periyar who will preside over the conference. Bharatidasan took it in his mind and felt ill at ease. He wrote a personal letter to E.V.R. stating that he would not have "accepted to chair the conference but for the constant persuasion of the District Secretary. There are some mischievous elements bent upon making cleavage between us."

"If you have any objection to the highlighting of my name in the party, I would refrain from doing anything without your concurrence."

To this unambiguous and frank expression, Periyar wrote back in his handwriting a lengthy letter of about eight pages explaining his stand in the issue. The overall impression of the letter was so kind and amicable that the poet was fully convinced of what E.V.R. Periyar wrote. There seems to have been no misunderstanding in between the two, later

on. The reverence, Bharatidasan had towards Periyar and the latter's respect for the poet have never gone off the track until their last days.

When Periyar's Self-Respect Movement was in its budding stage, a conference had been arranged in a cinema theatre at Othiyanchalai, Pondicherry. Periyar E.V.R., C.N. Annadurai and E.V.K. Sampath were some of the top-ranking stalwarts from among those who were invited. Bharatidasan, being one of the local organisers played an active role in the conference. The enmity to the conference was not from the usual conservative and tradition-bound elders. A direct opposition from the local communists began sabotaging the proceedings of the conference. Communism in Pondicherry was then under a Paris-educated Lambere Saravane who, in all probability must have been instrumental in fomenting trouble. In a scuffle that ensued in the conference, a ruffian slapped on the cheeks of Bharatidasan. A few party volunteers interceded in between and prevented the trouble from becoming worse. Local communist leader V. Subbaiah felt aggrieved at the incident. Scholars and party leaders from Ceylon and Malaysia felt shocked at the incident, made enquiries of it and condemned the attack.

Bharatidasan is allergic to the society that is male dominated. He condemns the taboos that society has imposed upon women folk only. He specifically quotes Bernard Shaw in emphasizing the rights of women and effectively pleads for their liberty.

To run the life of a householder  
It is the wife who offers a helping hand;

It is she who steers her husband well.  
Haven't you heard, the saying of Shaw  
O, ye dwarfish who inflict harm on women!

- *Poems of Bharatidasan* -Vol.I.

Love, democracy, endearment of language and culture, advocacy of widow re-marriage, importance of literacy among men and women were the topics dealt with by Bharathi also. In fact, he might be instrumental to initiate a like-mindedness in Bharatidasan. But in emotionally poetizing them, the revolutionary poet goes ahead of Bharathiyar in many respects.

The treatment meted out to the widows in our country was shocking. Quoting die-hard Sastras and worn-out practices, the society has subjected them to a tortuous life. They were advised to lie down on bare ground and to eat sub-standard food. They should not mingle with any domestic or public festivities. They should lead a cloistered life. Bharatidasan boldly questioned the society and logically argued against it. The society that permits an aged widower to marry a fair maiden again, has no tongue to speak ill of a young widow's remarriage.

Is it an evil for a maiden,  
As unwithered as that of flower afresh  
To marry again if her husband dies?  
Have you ever seen bees with no humming  
Breeze that does not waft along  
And a stomach healthy that lacks appetite?

- *Poems of Bharatidasan* No.I.

Bharatidasan is on the line of E.V.R. Periyar in insisting for the social approval of widow re-marriage. Amorous and passionate feelings and a desire for begetting offspring are natural desires of any woman. Such being the case, enforcing a taboo on young widows is atrocious, Periyar argued. Bharatidasan has given poetic expression to these progressive opinions, unmindful of the tremor it created among the conservatives of the society.

Periyar opposed the traditional way of conducting marriages with all the Vedic chants and other *mantrams*. He questioned the very presence of a Brahmin priest conducting the wedding, uttering slokas from Sanskrit which is absolutely ununderstandable either to the marrying couple or to those who assembled to bless them. Periyar opposed this and boldly initiated what is known as Self-Respect marriages. The orthodox section of the society unleashed a vicious propaganda that there won't be issues to those who are wedded under this heterodoxical system. But this anti-propaganda did not carry much weight. Very gradually the system of Self-Respect marriage took roots and when the disciples of E.V.R. Periyar formed a strong State Government under the leadership of Arignar Anna in Tamil Nadu State in 1976, the Self-Respect marriage was accorded a legal sanction. A law was enacted to that effect in the State Assembly.

Bharatidasan was not only an active supporter of this method of marriages, but himself conducted them on many occasions for innumerable of his followers and party-workers. His eldest daughter Saraswathi was given in marriage under this progressive

and rationalistic system.

Bharatidasan's support of inter-caste marriages is a natural corollary of his advocacy of rationalistic views. Full many a song he has composed in favour of such marriages. He makes fun of the worldly barriers such as religion, caste and creed. He opined that eligible bachelors and young women should break open the gates of orthodoxy, casteism and dogmatism to marry among themselves. Following is a poem by Bharatidasan purported to have been the utterance of a young maiden who open her wedlock romantically.

I am like a sandal grove-my dear  
When he, a breeze wafts alongs, I warmly  
embraced !  
Having heard of it, my parents asked  
Who is he and to which caste he belongs?  
O, My dear maid, when shall I stop laughing  
at it!  
If the one who joined with me is of a  
masculine caste  
Am I not a member of the feminine caste?

Couples desirous of marrying among themselves cutting across the barriers of caste should be unmindful of the world outside. They need have no fear. That is what Bharatidasan asserted. As a statement of a daring maiden who does not care for the dogmatic world, he has a strongly-worded poem as follows.

Let the boorish crowd that doesn't know love  
Cry and whine as it feels like!

Let the fools who pour salt into the waves of  
the sea

Do anything as they live!

I am the young and silvery fall

Mingling with the sweeping river of a young  
man

Lost myself with my mind ecstatic!

Let the curs of the village bark as they like!

Bharatidasan was not anti-Brahmin. Plenty of examples could be cited to reveal his personal touch and affection to Brahmin individuals. What he detested was Brahminism. As a class, the Brahmins were ruling the roost for ages together and they framed the social and moral codes in such a way as to keep the gullible public under their hierarchical hegemony. The Sastras, Smritis and other traditional dogmas, they often quoted to perpetuate their communal leadership. Even intellectual and scholarly public were not able to escape from their clutches. It is in such a pathetic situation that Periyar stood like a rock and opposed Brahminism. Even Periyar had to put up a constant, invincible and relentless fighting to batter the communal hegemony of Brahmins for over forty years. If the oppressed and backward sections of the public, socially walk erect today it was only because of the yeoman service of E.V.R. Periyar and his close followers like C.N.A., Bharatidasan and a host of others. But for Periyar and his timely services, the Backward class people would continue to have the stigma of being called Sutras. Following the footsteps of Periyar, Bharatidasan insisted that everybody should be rationalistic and think reasonably well before doing things. Let individual actions be undertaken and performed not because they were fol-

lowed by ancestors and predecessors but are relevant and meaningful even today.

Literacy and the spread of academic education were the endearing themes in the poems of Bharatidasan. The poet envisages cent percent literacy among men and women. He constantly believed that increase of literacy rate will, in turn bring out a proportionate social progress. But the woeful and low literacy rate of today therefore makes him unhappy and the net result is a despondent cry.

What day would I able to hear from others  
That everybody in my motherland  
Had been educated and obtain arts diverse  
Heroism and love blessed  
Happily reputed as lofty as Himalayas!

- *Poems of Bharatidasan Vol-I.*

A country that doesn't lay emphasis on women's education will never progress, the poet says. He was conscientious in all that he has said and done. Though harsh sometimes in his poetic utterances and rough in exterior with his peering eyes and trimmed moustache, he was kind and affectionate in his heart of hearts. He will bleed within if he sees anybody suffering for food and would go, even out of the way to wipe off his hunger and thirst.





## 6. POEMS OF BHARATIDASAN

Gradually Subburathinam came to be identified among the literary public only by his pseudonym. The fame and name that he acclaimed as a poet was so much that his proper name is almost forgotten. Exceptionally a well informed and scholarly public do remember his real name also. But generally he came to be known as Bharatidasan everywhere. This is in a way parallel to that of a famous English detective novelist Sir Arthur Conon Doyle who is almost forgotten but his creation of a character Sherlock Holmes is immortalised. Even today among the general public, the Tamil Poet cannot easily be identified with his original name. He is known to them only as Bharatidasan and not as Subburathinam.

Bharatidasan's poetical contributions are voluminous. Roughly two third of his literary output consists of poetry. It is estimated that he has written in all, thirty two thousand poetical lines. Quantitatively Milton, William Wordsworth and Tennyson, among the Western poets can come almost nearer to Bharatidasan. But within his vast area of poetical territory, what a miracle he has performed! Similes, metaphors, rhymes, alliterations, assonances and onomatopoeic expressions abound in his poetry. Irony, humour, invective and satire are not spared. One quality that is unique in him is his outspokenness. He never minces words. In his zeal to em-

phasise progressive tendencies, reformative policies, he, at times belches fire and smoke. In many a place his poetry is an emotional outburst.

A poet is said to be highly serious when he deals with eternal values of life. In dealing with matters that are far off from everything that is mundane, he soars above and doesn't deal with items that are of transitory interest to the commoners. It is how the absence of humour is accounted for, in the poetical contributions of Milton. Such a flaw or limitation is not to be found in Bharatidasan. He never pretends to speak excessively about the Unknown and His Heavenly Abode. He believed in the vast multitude of humanity and addressed them plainly. He doesn't preach but advises them as a fellow being does. He believes in monotheism as is found in the third volume of his poems. He is not totally opposed to God and cannot be called a die-hard atheist. He is a theist in the limited sense of the term.

He maintains an equipoise between serious and ordinary. Lofty heights he reaches without neglecting down below the dales and valleys. He can rightly be called a landscape-poet in his picturesque description of wild forests, white cascade of cool waterfalls, lofty cliffs, steep mountains and green meadows. These items that have induced in William Wordsworth, an esoteric significance have not gone far beyond the visual beauty and observation in Bharatidasan. Imagination that he weaves with, in his descriptive lines is neither far-fetched nor extraneous, neither strange nor exotic, but lively natural and comprehensible.

In spontaneity of expression, Bharatidasan can

be equalled with William Wordsworth. The Tamil poet never strained himself in the composition of his verses. The poetic quality is innate in him. He is in fact a poet in all respects but not a versifier. Devoid of the artificiality and the urbane in Alexander Pope, the revolutionary Tamil poet lisped in numbers, for the numbers came. Poetry is a vehicle of thought and it must be easily communicative. In fulfilling this lofty objective, he has not brought his poetry down to a pedestrian level but maintained a style and diction acceptable to the scholars and understandable to the public. Poetising may be an art of combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing and pruning to modern poets like T.S. Eliot but this mental mechanisation is totally unthinkable to Bharatidasan.

The Comparative perspective with which he is dealt with so far, may even induce a non-Tamil reader to question whether the poet has had an impact of the western poets. Certainly not. Bharatidasan was typically a monolingual and everything that he stands parallel to, is purely accidental. One may as well be satisfied with a cliché that great-men think alike.

The poems that he wrote in general are anthologised in three volumes. They sustain our interest in the order in which they are. The first volume, *Poems of Bharatidasan* alone has undergone thirtyfive editions, testifying to the fact that it contains the best of his poems. Innumerable lines from this anthology are found quoted in literary platforms, essays and articles in the contemporary Tamil land. A few of the chosen poems are rendered into English, French and Czech languages. But the poet deserves to be carried

on to as many global languages as possible merely on the basis of their perennial interest and aesthetic fervour.

The first volume of his poems contains sections on Nature, Love, Tamil, Women's World besides three small *kavyas* at the outset. The first of these three, *The Slope of the Sanjeevi Hills*, is structurally weak but rich in themes. It mocks at the foolishness of gullible persons who believe whatever that is said in mythologies is true, without comprehending the real motive behind it. Cross references there are about the emancipation of women. The poet fictitiously brings out what an Italian and an American think of our country.

*Puratchik-kavi*, the Revolutionary Poet that forms part of the first volume is a brief verse-play that portrays how genuine love overcomes all the setbacks and succeeds at length. Uthaaran, a poet is appointed to teach Tamil to Amuthavalli, the princess. Fearing that they may fall in love with each other, the king has falsely informed the poet that the princess is acutely leprotic. Likewise, he has already spoken to the princess that the poet was totally blind. This royal ruse went on uninterruptedly as there had been a screen in between him and her on all the tuitioning occasions. But one full-moon day, Uthaaran looked up and poetized the moon which is in fact a purple passage in the whole of his verse.

Hiding full shape behind the bluish garb,  
Oh!crescent, you peep out your illumined face!  
If shown your entire beauty, will this world  
Go crazy and die in its abundance of love?

Are You the only flower blown in the grove  
of the sky?

The pitcher of immaculate silver, fountain of  
delicious manna?

The red-sparkled sun appeareth in the morn  
Dipped into the sea, deprived of its bright fire  
To become a mass of luminiscent cold!

The princess was curious. Being blind, how could he visually enjoy the beauty of the moon, she asked. Shocked and surprised as he was, he replied that he was agile with full vision. They soon understood that the royal trick was deliberate to keep them apart. The love between the handsome young poet and the beautiful princess thence forward knew no bounds. With the acclamation of the general public, they soon got united despite the roynish obstacle. Besides highlighting romantic love, the poet has proved that the voice of the public is more stronger than the royal edict.

The Second volume contains a glowing poetic tribute to his mentor Subramanya Bharathi. What he highlights is the love and enthusiasm that Bharathi had shown, despite the fact that he belongs to a high-caste. Not only the national bard sang about the eradication of caste but also put it into action by dining with depressed class people in their slums and at times helped himself with eatables from the Moslem tea-shops. Such actions were totally unthinkable among the Brahmins and the other conservative people in those days.

The Third volume is not as much meritorious as the other two in respect of lucidity and effectiveness.

The first poem enunciates the benevolent aspects of democracy. One of the poems in this anthology speaks in detail, the immortality of the *Tirukkural* couplets.

The poet was not inimical to any language. He was tolerant and did not oppose when Hindi was officially declared as the national language. Only when it was imposed in the South of India especially in Tamil Nadu, he stood up against it. And that too when it was unduly patronised by the centre, he opposed it tooth and nail. When that patronage was too much to the neglect of regional languages of which some of them like Tamil are very ancient, he was vehement in his outright opposition to Hindi.

Innumerable of his poems are imbued with feelings of emotion and heroism and it is but natural that most of his characters in *Kavyas* and narrative poems are the embodiments of the same. In his personal life, he never minced words. Hypocrisy, egoism, vanity were the qualities he disliked and shunned. A careful survey of the major characters, the poet has portrayed leads us to conclude that they are the right spokesmen of all these qualities. In other words, the poet is almost subjective in the portrayal of his characters.

Feelings and thoughts of the poet towards the welfare of society are all-embracing. Nothing under the sun seems to have gone unnoticed. Women's education and welfare, removal of social evils such as illiteracy, superstition, religious bigotry, casteism were the topics that he endeared to condemn outrightly. Widow remarriage he boldly advocated. He championed the cause of labourers and pleaded for their

due share in the produce, both in industrial and agricultural sectors.

Bharatidasan is popularly known as revolutionary poet. The appendage 'revolutionary' is not attributed to any other Tamil poet excepting Bharatidasan. He richly deserves that title. He devoted himself with heart and soul to the Self-Respect Movement of E.V.R. Periyar in 1933. Ever since, he never compromised his rationalistic principles. Much against the sentiments of the contemporary society, he outrightly condemned religious fanaticism and proved himself an iconoclastic. Preached communist principles and voiced his opposition against centralisation of political powers. Bharatidasan's monolineal poetry *Aathichoodi* discloses his appreciation of communism in state-craft.

He did write minor *Kavyas*, dramas and anthologised his poems in a few volumes but in all of them, he conscientiously omitted invocation songs. He did not attempt writing them at all. He never believed in worldly concept of Gods and Goddesses.

His love towards Tamil is that of an endearing and deep rooted affection of a son towards his mother. The traditional concept of treating the language as one's own mother finds expression in a large number of his poems. No other contemporary poet has sung as much as Bharatidasan has done towards the cause of Tamil. He identified himself with the Welfare and progress of Tamil language. His is an indivisible bond with her language and literature. All-round development of Tamil language, within, and its geographical expansion without, he en-

visaged. He desired his fellow-beings to patronise the ancient and traditional folk-arts such as street-dramas, dances, sculpture, *karagams* and puppetry besides bringing out authoritative books on music and fine-arts. It was his opinion that instead of simply translating books, scholars in different subjects should creatively think and bring out books of their own in various subjects. To Bharatidasan, language and culture go together. He felt that these two are indivisible. Any harm to any one of these would affect both. This was also one of the reasons why he opposed the imposition of Hindi in the south of the country.

A non-Tamil reader may be surprised and may even be critical of Bharatidasan's excessive love towards his mother-tongue. The reason is partly historical and partly contemporaneous besides political. The Tamil and Sanskrit are the oldest of Indian languages. Their origin goes back to pre-Christian era. All these ages, these two ancient languages were mutually complementary. The oldest extant Tamil grammatical treatise *Tolkappiam*, in one of its stanzas paves way for the entry of Sanskrit words and phrases. The *Saundarya Lahari* makes a reference to Dravida land, the ancient seat of Tamils. There had been no animosity between Tamil and Sanskrit until the early decades of the nineteenth century. The trouble arose when a few short-sighted grammarians, in their over-enthusiasm went to the extent of asserting that Tamil cannot exist without Sanskrit. This has infuriated quite a number of Tamil savants. Swamy Vedachalam, a reputed writer and an erudite scholar in Sanskrit, Tamil and English, took up the cudgels and started a pure -- Tamil-movement to prove that



Tamil can stand on its own. He endeared himself to the cause of pure Tamil and even changed or in fact translated his name from Sanskrit Vedachalam into Maraimalai. He is now known as Maraimalai Adigalar.

It is from this pure-Tamil movement arose, a dislike to Sanskrit language. Many successive Tamil scholars found in this, an agreeable policy to perpetuate pure-Tamil in every walk of life. The Hindi language is actually an off-shoot of Sanskrit with an admixture of Urdu. Hence an allergy towards Hindi is an extension of a dislike to Sanskrit. Truly speaking, not that Bharatidasan grossly disliked Hindi but that he admired Tamil his mother-tongue, more. In his thoughts, words and deeds, the Tamil language played a pivotal role.

Let's say even connubial bliss of a damsel  
Is not comparable to that of our great Tamil;

Once Bharatidasan was on a tour to Madurai. He went around the bazaar and saw to his surprise and shock that innumerable name-boards of shops were written in English with Sanskrit words such as Bhavan, Mandal, Khadi, Bunder etc. The Tamil name-boards, few and far between were found to be faulty. Should Tamil be found degraded in a city of ancient Tamil Academics, he asked. He took some time to recover from the shock. It is said that his reaction to this experience is a small booklet *Tamil Iyakkam* which he is said to have written in one night. He wanted the commercial name-boards to be written in Tamil and felt aggrieved that in the streets of Tamil Nadu, everything is available and visible but

not the Tamil to be read out.

The fact that Bharathi is a great lover of Tamil language and literature is one of the main reasons why Bharatidasan adored him. Bharathi was born at a time when Tamil language was needed him most, he says in one of his poems. In his glowing tribute to Bharathi, he says,

A charioteer of Tamil graceful!  
He, a bee of Tamil flowers and a patron  
Of music melodious and a fountain of  
imagination

Cleavage among Tamils is to some extent religious and sometime caste-oriented. Lack of unity is not in any way conducive to the growth of an emerging population. Bharatidasan feels that unity among the Tamils could be forged through language. As an ardent disciple of E.V.R. Periyar, an avowed iconoclast and a rationalistic leader, Bharatidasan was determined that Tamil could effectively prove to be a socio-cultural link among the populace. It is in this way his preponderant love towards Tamil should be accounted for.

Oh! the great Tamil! The soul the sweet honey!  
Endowed I to you, my breath and my life!  
If you're tattered, tattered will be my life!  
If fortune befalls you, so it is for me too!

The poet was an advocate of pure Tamil. In his opinion, any admixture of alien elements to Tamil would certainly be detrimental to its growth. The admixture may even prove disastrous to the uniqueness

of Tamil Language and culture. This he said, keeping in mind a number of popular concepts where the car-natic musicians sang mostly in Telugu and Sanskrit kritis. They shunned the Tamil kritis. On occasions, the Tamil songs were tabooed in Music festivals. Terribly shocked Bharatidasan forthwith appealed for a campaign against this utter negligence of Tamil in the very soil of its origin. He turned his deaf ear to a naive argument that music transcends all linguistic barriers and did not pay heed to an incongruous discussion whether Tamil songs could be set to music. He took it as an affront to the prestige of Tamils and proved himself unequivocal in verbally condemning them.

Bharatidasan advocated unadulterated Tamil to be maintained in plays, films and in newspapers. He questioned how and why Tamil should be neglected from the sanctum sanctorum of the temples when there are abundant devotional hymns and aubades in Tamil. He did not say that he is against the Vedic chants in the temples but questioned the neglect of Tamil prayer there. His poetical booklet *Tamil Iyak-kam* speaks in detail about these problems.

A discerning reader of this biography may criticise the wisdom of an atheist-poet questioning the mode of prayer in the temples. Why should he be worried about prayer at all? Not that the poet is concerned with prayer as such but he is worried about the language which is used there. Setting aside his personal views on God and religion, he, as a Tamil-loving citizen feels that it is undesirable that the priests chant the *mantrams* in a language absolutely

unknown to the devotees who go there for worship. This he says in the interest of those who go there to pray God, irrespective of the fact whether he believes in God or not.

The poet strongly voiced forth his opinion that Tamil should be the official language of the state. The *de jure* status accorded to it as an official language is not enough but it should be so, *de facto*. The language should also be a medium of expression in all levels of academic bodies. If the students are taught in an alien medium, they may be rich in learning and scholarship but not in knowledge and wisdom. Their imaginative talent and innate wisdom would not develop unless they are taught in their mother tongue. They cannot invent and create as the westerners do. In Bharatidasan's opinion, a legislation must be enacted to make Tamil a compulsory medium of instruction.

Bharatidasan's *Kudumba Vilakku*, 'Lamp of the family' attempts to picture an ideal family wherein a house wife plays a vital role in effectively running an average household. This may seem utopian at times but the motive behind this quintuple poetry is appreciable. In bringing out this booklet, the poet has thematically broken the traditional concept of revolving around either heroism or romance as a fit material for lasting eminence. Herein the poet underlines the importance of women's education in the second part of the book.

Women who remain uneducated  
Are alike barren land wherein

Grass may grow but not offshoot efficacious.

- *Kudumba Vilakku* - II.

The same idea he expresses elsewhere in *Isai Amudhu*. 'Musical Manna' by making an appeal to parents that they must-unfailingly educate their female-children. If only they are educated, they will naturally discard the meaningless fear and unnecessary shyness, he asserts. Emancipating of women from the domineering masculine world is one more endearing characteristic of the poet. Bharathi says that if chastity is insisted among women, let it be so among men too. Bharatidasan identically observes that if timidity and shyness are expected of women-folk, let it be so among men also.

The poet appreciates romantic marriages among young men and women. He was conscious of the fact that it is casteism that proves a stumbling block to love-marriages. He makes one of these characters speak passionately to his lady-love as follows:

With my blazing-love, I shall jump on you,  
the sea,  
But the fetters of caste have fastened my  
legs, alas!

- *Puratchik-kavi*.

*Azhakin cirippu*, The 'Laughter of Beauty' is a nice collection of brief poetical passages delineating beauty as it is variously manifested in the sun, the moon, the sky, forest, sea and lotus pond. Similes and metaphors abound in the process of depicting visionary beauty. By referring to the libraries, the

poet admirably extends the frontiers of beauty and implies the essence of intellectual beauty as well. One is tempted to draw an analogy with epigrammatic passage of Keats.

‘Beauty is Truth and Truth Beauty’.

*Isai Amudhu*, ‘Manna of Music’ is in a way champions the causes of cart-man, industrial labour, gipsy and a number of manual labourers. When society takes little care of them, the poet darts his keen observation to their dreams and aspirations.

## 7. THE POET AND HIS PLAYS

Drama is one of the visual arts capable of inspiring the educated and influencing even the unlettered. It has been an effective mass media since time immemorial. *The modern drama is only an offshoot, evolved and developed from ancient folk-arts.*

A closer view of the history of drama in Tamil-speaking areas reveals that the growth of drama is indissolubly linked with the contemporary political developments. Along with the surging nationalistic spirit in pre-Independent days, there have arisen a number of socio-political movements such as Rationalistic movement, Justice party, Self-Respect campaign and Dravidian movement. *These socio-political units soon attracted the educated higher and middle class people from among the non-Brahmins who for a long time felt languished for want of job-opportunities. In effect, these were the non-Brahmin movements against the domination of Brahmins who were all-powerful in every walk of life, taking advantage of their self-styled role as the highest caste in communal hierarchy. Though T.M.Nair, Raja of Bobbili, Thiagaraja Chettiar, Raja Sir Muthaiya Chettiar and K.M.Balasubramaniam were the architects of the non-Brahmin movement in the south of India, E.V.Ramasamy Naicker popularly known as Thanthai Periyar stood in the forefront of it at one stage. Periyar's was a rationalistic-cum-Dravidian movement, an offshoot of the Justice Party of the pre-Inde-*

pendence days.

Nearly five decades of his public life, to be precise, until the last breath of his life, Bharatidasan was a votary of rationalistic spirit and an ardent follower of Thanthai Periyar. This influence is perceptible in his plays also. As Subburathinam's father was very much interested in theatrical activities, his son too had many an opportunity to play minor roles in the local dramas even at an early age of ten. As a young boy, he wrote a playlet *Chintamani* and helped young children to enact it in the school functions. He was to write story and dialogue to a number of films at his maturer years. All these experiences have gone into the making of both verse and prose plays during his writing career. But verse plays are few in numbers, as they were meant for reading and not for acting. In other words, a number of Bharatidasan's were closet plays.

As Bharatidasan was a follower of E.V.R. Periyar and a member of the Dravidian movement, most of his dramas are found to be the vehicles of rationalistic spirit. They cut across the traditional taboos of the society and highlight the principles and ideals, he stood for and respected. He felt that was what the contemporary society needed.

Modern approach to the ancient classical and mythological works, delineation of culture and civilisation, depiction of love and romance, condensing the life-sketch of Tamil savants, commenting on a scientific temper, appreciating women's education and liberty, uprooting superstitions and dogmas and desiring an egalitarian society were a few of the charac-



teristics of Bharatidasan as culled out from him as a playwright. His bias towards humour is glaringly known in most of his plays. A noteworthy feature in his dramas is the addition of songs to be vocally sung on the stage. But in later day dramas, the musical songs are conspicuously absent. This is because of the influence of contemporary theatre where, up to the early twenties, roughly one-third of the play consisted of songs. Gradually this adherence to lengthy songs and music disappeared and in the fifties of this century there arose action-packed dramas with little or no songs at all.

More than twenty plays Bharatidasan has contributed and of these, only three are verse-plays *Veerat-thai*, *Onbadu chuvai* and *Cathimutrappulavar*. He made a few of his minor *kavyas* and long narrative poems into playlets on later occasions. *The Puratchik-kavi*, (1938) one of the *kavyas* anthologised in the first volume of his poems, he converted into a play *Triumph of Love* and arranged for its theatrical performance in Malaysia in 1941. The play was a resounding success in Singapore and Sri Lanka also. Later on, in 1944 the same play with a different title *Delightful Night*, was enacted all over Tamil Nadu. The drama *Amaithi*, 'Peace' (1946) is unique in the annals of Tamil literature as it contains neither song nor dialogue but only silent actions of the dramatic personae. In fact it is a dumb-play and from the spectators' point of view, audition remains inactive. But the spectator must be alert visually. Lack of songs and dialogue, the essential components of any play should therefore be amply compensated by deeply inspiring and attracting scenes and actions. Otherwise this typical dumb-play is bound to be a dismal

failure. Bharatidasan's dumb-play was well received by scholars and the public and in a few places it was also successfully enacted. The chief characteristic of this play is that it can be performed anywhere else in the world. It transcends all language barriers. A character *Mannankatti* is dumb and an embodiment of peace. His actions are highly symbolical. Even in his suffering, he helps others.

On the personal request of N.S.Krishnan, a prominent comedian of the Tamil stage in the forties and fifties of the century, Bharatidasan dramatised his lengthy poem, *Edhirbara Muddham*, 'Kiss unexpected.' *Is it Love or Duty*, a minor *kavya*, he has rendered into a play.

In 1944, Bharatidasan was instrumental in organising a drama troupe with the active assistance and support of Namakkal Chellappa Reddiar and Murugu Subramanian, editor of a now extinct literary journal, *Ponni*. This amateur dramatic association, once enacted in Pondicherry, *The Merchant of Venice*, one of the famous comedies of Shakespeare. Bharatidasan wrote not only songs and dialogue but also directed the play. The play in effect did not appear to be an adaptation but almost as original. The students who sought his advice and also some private coaching from him in the course of their teacher-training, formed part of the characters of the play.

*The Heroic Mother*, a verse play included in the First Volume of his poems contains ten scenes. Though it is a conventional king-queen story, the poet has introduced into it, the concept of democracy. The portrayal of Vijaya, the queen is highly impres-

sive. The Commander-in-chief Kangeyan brought the entire palace of Manipuri under his control and made the queen and the young prince separately run away for their life. The dynamic queen had disguised herself as an elderly gentleman and she continues to be so in the forest. Not knowing that the disguised old man was his mother, the young prince learnt from her all the martial arts, archery, fencing, horse-riding and bowmanship. At the opportune time she, in disguise exposed the villainy of the Commander-in-Chief and made the Concorde of princes decide in favour of crowning the exiled prince. They all acceded to a suggestion to democratise the kingdom and the denouement of the whole affair is a welcome note to democracy.

The traditional glorification of monarchy is done away with and the poet heralds the adoption of democracy. The role of Vijaya, the queen is highly remarkable as she is teaching her own son incognito in exile with all tactfulness and bravery. She appears to be the prototype of bold women, as conceived by the poet.

*Hiranyan or unexcelled hero*, highlights the merits of patriotism and love. The poet wrote it in 1934. Those who acted in it include the leading spokesmen of rationalism such as Kuthooci Gurusamy, Tiruvacakamani Balasubramaniam and Sathiyavani Muthu. In 1939, the *Kudiarasu* Publishers, Erode brought out this play in a book-form and it was sold like hot-cakes. For some years, this play was proscribed by the then Government on charges of anti-religious sentiments. Hiranya is pictured as a loving father deeply concerned with the gullibility of

his son Prahlada to the wiles and deep cunningness of Aryan priesthood. Though the play was based on a mythological story, the treatment of the theme was entirely in tune with the needs of the day. It very well served the purpose of non-Brahmin movement. In other words, it was a new wine in an old bottle, bordering a parody in the Tamil stage. It was thus a forerunner for plays such as *Kinthanar* and *Keemayanam*, respectively a parodying of *Nandanar* and *Ramayanam*.

*Chaumiyan* is a well-written play upholding the merits of democracy. Monarchy is no longer acceptable to the courtiers of whom two persons raise the banner of liberty and succeed in their efforts. The mistaken identity in respect of these two characters forms part of humorous situations in the play. It is the genial humour that proves to be an adequate compensation for the lack of structural unity in the play.

The plays of Bharatidasan (1959) is an anthology of four short-dramas *Karkandu*, *the Ocean of Joy*, *Cathimutra-p-pulavar* and *Tolerance is wider than ocean*. The first and the last are highly humorous and can be roughly paralleled to *Sabapathi*, a long play by Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar. The *Sugarcandy* is woven in colloquial dialogue. Also comes a septuagenarian, Veerappa Mudaliyar with a deep desire to remarry. Despite opposition from his grown-up sons, Veerappa Mudaliyar is determined to marry the daughter of an indigent Chidambaram Mudaliyar at Pondicherry. A young watchman who came to know of the entire episode, secretly married the girl to the discomfiture of poor Veerappa Mudaliyar. The dialogue of the play-wright in han-

dling the role of the watchman especially in winning over the confidence of Chidambara Mudaliyar is superb in the drama.

*The Ocean of Joy* is a playlet meant for broadcasting. Here comes Arasappan, a cunning villain who wants to marry a girl Thangam for the sake of property and to keep another for his lasciviousness. When his relative-girl wants to marry a young man of her own choice, the villain abducted her in order to coerce her to marry him. But his lady-love unmasked his perjury and enabled Thangam to marry a lover of her own choice. Thus comes an ocean of joy to the newly wedded couple.

*Cathimutra-p-pulavar* is a dramatic version of the story of a Sangam Poet. Bharatidasan's love for Tamil classic is revealed in many a place. A number of passages are noted for the rhyming of the last feet or letter in the lines.

*Tolerance is wider than Ocean* is a full-length comedy where a Landlord of Muthuppakkam is abjectly selfish and totally unconcerned about the genuine sufferings of his sub-ordinates such as barber, cart-man, tiller, accountant and priest. Instead of giving a helping hand to them, he would preach tolerance. Even this selfish man had to meet a crisis in his village. In order to tide over it, he sought the cooperation of the villagers. When he urges them on to do so in haste, all his sub-ordinates uniformly preach tolerance to him. The embarrassing situation of the land-lord provides a genial humour at length. Expressions that are allegorical and are of two meanings add to the pleasantness of the play.

*Educated women*, an illustrious play ensures the importance of literate women in a developing society. The poet firmly believes that the educated women alone can revive a crumbling family. Ponnann the first son of a family goes astray and becomes an incorrigible spendthrift. When his actions go unbridled to the detriment of the entire family, his wife takes up the cudgels to see him behave. She is ably assisted by her sister and the car-driver. At one stage, when Ponnann goes to the extent of conspiring to murder his own brother, they all make him realise the fraternal love and affection. The transformation of Ponnann, from his wickedness to real love is gradually effected in the play and it testifies to the ablest craftsmanship of the dramatist. The ordeal of being unemployed in an impressionable age is humorously portrayed. This comic relief is very well poised in the structure of the play.

*Talaimalai kanda Thevar*, a short play of four units is based on the life of an eyeless bard. When he is relaxing in an inn, unknowingly his hands have fallen on a woman. Her husband took a strong exception to what he calls the high-handed action of the bard. The poor blind poet had to fend himself poetically with a pathetic plea of innocence.

True it's that my hands touched but not  
my heart

If you would cut me off, do so, my friend!  
Still if you don't believe my expressions verbal,  
Bear with me by seeing my eyes real!

Despite being blind, he accepted a challenge to rob in the house of a prostitute and does so. At

length he makes her giving up the sinful life and do better service for the cause of Tamil.

*The Romance of a Pole danseuse* is a play of twenty four scenes. Muthunagai, a female-character is dynamic and using her as his mouthpiece, the poet lambasts the society for all its meaningless rituals, follies and foibles. She is exceptionally brilliant in composing poems of unfailing excellence. An adept in the art of fencing also. The women-folk, in almost all the *kavyas* and plays of the poet, occupy leading roles and prove themselves better than even male-characters. The poet's constant portrayal of women in a highly elevated stance, be in poetry or drama reminds us of the fact that so was Shakespeare in the characterisation of Portia, Rosalind, Celia, Isabella etc. All through the play, Muthunagai disseminates lofty thoughts that all human-beings are as equal and born free as rain-drops and their mind should not be corrupted by divisive thinking and feelings of casteism. With her sharpness of intellect, she makes even the king declare that there is no caste. The king of the country was a staunch believer in caste and in previous birth. But in such an ideal play as this, what is incomprehensible is that the poet makes this dynamic woman character marry the king even though he had been married earlier! Does it mean that the poet does not oppose the bigamous life, despite his progressive thinking?

*Kudumba Vilakkum Kunduk-kallum* is one more of Bharatidasan's drama that elucidates the role of women in average house-holds. It is they, the women who attend to the domestic chores from early morn till late-night. Their routine jobs at home include the

preparation of food, serving, welcoming the guests, looking after children, etc. In claiming an equality among men and women the tendency of menfolk commanding women alone to do all work at home is condemned. The householder or a husband is not an unbridled horse, nor is a housewife, an unconditional slave. To put it in a nutshell, no house should prove to be a prison house for women. Many cross references in the drama point out that ancient Tamil works testify to a classless society and to a belief in one-God. In over-emphasising his monotheistic concept, the poet says that God Vinayaga should be kept in museums. Commenting on the mythical story of God Siva asking for human-flesh, the poet says that such a thing cannot be thought of in these days. Critically looking at a divinity with a satirical touch is the silent impact of E.V.R Periyar in the works of the poet.

Rasputin was a monk in the czarist Russia. The drama named after him portrays the atrocities and sexual orgies committed by him. Though the source-material is Russian, the locale and atmosphere reminds us of our own land. The portrayal of Rasputin is a tacit indication and fore-warning to the like-minded and vicious sanyasis that an ignominious fall is imminent to them if they also behave atrociously. The dramatist may appear to be harsh in dealing with their shady affairs and stealthy behaviour with women. But this is what Geoffrey Chaucer did against the erring Anglican clergy in the beginning of the 15th century. The same with still more severity was done much earlier in Italy by Boccaccio in his *Decameron Tales*.



*Van ci Vizha* attempts to illustrate that the Deepavali festival is symptomatic of Aryan domination over Dravidians. When the Dravidian movement was in its heyday, this play was highly popular among the masses. In a socio-political background, the dramatist indicates that the Deepavali should be mourned by the Tamils and not to be celebrated.

*Vikata-k-kourt* is a typical parody in which Apusamy a responsible employee, of a company swindles a sum of Rs. 300/- from his firm and proceeds to Tiruvannamalai to witness the Jothi Festival. There he dies in the house of a harlot. When the case came up for hearing, the company-lawyer beautifully argues for recovery of the amount and exposes the foolishness of clinging on to superstitious beliefs. This is exactly the parodying of Saint Manickavasagar's action of constructing a Siva temple with the money given to him by the ruling king for purchasing horses for his cavalry. The prosecution-lawyer indicts the Railway administration for fostering among the general public by advertising for Jothi festival. If the railways are mindful of spreading a sense of devotion among the public, they might do it by giving a free passage to and fro for the pilgrims, the lawyer argues. The lawyer goes ahead at one instance that even God Siva himself is liable for prosecution. The fact that the dramatist is bent upon driving home his rationalistic beliefs is amply demonstrated here.

*Ceratandavam* is almost like a musical opera based on the story of Adimandi and Attanathi referred to in Sangam literature. The supremacy of Adimandi's love is highlighted despite a lot of set-

backs that come in.

The play affirms the universal concept of monogamous life. Many songs in this play are tuneful and can be easily set to music. They are all rich in thought-content as they revolve around the Tamils, their language and culture. Usual importance is given to rationalistic beliefs.

*Nalla Theerppu* is one more addition to the realm of short plays with an emphasis for songs. This play underlines the importance of dance and music. The impression one gathers after a careful perusal of this play is that fine-arts including music and drama should be developed by the state itself. This is the effective way of fostering its all-round development.

*Piciranthayar*, an exclusive prose-drama of thirty four chapters has won the prestigious award of the Sahitya Academy. The source material for the play is the well-known friendship of the Tamil bard Piciranthayar and a contemporary ruler Kopperuncholan, referred to in *Puranaanooru*, a Sangam Anthology. In the absence of solid historical evidences about the bard, the dramatist has woven the story convincingly with fictitious material. The Tamil poet proves to be a good Samaritan and works hard to alleviate the sufferings of the commoners when they are battered by seasonal rains and storms. His is a firm belief that the ruler should be guided by ethical principles. He believes in reforming the offenders by making them penitent. In its epilogue, the play highlights the importance of a sense of optimism and supremacy of a genuine friendship in an amicable social set-up.

Technically speaking, the drama contains a play within a play. Its structure is balanced and in its tonal meaning it is almost didactic.

*Onbadu Chuvai* is a mini verse-play exhibiting a harmonious amalgam of nine traditional passions and feelings of the mind such as gladness, wonder, disgust, anger, smile, bravery, fear and distress. The protagonist of this playlet leading his lady-love to his secret-venue through a thread-ladder reminds us of the meeting of Romeo with Juliet in Shakespeare's play, *Romeo and Juliet*.

A strict perusal of Bharatidasan's total literary output exemplify that he is more a poet than a dramatist. The dynamism that we find in his poetry is far remote in dramas. His plays are not proportionate and not all of them can structurally be deemed suitable for theatrical performance. The graceful symmetrical form that one finds in Shakespeare and the stage-direction that one notices in Bernard Shaw are not to be found in Bharatidasan. Most of his contributions are closet plays. Though his themes are drawn from Sangam classics, folk-lore traditions and ancient tales, there is also a sporadic modernity. But in either of these cases, there seems to be no innovation. Themes, be ancient or modern are either adapted or modified in a different form oriented to his attitude. No doubt a zeal for reformation in socio-political angles is very well displayed. His language is chaste and the names of the dramatis personae exude a charm besides being emblematic of ancient culture and tradition.



## 8. PROSE-WRITINGS AND SHORT-STORIES

Any straight forward expression in language that is not marked by metre or rhyme is prose. Poetic prose is one that makes use of cadence, rhythm or other devices normally associated with poetry. S.T. Coleridge, in *Table Talk* observes that poetry is equal to the best of words in the best order. Bharatidasan does not seem to have been worried about all these varieties of prose orders for the simple reason that he was an adept in poetry. He was a gifted poet. Thousands of poetic lines, lucid and comprehensive flowed out of his pen. In other words, he wrote poetry as a rule and prose as an exception.

Bharatidasan however was not inclined to write in prose. In his introduction to a secondary *Kavya Pandiyan Paricu*, the poet says that his original plan was to write the story of *Pandiyan Paricu* in prose, but subsequently gave it up and wrote it in poetry. Any subject matter could precisely and effectively be brought out in poetical form, he says. If lucidness and simplicity are the hall marks of prose, Bharatidasan achieved these twin objectives in poetry itself and hence, the need for prose never arose in him. He does not seem to have written even a single book in prose. Even his juvenalia such as brochures and leaflets in espousing the cause of Indian nationalism in the late twenties, was written in the form of songs and ballads.

Not less than four prose anthologies that are presently available contain what Bharatidasan wrote in journals and periodicals as occasion demanded. These are all posthumous publications, excepting *Bharatidasan Kathaigal* published by Gnayiru Pathipagam, Pondicherry in 1955. Under the aegis of the poet's only son, Mannar Mannan and two daughters, Saraswathi and Vasantha, the following three titles were brought out by Poompukar Piracuram, Madras.

i. *Bharatidasan Pecukirar* - 1980

ii. *Maanudam Potru* - 1980

iii. *Ezhaikal Cirikkirarkal*-1984.

The short stories and other prose writings of Bharatidasan appeared in Tamil periodicals published from Pondicherry in the early thirties of the present century. *Puduvai Murasu* and Masilamany Mudaliyar's *Tamil Arasu*, the Pondicherry-based journals patronised Bharatidasan. In those early days of his literary career, then Subburathinam assumed the pseudonyms such as Puduvai K.S.K., K.S.R., Kirukkan and Kindalkaran.

P.S. Chettiar's *Cinema Ulagam* and Kanchi Manimozhiyar's *Porvaal* spared their pages for the short-stories of Bharatidasan. *Kudiarasu*, *Dravida Nadu* were the other journals that carried the essays of the poet in the late thirties and forties. Bharatidasan's magazine *Kuyil* came out in the forties and it regularly published his articles and short stories.

*Bharatidasan Pecukirar* is a collection of twenty three speeches made extempore by the poet in a number of teacher's meetings, literary gatherings and general functions. As a speaker, the poet never bothered to make his speech ornate and pedagogic with alliteration and assonance. Devoid of artificial harangue, he used to be very informal as much as Periyar E.V.R. in this respect. So simple and direct, his speeches were, as to make us feel that they were individually addressed. The poet will never beat about the bush but frankly expressed his opinions. No question of mincing matters and as such, sometimes the persons involved will feel uneasy at the critical remarks of the poet. The purport of these lectures, anthologized here in the form of short essays, revolves around language, writers' tasks, religion and society. Irrationality, religious disharmony, casteism and foolish superstitions are ludicrously commented on.

Bharatidasan's lecture on 15, February 1954 at Coimbatore is a piece of literary research. Unequivocally he criticised the self-styled edition of Kamba Ramayana by T.K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliyar and his unconventional way of juxtaposing two consonants together in Tamil words. The poet's speech on that occasion is a piece of linguistic study and a nice historical research.

*Manudam Potru*, Celebrate the Mankind is a collection of seventy three essays and skits contributed by Bharatidasan in a number of journals in a period of about two decades from 1930 onwards. The poet's rationalistic beliefs and condemnation of casteism are highlighted. A Letter purported to have

been addressed to God is highly humorous and in a way briefly brings out what all religious views on God Siva, people hold. *Ponnum Thangamum* is one of the informative essays in the volume. The poet's rejoinder to R.S. Desikan and Kaka Kalelkar, an article on Tamil spelling reform and another one on the war-ship Emden's anchoring at Pondicherry are worthy of being read.

It is surprising that Bharatidasan was a short story writer also. Short story is a genre that survives in the shadow of novels. It is designed to produce a single dominant effect and it concentrates on an individual character. Bharatidasan's short stories in a collection, *Ezhaikal Cirikkirarkal*, 'Poor men Laugh' are structurally well-knit and stylistically simple and incisive. Astonishing variety is an added characteristic of this anthology. Satire is so gentle that both the victor and the victim would laugh with one another. Fantasy and fable-type stories are also sporadically found. *Vikada Muzhakkam* is a story that parodies a vedic discourse in a highly humorous manner. Hypocrisy, vanity, arrogance and humbug are unmasked in this collection.

Bharatidasan's subtle handling of deep-rooted superstition among the house wives is impressively brought out in a story-like article, *Suyarajyam Vendum*. One article with the resemblance of a short story pungently satirises the futility of caste-marks. In unmasking the priesthood and in ridiculing its questionable behaviour, certain stories remind us of the *Decameron Tales* of Boccaccio. A burlesque imitation of the Ramayana, depiction of the travails of widowhood and the ritualistic preachings of evan-



gelists are a few of the other subjects that are interestingly dealt with.

This collection contains not merely stories that are to be kept on par with typical short stories of to-day but are also accounts that are seemingly anecdotal and biographical. The secret of their success, however is that they are lucid and interesting. They display various items such as parody, burlesque, satire, fable, fantasy and even a skit that borders on a minuscule science fiction.

Stripped of sex and violence, innumerable modern short stories would prove to be skeletons and grow pale into insignificance. But Bharatidasan's short stories are so refreshing that members of all age-groups in a home can happily go through with relish. That is certainly a remarkable virtue in Bharatidasan, as a story-writer.

At length, the present writer feels that despite umpteen critical works on Bharatidasan, no work has devoted any attention to his prose-writings. The reason might be that his prose is not as voluminous as his poetry. It is a high time that a balanced critical attention is paid to the prose-works of Bharatidasan in the days to come.



## PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF BHARATIDASAN

Bharatidasan's literary career has spread over a period of about fifty years of which roughly the first two decades disclose him as a nationalist with sparsely-written literary productions close in heels with pan-Indian and anti-British revolutionaries. The remaining three decades are clustered with copious literary productions on socio-literary themes.

As a man of principle he never brooked disgrace or ignominy. This innate quality is in consonance with the ideals of self-respect movement of which he was an ardent advocate and an adherent until his last breath. Bharatidasan cannot suffer fools and he never minced words. He would sing songs very nicely. He had been a person of histrionic talents in his early days. On occasions he undertook major roles in many a play arranged under the aegis of schools run by traditional teachers in rural areas. In his schooling days, Subburathinam was mischievous. But still he was liked by the teachers for his talents in music and acting.

Bharatidasan was a lover of reading and meticulous in preserving books. Even though he did criticize mythologies and puranas, he did not neglect or throw them away. These old volumes he carefully preserved in the shelves of his home library. *The Tirukkural* he endeared the most and never forgot to

carry it along with him during tours. It was his habit to constantly refer to it in conversation. Influence of this ethical treatise can very well be found in many of his poems.

More than the political parties and their individual leaders, Bharatidasan highly respected the ideals and principles that governed them. Strictly speaking, the poet never aligned himself with any single political party either at Pondicherry or in Tamil Nadu. He led his life independently of any political connections. But still he remained a deep sympathiser and an advocate of nationalism.

Even though the young Subburathinam's meeting with Subramanya Bharathi was accidental, it proved to be so impressive as to make the young man change his proper name into a pseudonym, Bharatidasan. It is interesting to note that multitudinous people to-day do not know his real name. They know him as Bharatidasan only. For the first time under this pseudonym, a poem was published in 1919 in a journal *Desopakari*, from Madurai. Roughly from the twenties and onwards the poet signed his name as Bharatidasan only.

Broad-shouldered, fairly tall and a brown complexioned personality he was. His bushy moustache, slightly trimmed is an added attraction to his heroic look. He would walk erect, looking direct. Half a foot short of six feet, he began wearing thick-rimmed spectacles from 1934 onwards. He did not become grey-haired until the fifty fifth year of his age.

The poet wore khadi clothes of which the loose jibba would be knee-long and the dhoti would go down up to the palm of his feet. While going to school, a thick coat, usually of the ripe arecanut colour he would wear instead of jibba. A green shawl would don his shoulders. He would make sure that all clothes are spotlessly clean before wearing them. He would set aside the cloth even if there is a small scar or dirt or rent in it. Perfumes and cosmetics he was fond of. Roughly after 1946 onwards, a change in his sartorial elegance was noticeable. He wore a majestic-looking sherwani, a type of collarless long-coat covering the neck. Sometimes he put a red-colour long shawl folded triangularly on his shoulders. The golden-coloured flowers woven into the shawl would be prominently visible. At home he would normally wear a lungi and keep himself free of any upper garment. As a rule, he refrained from wearing any gold ornament.

Bharatidasan was almost a gourmet, relishing non-vegetarian dishes. Fish, roasted and in sauce he would delightfully eat. Sometimes he would buy small fishes directly from anglers and fishmongers. His wife would readily dress them in water in the backyard of the house. He would even give a helping hand to his wife on those occasions. Bharatidasan had a number of domestic fowls and doves. But it is not known whether he groomed them for table purposes.

Potato and banana chips, tomato soup, greens, roasted beans, buttermilk, dhall sauce with ladies finger and drumstick are the other items that he liked in his menu. Habitually he was not slow in eating. He was punctual in food habits and would never eat

belatedly. Always drank hot water in between the courses of meals. Once the meal is over, Bharatidasan would go in for betel and nut and habitually a bout of smoking. He ate with relish a variety of mango-fruits. When returning from Salem during summers, he would make sure to bring with him two or three baskets of graded mango fruits to last as many days as possible.

The poet was a bundle of emotions, passions and a man of strong likes and dislikes. Both in disclosing either his appreciation or condemnation, he would go to the extreme. But always so humble and child-like in moving with individuals and with those who are in need of any help from him. Taking advantage of his overwhelming tenderness and love, many have made him gullible on occasions. The poet would not mind it, though he was a loser of monies and things. But if it is a question of poetry, debate or discussion, he would forget himself and speak out anything that he deems fit and correct, unmindful of the reaction it is likely to create among the hearers. Cutting across the circumstances, atmosphere and situation, he would be forceful and effective in argument.

Aspiring poets and poetasters used to come to him for getting a word of persuasion, foreword or a commendation letter. For all those who were desirous of getting such encouragement either orally or in writing, he had a constant advice: "You should find a fixed source of income for your livelihood elsewhere and then only you must begin writing poems or songs." The implication is that no one should solely rely on his pen for keeping wolves at bay. The poet's

humane outlook thus forms part of his individual character.

Presiding over a meeting or a poet's corner or a symposium was allergic to Bharatidasan. In case, if he chairs a function, it may result in an embarrassing situation to participants. He would not allow them to indulge in harangues or wholly irrelevant talks. In presiding over poet's meet, neither would he allow anybody to unduly flatter him nor himself would do it on others. His lecture would not be flowery or a spontaneous overflow. He would speak to the point, punctuated by an outburst of his experience or feelings. In presenting his points he would not beat about the bush. To be brief, his lecture would consist of frank and direct statements, devoid of any artificial or literary adornments.

In self-respect marriages, if any speaker begin criticising mythological stories, Bharatidasan would carefully listen to it and see that the blasphemy does not go out of bounds. Even in criticising certain obscenities from the puranas, one should carefully point it out, he used to say. He would make speakers understand that marriage is a function where part of the gathering is of women and children. His dignified behaviour and modesty in writing are worth emulating. Similar was the outlook of Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar in more than ninety of his Tamil Plays.

Bharatidasan cannot be cowed down either by the rich or the authoritative persons. Many have suggested to him that if only he was flexible and amenable to rich and influential personalities, he would get himself still elevated. He was lacking in

worldly -- wise matters. To such of those who verbally indict him in these lines, he would respond curtly: "I am not for hawking my poetry and waiting at the door step of anybody. My poems are moving of their own and I can't accept any suggestion that degrades me." He was firmly of opinion that every writer worth his name should lead a dignified life and the society should properly respect him.

The poet's frankness has been already referred to. In 1963, a conference was got up to highlight the importance of Tamil as medium of instruction. Professor Dr.M.Varadarajan of the University of Madras and a great Tamil literary writer was also one among those who were present. The professor in the course of his lecture made an emotional appeal to the audience as follows:

"Many parents send their children to English medium schools. Forgetting the mother-tongue, their action of sending their wards to English schools is like committing the young to homicide. Hence we must all join together to fight and agitate against the anglophiles."

The poet was the next in order to speak from the stage. Exceptionally he was moderate in his moods and temperament. But that day in reacting to the passionate appeal of the Tamil Professor, the poet was blunt and frank. Perhaps the poet felt a hollowness and an exaggerated vein in the emotional utterance of the professor.

"You all have heard what the Professor spoke earlier. Let us suppose that tomorrow we all start our



agitation. I am sure that all those who propose the agitation and those who accept it in toto cannot be found here tomorrow." Such a terrible frankness the poet was known for.

Bharatidasan was firmly of opinion that one should be intimately familiar with the language and literature of one's own mother-tongue. He would not accept the dry and inane argument that an aspiring poet need not be so. Moreover, Bharathiyar has proved what a poet could do to an emerging nation. Ever since he wrote, a desire for Tamil has increased. A true poet could rightly predict and what is genuine and what is truth. Bharatidasan added further! "Napoleon, the Great performed everything like a miracle not because of a dialectic reasoning or logical discussion but by a feeling of urgency and immediacy. This does not mean that I am not for academic learning or knowledge. No, not at all. Concentrate on the works of those who were known for their nationality, expertise, keen sense and worldly knowledge. Set aside the works that are supported by mere logical reasoning." He added further that Tamil writers should methodically learn the language and once they become writers, they should have the gut to express their opinion fearlessly.

Fine arts would fade, perish and vanish at one stage. This is the argument of some vested interests. Bharatidasan is assertive in underlining the fact that if Tamil arts should reach their apex of glory, the thoughts that are responsible for their creation should also be exalted. If the obscene stories are termed arts, how can they be called lofty and elevated?

Even though Bharatidasan was an atheist and rationalistic, many revered persons from other religions would come with a request for hymns and songs on festivals and special ceremonies. The poet would never say 'No' to such a request, but then and there compose a poem to their satisfaction and bade them off. But on one occasion, a well-known communist leader wanted the poet to write exclusively on Marxism. Pat came the reply from the poet. "Do not expect me to write poems on Indian communists. They all have become inimical to our nationalistic policies. Let them understand that communism cannot get roots in India unless the self-respect movement is spread out."

Bharatidasan has written story and dialogue to many Tamil films. A reputed cine director and film producer T.R.Sundaram of Salem has got an agreement signed by the poet to write for a film *Valayapathi*. The poet has done it so and handed over the script to the producer. One provisional director T.R.Ragunath censored the script and sporadically altered it without the knowledge of Bharatidasan. Once the poet heard about it, he became terribly angry. Film-producer T.R.Sundaram had been on a tour to Fiji Islands then. As soon as he returned, the poet wrote a letter asking him to annul the agreement straightaway. It was a loss of a sum of Rs.40,000/- a huge amount in those days. But to the poet who stood on prestige and principles, this pecuniary advantage was of no concern at all. Incidentally it may be mentioned that the experience of R.K.Narayan the reputed Indo-Anglian novelist was no less in filmdom when he had handed over his novel, *The Guide* to be filmed. Though he allowed the producers to make a

film out of his novel by celluloid champions, he was not happy with the way in which his novel was mutilated. He took a vow that he would never have any truck with the film personalities for ever. Bharatidasan's opinion is that in general, Tamil cinema does not portray the style, behavioural pattern and dressing of Tamils. It never aspired to lift up the downtrodden and oppressed. It has to strive hard to come up to the level. A short poem on cinema in the First volume of his poems makes it clear. He makes fun of exaggerations and apishness that are abound in Tamil films. He expects them to reflect the cultural milieu of the country.

Once in a Tamil literary conference at Nagercoil, Bharatidasan took part as one of the main speakers. The local Tamil poet Kavimani Desigavinayagam Pillai in his welcome address, referring to Bharatidasan critically spoke as follows: "Here has come a koel from Pondicherry. Let it coo here in a limited manner. If it coos too much, it will be caged here." Added to this veiled insult, the Kavimani allotted only five minutes to Bharatidasan. The meaningless mandate and the veiled invective of Kavimani were too much to bear for an equally reputed poet-speaker. Yet he began speaking. But exactly after five minutes, Kavimani gestured him to stop his lecture and resume his seat. Bharatidasan stopped his speech abruptly and walked out of the meeting angrily. He proceeded straight to the residence of N.S.Krishnan, the reputed comedian of the cine-world, also a local man and a friend of the rationalists. There was a great hubbub in the venue of the conference and a sizable crowd besieged the house of NSK in support of Bharatidasan.

In the late evening of the same day, there had been a fine-arts programme for NSK in the conference. Facing the huge crowd, NSK spoke: 'Dear comrades, I am president for this fine-arts programme. The only main speaker is Bharatidasan. The fine-arts programme will take place, if only there is time after the speech of Bharatidasan is over. Thus saying, NSK sat down and Bharatidasan arose. The audience applauded him with cheers. Many have garlanded the poet and shook hands. Bharatidasan spoke until the entire steam was out. Part of his speech appeared to be a repartee to Kavimani. "Nobody is born in the world to put me into a cage. Keep yourself free of your low feelings. You are not as much cultured as you are educated. You are arrogant. Is it because you are a local, you behave unbecomingly? Apart from this rejoinder to Kavimani, Bharatidasan addressed that day to his heart's content. The public heard his speech with rapt attention and as per schedule, NSK's entertainment programme was also carried out.

Bharatidasan was broad-minded and dignified especially in dealing with individuals whether they are friendly or not. Whoever comes to his residence, he would not hesitate to provide food. He would not maintain any distance between himself and others. If anybody with slender or little resources came forward to arrange a literary meeting, he would kindly persuade him to wait until his trip in that area coincides with the proposed meet. 'You need not spend anything for my sake. Please wait until I go over there for some other assignment. You can have your function also."

A contemporary Tamil teacher Duraisamy Mudaliar of Pondicherry was temperamentally inimical to Bharatidasan. Himself and the poet mutually hurled poetical abuses on many occasions. The Mudaliyar proved an irritant to the poet in many aspects. He used to call the poet discourteously in singular term, Rationalist Subban. Once he wrote a *venba*, a four-line poem ending with a three-foot sentence, *Subbuval mulaitta kavi*. If the first phrase is spilt into two, the sentence would mean in Tamil that 'Subburathinam is a poet with a tail behind.' As a rejoinder, Bharatidasan gave a poetic reply using in it an equally effective scurrilous phrase, *dhondi Duraisamy*. By stages the poet customarily used this as a pet phrase to refer Duraisamy Mudaliyar. Their mutual enmity bred by poetic innuendoes never ceased to be. When Mudaliyar reached his superannuation, a big function was got up to honour him. Bharatidasan took efforts to invite K.Kamaraj, then Chief Minister of Madras and arranged to present a silk shawl to the retired Tamil Pandit. Also at the demise of Duraisamy Mudaliyar, Bharatidasan ran to his house and stood there dazed with tears trickling down his eyes. 'Duraisamy was inimical to me. But I respect his knowledge of Tamil. I shall soon arrange a meeting of condolence and pay tributes to him.' He did so, a few days afterwards and spoke to his heart's content admiringly of Duraisamy's knowledge and love of Tamil language and literature. Such was the broadmindedness and dignified behaviour of Bharatidasan.

The poet evinced a good deal of interest in the progress and welfare of his students. He was extremely ambitious in instilling into their heart and mind,

what all he had learnt. He would not mind to repeatedly say, to drive home a point to them. Never bothered to answer even if the students pester him with questions innumerable. One of his finest qualities was to patiently answer the queries in a methodical manner and to go on tirelessly explaining them until the students are convinced of his stand.

Those who sponsor his literary meetings should arrange them well and behave properly. If things were in order, he would not mind going there again, if called for. If not, when the prospective sponsors who mismanaged the whole affair earlier go to him again he would scold them bluntly pointing out what wrongs, they did and flatly refuse to comply with the request.

Liberal in thinking, frank in expression, and emotional in argument, the poet had unsurprisingly a number of persons not well disposed to him in politics and society. The pinpricks, as a result were in plenty but the poet never felt either annoyed or afraid.

Young girls enrolled themselves for teachers' training would come to his residence for some guidance. He would politely treat them and teach them well in academic matters. If any girl is found ultra-modern in dress and with two plaits of hair style and gaudy clothing, he would advise her to be moderate in dress and manners.

His love and loyalty towards Bharathiyar knows no limits. If anybody speaks ill of him, he would be miserable and unhappy. Anybody speaking ig-

nominiously of Bharathiyar on the basis of his caste, Bharatidasan would not brook it. When people criticise his pseudonym stating that the second half of his name "thasan" means 'slave' and hence he is a slave to Bharathiyar, he would burst out: "Yes, yes! I am a slave to Bharathiyar. Let me be as it is!"

Bharatidasan was fond of gambling. At Nettappakkam village, while serving as school teacher, he gambled a great deal of his coins in the company of local government employees, Karnam Ranganathan, PWD Ponnambalam and Krishnaji Reddiyar. The game would begin with a betting of a pie and not a day passed for the poet without coming home with a small bundle of coins in hand.

A Youth Association at Pondicherry was arranging periodical literary functions. This association was patronised by the scholars of traditional and conventional group. They were opposed to the poems of lucidity and simplicity. Bharatidasan was naturally not well disposed to them and neither were they to him. A revered Tamil scholar of the old school, Pandithamani Kathiresan Chettiar addressed a meeting under the aegis of the Youth Association. To fall in line with the aims and attitudes of the organisers of the Association, Pandithamani made a scathing attack on the simple Tamil poems. In toto, his reference was tacitly revolving around the poetic contributions of Bharatidasan. He also quoted a Tamil couplet to affirm the looseness of what he called an effortless versification with inane phraseology. Bharatidasan was also one among those who assembled. He stood up, obtained the permission of the chair and repeated the very poem quoted by the chief speaker and proved its

true and deep significance. The very poem that Pandithamani quoted as a valid point to attack the neo-modern Tamil poets boomeranged on him still more effectively because of the timely intervention and effective interpretation of that poem by Bharatidasan.



## 10. LAST PHASE OF LIFE

The general impression is that the poet was unhappy and discontented in the last phase of his life. The unhappiness is due to many reasons; Gradual differences of opinion with front-rank leaders like Arignar Anna, lavish expenditure in the filmdom and ill-health due to tension and worries. But one redeeming feature is that despite all these set-backs, the effulgence of his literary creations did not diminish. Poems, plays, critical essays on topical matters, adaptations of ancient Tamil works and short and simple poems for juveniles, he produced almost uninterruptedly. The publication of the second and third volumes of his poetical anthologies, *Kudumba Vilakku*, *Thenaruvi* and songs entitled *Icaiamuthu* are among those titles that were published in this period.

Back in 1946, Arignar Anna and young stalwarts of the party took sincere efforts and had collected from the public a sum of rupees 25,000/- to be presented to Bharatidasan. A literary function was got up at Madras and a veteran Tamil scholar Navalar Somasundara Bharathiyar chaired the occasion when this purse was offered to the poet. In his thanks giving speech, the poet remarked that "the honour bestowed on him on that occasion was actually an honour done to Tamil language and literature." Bharatidasan then seems to have suggested to Arignar Anna that both of them could launch a new political

party for the welfare of Tamils with the money presented to him. Being aware of the outspokenness and plain heart of the poet, C.N.A. persuasively replied him as follows:

"Please do not entertain the idea of joining politics. You move about in your unique world of poems. No politician could come anywhere near you in the lofty heights of your poetical career. If you prefer writing poetry even after your entry into politics, yours will be the political poems of mere topical value. In other words, they will be short-lived. Instead of espousing the cause of politics, with the purse that we have given, you can as well go about visiting hill-resorts, swimming in great rivers and meeting people of various regions in this vast sub-continent. The best impression that you have gathered and gained in these excursions, you can produce in the form of viable poetry of lasting eminence. This purse-giving function was arranged only with this view."

This passionate plea of Arignar Anna on the basis of his practical experience did not cut ice in the minds of the poet. He felt and said it is CNA who prevented him from entering politics. Perhaps the poet might have thought of better prospects in politics. Dissuasion of the poet by CNA from becoming a full-time politician, therefore must have been very unpleasant. The poet has given expression to his unhappiness in subsequent occasions also. Reacting to this, CNA has remarked, "If the poet is fully conscious of the fact in what manner I am suffering in politics, he would realise how far my suggestion is

good."

In 1947, India attained her liberty from the Britishers. Everywhere in the sub-continent, people celebrated it by hoisting the tri-colour flag of the new-born nation. EVR took exception from the general happiness of the country and said that 'hitherto the Britishers treated all Indians alike but hereafter the state craft will be Aryan-dominated and hence no reason to be jubilant'. CNA did not toe this line of EVR Periyar stating that in the first phase, we are free from foreign domination and to that extent we are bound to be happy: This ideological friction within the Dravidian League between the founder and his trusted lieutenant continued to be so and at one stage in 1949 it became acute when EVR got married with 27 year old spinster Maniammai on the pretext of nominating a heir to his properties. The marriage of the septuagenarian-leader was opposed tooth and nail on social and moral grounds. This marriage of incompatibility resulted in the birth of a new party Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) under the leadership of CNA. The vast majority of the youths from the rank and file of the Dravidian League followed suit and joined with CNA. At this crucial stage, Bharatidasan was said to have criticised the DMK group in support of EVR Periyar. This somehow estranged the poet from the emerging group of the DMK party.

Bharatidasan did not align himself with any political party. But he continued to be an admirer of EVR Periyar. Nearly a decade, he stuck to his hometown Pondicherry and produced a number of literary works of poetry, prose and drama. Had he continued

to be so at Pondicherry itself, he could have led a happy and well-off life. His decision to move to Madras was fraught with unhappiness and misery. The reason that prompted him to go to Madras was to produce films of his choice. Innumerable film-songs he has written roughly from 1947 to 1956. This contact with the cine-world must have been tempting to the poet to make films himself at Madras. One of his poems in the First volume of his Anthology envisages how an ideal Tamil film must be. If that were to be taken as a criterion and also an earlier outright rejection of a rich offer from a film-producer T.R.Sundaram on ideological grounds, one can safely assert that money-making was not the chief motive but a service to that mass media that prompted him to go to Madras. Strictly speaking, film-production is a financial venture and a business in which ideology cannot be tallied with. Any attempt to club ideology with business will result in financial disaster and that is what happened when Bharatidasan ventured into Tamil filmdom.

In 1961, Bharatidasan moved to Madras, hired a big bungalow and on October 14, 1961 The *Bharatidasan pictures* as a newly started company began functioning. His idea was to film the story of *Pandian Paricu*, a reputed minor *Kavya* written by the poet himself. His favourite journal *Kuyil* was also revived. In January 26, 1962, the poet founded an organisation, the Forum for the World's Tamil poets with the co-operation of his friends and fellow-poets. Along with the journalistic venture at Madras, he did all the spade-work for filming the life of Subramanya Bharathi. He had completed writing the story and dialogue for this documentary in April 1963. He felt

it essential to honour the memory of Bharathi through this popular mass media. But as ill-luck would have it, he fell on evil days. The money that he brought from Pondicherry was almost over. It was said that he had incurred a huge sum of money for film-production. Once that amount was spent, no way he could find to replenish the deficit. Unable to pay rent to the bungalow, he had hired, he moved on to an out-house in the same compound. This set-back was too much to bear.

Bharatidasan suffered terrible anguish when he confronted all these adversities. Many of his friends came forward to remind him of the blunder he has committed but none to give him much needed financial help. He felt a miserable loneliness. Narana. Duraikkannan, a minor novelist took efforts in vain to celebrate the 73rd year Birth Anniversary of the poet. Bharatidasan could not withstand the adversities he never dreamt of. The mental agony resulted in acute tension and physical fatigue. All these have aggravated his diabetics and he had to be admitted in the General Ward of the Government Hospital Madras. Just a couple of days, he was alive and on the third day, the 21st of April, 1964 he breathed his last.

The mortal remains of the great revolutionary poet were brought to Pondicherry and kept in his residence at Perumal koil street. Great leaders, friends, relatives, and the public gathered in large numbers and paid their homages to the departed soul. On 22, April 1964, the body was interred in the Pappamma kovil graveyard. Thus the glorious chapter of the great revolutionary poet ended. But to this day he

is alive in the minds of the poets,the literary lovers and the general public. His memory will continue to be adored and revered as long as Tamils are alive in the world.

## 11. WREATHS OF HONOUR AND TRIBUTES

A careful survey of Bharatidasan's life and works reveal that he has not been as much celebrated as he deserved to be. Of the five decades of his poetic career, it was only during the last two decades, roughly from the middle of Nineteen forties, he was found to be admired and honoured. Until then, due recognition from all quarters was not forthcoming. A section of the conservative school of Tamil pandits was highly critical of his poetic output and sporadically voiced forth its adverse criticism, if not contempt. Pandithamani Kathiresan Chettiar and a few others were not well disposed to Bharatidasan for different reasons. But the passage of time has swept away all these prejudices and dissensions. In the hierarchy of modern Tamil poets who wrote for the commoners, Bharatidasan could be termed the successor of Bharathi. The transition of Tamil poetry from complex metres to simpler level in their hands was not relished by the conservatives. They frowned upon what they called the dilution of poetic standards. They would have assented to his poems had he trodden the path of traditional poetry. This was one of the main reasons why Bharatidasan was not recognised by the scholarly world. Added to this was the fretting and fuming of the orthodoxy at the socio-religious progressive views of the poet. Hence there was no wonder that for over three decades of his poetic career, Bharatidasan had to swim against the

cross-currents of his public life.

But still, cutting across the personal likes and dislikes and socio-religious condemnation, there were a few scholars who saw in Bharatidasan a genuine poet and appreciated him. Maraimalai Adigal, the founder of a literary organisation at Pallavaram has this to say:

"The Tamil poems, newly composed by Bharatidasan will provide an awakening and delight among the Tamil masses who are in need of reformation in many respects."

M.S. Purnalingam Pillai, Emeritus Professor of English, Tinnevely states: "Every page of this anthology smells with the flavour of Tamil. The art of love which is traditional among the Tamils is beautifully highlighted. In his sweet contributions are found the trifurcation of Tamil, namely the prose, poetry and drama as if it is a blending of honey and milk. The poems throb with the chief characteristics that are amenable and acceptable to the modern world. They are couched in a lucid language, easily understandable to every literate person."

Va. Ramasamy, a reputed journalist-friend and the first biographer of Bharathiyar affirms as early as 1938 that Bharatidasan belongs to the poetical heirarchy of Subramanya Bharathi and adds: 'Bharatidasan is an emotional poet; not merely ornamental and artificial. He is not a mason of words to build an edifice of poetry with the help of a Thesarus. Not a Pandit who frowns at neo-modern poetry. But Bharatidasan is a poet throbbing with life and spon-



taneously pouring forth emotions and feelings. This is my humble opinion. I am sure that those who enjoy the life and beauty of his words will certainly endorse my opinion. Bharatidasan is the treasure of Tamil Nadu. Let the treasure be cherished and protected by all Tamils. Let them have their life enriched by going through his poems."

Na. Mu. Venkatasamy Nattar, a reputed Tamil scholar and litterateur, then a Faculty Member of Annamalai University acknowledges that "Bharatidasan's poems disclose the fact that he was gifted with innate genius and a rare poetic talent. As we read his poetical contributions, they induce us to go ahead and read them furtheron."

Navalar S. Somasundara Bharathiyar famous editor, scholar and commentator of Madurai speaks very highly of the poems of Kanaga Subburathinam alais Bharatidasan and adds further, what is appreciable is his intuitive genius with which he lucidly brings out his thought-contents and feelings in a language, simple and comprehensible."

Thiru Vi.Kalyanasundara Mudaliyar says that "the poetic talent is innate in Bharatidasan. Innumerable are the poetic pearls that have overflowed from Kanaga Subburathinam, a treasure of Pondicherry. May exist difference of opinion in his thought-content. But what appeals to me is the poetization of Subbu."

Multi-lingual scholar and editor of the Tamil Lexicon, Prof.S.Vaiyapuri Pillai of the Madras University has said that "the fact that many scholars

writing verses in Bharathi's poetic pattern is symptomatic of liberation that the Tamil language has attained. Bharatidasan's poems are pleasing to learn. Their depth, taste and inspiration are highly commendable." It may be recalled that Prof. Vaiyapuri Pillai was a strict disciplinarian and a word of appreciation from him was normally next to impossible. It is heartening to note that Bharatidasan's talent was such as to draw appreciation from such unlikely quarters.

Prof. Saranathan, Principal, National College, Trichinopoly has highlighted "the eloquence, imagination, courage of Bharatidasan" and added that "his mind is attuned to social reformation."

T.A.V. Nathan, Editor *Justice* is exuberant in admiring the poems of Bharatidasan. "Their excellence, content, taste and structure enlighten us at everytime we read or sing them. Their fineness and aesthetic excellence have added a glory to the entire canon of Tamil poetry."

A. Ramasamy Gounder, Principal of the Municipal College, Salem has sung the glory of Bharatidasan in a poem which is rendered below in English where a variety of interests such as labour's cause, travails of widows and irrational customs are highlighted.

Even after seeing the sufferings of labourers  
in the world,  
After witnessing the customs that are irrational  
After observing the horrors of society that  
is merciless  
And after seeing the sufferings of

young widows  
O Tamils, you are found sleeping cowardly  
Remove them, so indicts a hero with his poems  
Bharatidasan, the like of which if we have  
All the sins of ours will be off soon!

Pudumaippittan, a reputed short-story writer in his inimitable way remarked in one of his lectures, broadcast in All India Radio that "Bharathiyar has left behind for us a number of assets. To mention a few, of all these, the poetical works such as *Gnana Ratham*, *Koel Pattu*, *Pancali Sabatham* and *Kanaga Subburathinam* alias Bharatidasan."

Dr.M.Varadarajan, popularly known as Mu.Va. in the Tamil-speaking world has commended that "it is Bharatidasan who has poetically condemned the evil practices and foolish notions of the society. He has carved a niche for himself in the annals of Tamil literature where the term Revolutionary Poet refers to nobody else except Bharatidasan in the present century and in the preceding too. Bringing an orderliness by revoking the aims and objectives that are essential for society is revolution. This can be perceived well in the poems of Bharatidasan."

Dr.N.Sanjeevi, Professor of Tamil who succeeded Dr.Mu.Va. in Madras University has briefly pointed out that "as on date, Bharathi is deemed to be the gift of the Nationalistic movement and Bharatidasan, the gift of the Dravidian Movement."

K.V.Jagannathan, known for his religious and literary discourses and Editor of a Tamil monthly, *Kalaimagal* has a poetic tribute in favour of

Bharatidasan.

"To foster the growth of revolution  
Sang he the songs, wherein he showed  
A poetic style as lucid as water transparent  
And stands apart as the unique son of  
Tamil-Mother."

R. Krishnamurthy popularly known as Kalki, the novelist has said that "by personally moving at close quarters with Bharatidasan, the despondence of not moving with Bharathi has gone off."

Professor R.P. Sethu Pillai affirms that "Bharatidasan's verse is charged with force, vehemence and a thirst for freedom."

Namakkal poet Ramalingam Pillai prefers calling Bharatidasan as "an undaunted hero imbued with a desire for liberty."

Dr.A.C.Chettiar, Professor of Tamil, Annamalai University observes that "Bharatidasan's love for Tamil knows no bounds. Even a foreigner who reads his poems will become a Tamilian."

Keeping in mind certain graphic portrayals of nature and its environs as evidenced in poetic anthologies such as *Azhakin Cirippu*, Dr.C. Balasubramanian, Vice-Chancellor, Tamil University observes that Bharatidasan could be compared to the Lake Poets of English Literature. It is true that Nature gets gracefully delineated in umpteen ways in his poems.

This is only a comparison that scholars attempt on the poetics of Bharatidasan. In these days of comparative literature gaining momentum, this sort of comparison called parallel study is bound to develop. In writing about landscape poetry, what Bharatidasan himself says in his Introduction to *Azhakin Cirippu* is worthy of mention, especially to those who are desirous of writing creative poetry.

"Everything in Nature is beautiful. Beauty laughs gleefully in lotus flower, in moon and its rays. One should be competent to perceive beauty in all manifestations of Nature and also to draw it in verbal painting. The habit of writing as they are found in other literatures and also in Tamil literature should be done away with. To instil into the minds of poetry-lovers, the importance of writing of their own, I initiate this booklet of poetry."

In the list of those tributes enumerated above, those of about ten professors refer to the emotion and simplicity that govern the poetry of Bharatidasan. That was the stylistic side of his contribution. But what is equally essential is his socio-religious outlook which was happily appreciated by the great leaders of the Self-Respect and Rationalistic movements.

E.V.R. Periyar the charismatic leader of the south was a man of the masses. He was merciless in battering outworn creeds, dogmatic beliefs, meaningless rituals and foolish notions. He did not say that he would reform religion. It was not unknown to him that many religious savants have made attempts to reform but miserably failed in the bygone ages. He said that he would do it away with. Not merely he

did theorizing against religion and gods. He put up a relentless fight against them for over six decades of his public life. Bharatidasan was swept away by Periyar's frankness and liberal thinking. Instead of following the beaten track of his conservative predecessors, Bharatidasan turned his pen towards disseminating nationalistic principles. He yoked himself to the causes of the Self-Respect Movement in the footsteps of Periyar. Here follows what Periyar comments on the poet and his achievements.

"A very bold Tamil poet. He is the first and perhaps the last poet to frankly disclose revolutionary ideas. No poet comparable to him as such has so far appeared. Those who write today and have written yesterday have all clinged to the worn-out ideals of the past. Bharatidasan alone has ventured to speak out the spirit of equality and the importance of liberal thinking. Both the Self-Respect Movement and the Dravidian Party were very much persuasive and encouraging to him. To put it briefly, one can safely assert that there has been nobody else before and after him to espouse the cause of social revolution. He has sung condemningly of God, Religion, Foolish superstitions, Enslavement of Women and child marriage. Apart from being a great revolutionary, he was very much devoted to the unity of human society. He is undoubtedly the peerless poet of the Self-Respect Movement."

C.N. Annadurai, popularly known as Anna, the genius has complimented the poet as unique in every respect. His poems have come out of a full moon that tears its way through a pall of smoky clouds. Ideas that are modern and revolutionary spontaneously bub-

ble out of him as fine pieces of poetry. The verses that he has written on the beauties of Nature and other arts are capable of gladdening the readers."

Kalaigñar Karunanidhi, the great speaker, dramatist, novelist and poet has opined that about four decades back, it was Bharatidasan who boldly poetised the policies of E.V.R. Periyar and Arignar Anna. He was an active spokesman of the Self-Respect Movement. Family planning was one of the avowed principles of our Dravidian movement. Bharatidasan boldly favoured it in one of his poems as follows:

To usher in love and to plug the passage of  
womb  
Let us devise a door and what fault in it?

Bharatidasan is an embodiment of Tamil and an image of spontaneous verse.

K. Veeramani, Editor of *Viduthalai*, and a lieutenant of Dravidian movement observes that the credit of having formed a battalion of young poets as spokesmen of Self-Respect in the Tamil speaking world goes to Bharatidasan only and not at all to anybody else.

Pulavar N. Ramanathan observes that the idea of communism is new to the Tamil literary world. Bharatidasan was the only Tamil poet who has scientifically approached it in various aspects and given expression to it with a fine literary flavour. In a world of egalitarianism aimed at by communism, there is no room for any social and political bicker-

ings. That is why the poet says as follows:

Let us create a world anew-And  
Uproot the world that fights within.

In 15, July 1945, a literary function was got up at Rajapalayam. Dhanushkodi Raja a local person known for his socialist views took efforts to organise the function and presented a purse of Rs. 2000/- to Bharatidasan. The poet was in his fifty fourth year of his age, Arignar Anna, Pavalar Balasundaram, Poet Vanithasan and a number of local literary personages took part in the function and felicitated Bharatidasan. This could certainly be called the first literary function where the poet was publicly honoured. Until then, despite poetic talents, he had to confront more brickbats than bouquets.

Bharatidasan's sixtieth birth day was celebrated all over Tamil Nadu in 1951. That was an occasion for the connoisseurs of literature and fine arts to arrange literary functions in honour of the poet.

Bharatidasan contested for a membership in the State Assembly of Pondicherry in 1955. He was elected with a thumbing majority. The immediate rival trailed behind him with thousands of votes lesser than the poet. Because Bharatidasan was the eldest of all the members elected, the very first meeting of the legislators made him the protempore speaker of the State Assembly.

K.A.P. Viswanatham, a nonagenarian Tamil scholar convened the Second Annual Meeting of the concorde of Tamil Scholars at Karanthai Tamil San-



gam, Thanjavur. The Tamil Scholars numbering forty nine had come in cars in a long-procession to the function and the chief guest was none other than Bharatidasan himself. The poet was made to ride on a caparisoned elephant through the main streets of Thanjavur before reaching the dais at Tilakar Maidan. Such a huge procession in which a progressive poet on the back of an elephant was coming with hundreds of Tamil lovers behind him was a remarkable sight -- a sight which was almost a replica of the honour, bestowed on the Tamil poets by the royal personages of the bygone ages. The entire city of Thanjavur was agog with jubilation and throughout the entire route from Karanthai to the Maidan in the heart of the city, the celebrity was showered with rose-water and flower petals.

In 1961, Bharatidasan moved on to Madras with the intention of writing stories and dialogues to a few films that were about to be shot. In a function arranged under the aegis of the Tamil Writer's Association in 1962, the elder statesman Rajaji participated and presented a golden shawl to Bharatidasan. On 4, July 1963, the 74th Birth Day Celebrations of Bharatidasan took place at Raja Annamalai Manram, Madras. That proved to be a big function got up to celebrate his services for the cause of Tamils in general and poetry in particular.

Bharatiya Gnana Peedam has provisionally decided to present its one-lakh rupee literary award to Bharatidasan in 1964. Initial arrangements were also made. But unfortunately Bharatidasan breathed his last in 21st April 1964. The basic condition of the award is that it must be given to living persons.

Hence the founders of the Award switched on the covetous award to a reputed Malayalam Poet Sankara Kurup.

After the demise of Bharatidasan, a number of memorable events took place all over Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry to honour his name and to perpetuate his memory. A Memorial shed in honour of Bharatidasan was constructed by the local Municipality in the graveyard at Pappammakoil near Pondicherry on 21 April 1965. This is followed by a number of functions got up in many places to pay homages and to honour his memory posthumously.

A full size statue of Bharatidasan was erected by Arignar Anna, the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu on the 2nd June 1967. The memorial function was arranged under the aegis of the State Government. Dr. Mu. Varadarajan the then Professor of Tamil, Madras University declared open the statue of the poet in the beach road at Madras.

Under the munificence of the State Government of Pondicherry, the Birth Day of the poet was celebrated on the 29th of April, 1971. The house, bearing No.95 at Perumal Koil Street where the poet had lived, was purchased by the State and in it the Pondicherry Government established a Memorial Library and Gallery of Exhibits in memory of Bharatidasan. Ever since, the State Government has been annually celebrating the Birth Day of the poet.

In April, 1972 the State Government of Pon-

dicherry arranged to declare open a life-size statue of Bharatidasan. On 30th April 1982, the then chief Minister of Tamil Nadu M.G. Ramachandran declared open the newly started University at Trichinopoly and named it after the poet. As it is, the Bharatidasan University is a statutorily recognised institution situated in a sprawling campus on the Trichy-Pudukkottai highway.

Bharatidasan was for a long time insisting on the establishment of a separate university for fostering the growth of Tamil in all aspects of science and arts. That laudable aim was fulfilled after the founding of the Tamil University under the munificence of M.G.Ramachandran, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu.

The Sahitya Academy has chosen a Tamil play *Piciranthaiyar* for its annual literary award of Rs. 5000/-. Both the award and a citation were posthumously given in honour of Bharatidasan. The Government of Tamil Nadu established a committee in 1990 and as per its recommendation declared the year 1990-1991 as the centenary year of Bharatidasan and purchased the copy right of all his publications after handing over a sum of Rs.8/-lakhs to the legal heirs of the poet.

As requested by the State Government, the Birth Centenary of Bharatidasan is being celebrated all over Tamil Nadu by voluntary agencies, schools, colleges and universities. Quite a number of books on the life and works of Bharatidasan are being published.

The poet was a resident at Nettappakkam, a suburb of Pondicherry. The house was owned by one Sundara Reddiar. It was bought by the Pondicherry State and is being preserved as a memorial in honour of the great poet.

## 12. SONGS AND POEMS FOR JUVENILES

In about two thousand years of the history of Tamil literature, what is conspicuous is that its poetry is of high seriousness. None could go through it at a glance. Every other Tamil poetical work of the past that we come across needed a commentary to wade through. Even ripe scholars of commendable talent will tumble down unless they are meticulous in comprehending the poetic texts of the ages past. Harsh diction, complex structure and elevated style along with a terseness have made these texts hardly accessible. In such a situation, until the later half of the nineteenth century, the tiny tots and young children were taught in a rigid grammatical and literary pattern that heavily relied on the faculty of memory. Without the help of a Guru, they cannot keep abreast of the broad vistas of ancient Tamil literature. So was the position in Sanskrit and other Indian languages also.

The Gurukula system of education nurtured in India for generations together, afforded little scope for developing young children's initiatives and innate talents. As noted above, the ancient Cankam and other classics were hardly comprehensive to youngmen and literates. But surprisingly they are abound in nice references to the pretty young men and children. In succeeding generations, imagination ran riot in conceptualizing even the Gods and Goddesses as children and celebrating them in a fictionalized literature known as *Pillait-tamil*.

But the irony behind all these is, a sort of literature exclusively for children, meant for their reading and singing was unheard of in Tamil. In

fact, songs and poems for juveniles seem to be a twentieth century phenomena. Even the earliest collection of tales for children, *Paramartha Guru Kathai* needed an Italian missionary to render it in Tamil and that too in prose. But easily comprehensible and simple poems for children are available only from the poetic cornucopia of Subramanya Bharathi. He, as a radical revolutionary heralded a new era of poetry in Tamil not only with his socio-religious and political themes but also in style and form. He kept a few pages set apart for young children and adolescents.

Since Bharathi's time, poetry was no longer the prerogative of the elitist and the learned. It was mitigated of its rigors and made easy to be enjoyed by young men and women. In other words, Bharathi has extended the domains of poetry to young children and old men alike and so too Bharatidasan, his successor. Bharatidasan's slender volume '*Ilaignar Ilakkiyam*', Literature for the young is purposely written for young children. This only juvenilia of Bharatidasan runs to about hundred and twenty pages with one hundred and thirty poems arranged in nine sections. Since March, 1958, the year of its publication, the fact that it has undergone eight editions until 1988 is rather fair in local standards.

Bharatidasan says in his introduction that the poems contain therein are readable, relevant and suitable to the students of all ages. He also opines that among the reading public, especially the young, poetry is capable of driving home a point better than prose. The art of rhetoric serves as a catalyst to enrich one's own memory beside enabling the young to enjoy the poems by themselves. In any language, the rhythmical quality of poetry, aided by mellifluous and sonorous epithets along with lexically operating onomatopoeic and mnemonic properties linger long in boyish memory. But this doesn't mean that

Bharatidasan, is analogous to Edward Lear of limeric verses. Lear is known, for his nonsense poems and animals that belong to the realm of fairy tale. Bharatidasan doesn't believe either in nonsense verses or in animals and their grotesque and comical illustrations; nor his poems are akin to the weird creations of Lewis Carroll.

The Tamil poet has not created a world of fantasy for amusing the young. He doesn't make things supernatural for the sake of entertainment. He is pragmatic devoid of monotony besides being objective and interesting. For example, he writes a short poem on Ghosts to ensure the young that there are no such beings in the world. Neither weird nor unnatural creations are found in his output. Bharatidasan is pragmatic in everything he writes and of course he writes with candour, liveliness and simplicity. He endearingly instructs and enliveningly amuses the young and old with examples drawn from work-a-day world. His animals are those that we see around us and the incidents that he points out are, all drawn from every walk of life.

Unlike the English counterparts who rely at times on gaudy and inane phraseology that leads to a mere meaningless amusement, Bharatidasan has a significant method of songs that are structured to have a wide coverage. The purpose behind his unique achievement is obvious, if one glances through the contents. The first section starts with glorification of mother-tongue, passes on to Nature and common sense. Besides a section on Vehicles it is extended to Vocations, Living Beings, Laughter and Narrative Songs. A small section on Aubade has half-a-dozen poems that revolve around lullaby. In their totality, all the meaningful rhymes of this volume are educative and instructive besides providing a panoramic view of day-to-day life and certain

benevolent aspects of Nature. Rhythmically some of the poems are baby-games, lullabies and counting rhymes.

Very rarely the poet indulges in pun and equivocation. Even when they occur, they are devoid of any complexity. A poem entitled *Are you the Tamil*, is purported to have been addressed to a young girl of adolescent age. The title is given adroitly in such a way that Tamil is impersonated as a girl to whom the following question is posed.

*Oh: Ye, the girl of Tamil, the girl of Tamil  
why have you read Tamil?*

The response from the lass is transliterated below.

*Tamizh padit-ten, athai unnath-than  
Tamizh-padit-ten-*

*The Tamil is a measure of honey  
And to devour it, I studied it.*

The two opening syllables in the first line of the Tamil version, in one sense mean 'Tamil is a measure of honey! The same two syllables of the second line, though verbally the same, mean, I studied it! The implication is that studying Tamil is as sweet as tasting a measure of honey. This verbal jugglery is embedded in words that are familiar and understandable.

Similes and metaphors are so simple as to help graphically portraying the men and matters around us. The summer months of April and May are the cruellest. A poem of octuples bring out the sultriness and severity of summer eve. A purple passage from that poem is noted below.



*Dry leaves are the pappads roasted  
Boils soon, if trodded on the burning sand  
Water poured into the tub gets terribly hot  
Flower blossomed in orchids is withering soon;  
Attic room with a cot, an unbearable oven.*

Assonance, alliteration, half-rhyme, end-rhyme are effectively handled elsewhere by the poet. All these rhetorical devices are applied in a lucid style known for its simple diction and gentle movement. Under the caption, Nature, one gets a panoramic view of sylvan surroundings characterised by rain, tank, muddy pool, lotus pond, lake, river, beach, sea, green-fields, groves, coconut tree, garden, park, mountain, stars and the moon.

A noticeable feature of this section of Nature poems is that there are eight songs that speak of the moon itself. One song alone is on the crescent moon. The rest are different in their form and content, though the source-material is one and the same. They bear ample testimony to the rare talent and rich imagination of the poet

Under the section, Knowledge, eight short poems are titled alike - Behave properly. But their contents are not alike. They briefly enumerate how young and the teenaged lads should behave and act in their day-to-day life. This doesn't mean that the poet indulges in dry moralizing. Not at all. He is neither pedagogic nor disciplinarian with certain do's and don'ts. In brief and sweet readable lines spiced with humor, he persuades the young to do the right things in ordinary life. In average households, sometimes the young ones get up forgetting to fold up the beddings and in odd moments, found scribbling on the walls. In emerging out of homes, they, on seeing a stray-dog start pelting it with stones and picking up

quarrels with friends. Similar mischievous acts and foolish pranks they do indulge in every now and then. It is these common follies that are noticeable among boys and girls, he gently dissuades. The aim of another poem 'Useless work' is also of the same pattern, humourously dissuading them from doing certain evil actions.

Forgetfulness is not desirable. But still men are bound by it due to many reasons. Championing of this human folly by Robert Lynd in his humorous essay *Forgetting* need not be taken a very serious note of, in this context. The reputed English essayist says, 'Who would have trusted Socrates and Coleridge to post a letter? Absent mindedness is a great virtue in them!'

Under normal circumstances, one is apt to forget due to old age. Even young people are vulnerable to it because of a careless way of misplacing things and forgetting them at home. Kannan groomed his hair after anointing his head. He should have placed the oil-bottle there itself but in an absent-mindedness he put it elsewhere. The next day when tracing it back, he spent a lot of time - an avoidable waste. Similarly he misplaced the small needle and ran about, in recovering it from elsewhere. Bharatidasan has a nice poem on the evils of absent-mindedness.

Bharatidasan may not have been ignorant of a very well-known nursery song - Solomon Grundy. However, a poem reminiscent of this is found in the volume. Both these songs enumerate the seven days of a week to enable school-goers to memorize them in the order.

*Solomon Grundy  
Born on Monday  
Christened on Tuesday  
Married on Wednesday  
Ill on Thursday  
Worse on Friday  
Died on Saturday  
Buried on Sunday*

At elementary level the object of this nursery rhyme is to list out seven days of the week. At a mature level it implies that human life is short and hints at the possibility of resurrection. Bharatidasan's poem listing the days of the week does not connote that much of subtlety and depth in meaning but rhythmically lists out the seven days of the week.

*Sunday the first day  
Subsequent Monday, the second  
Oncoming Tuesday the third  
And then Wednesday the fourth  
Appeareth Thursday the fifth  
Followed by Friday the sixth  
And at length Saturday the seventh  
Utter these ye, unfailingly.*

The section Vehicles is a collection of very interesting portrayals of all available conveyances, both old as well as modern. There are poems on bullock-cart, single and double, horse drawn carriage, bicycle, motor-cycle, bus, lorry, train, boat, ship and aeroplane. A perusal of these sketches reveal that they are not mechanically delineated. The poems are interspersed with practical suggestions humourously conveyed—one should not be rash in driving, the boatmen must be extra careful, the motor-cyclists should attend to the wear and tear of the vehicle et cetera.

A train is about to arrive in a platform. Narayan's daughter is getting herself decked with jewels and silk fabric; hectically running about in search of a small casket of kum-kum. In her undue hurry she runs around everywhere, leaving it in the very place where she sat a few minutes before. Her frantic search for the casket has not yet ended but the train wended its way to the station next.

Similar is the pattern in which the artisans of a typical village-potter, goldsmith, mason, blacksmith, carpenter besides a gypsy girl, errand-boy and lock-mender are portrayed. These are sections on living-beings such as fowls, doves, dogs, parrots and crows.

The entire volume is wound up with nine narrative songs which form part of the last section. Self-conceit and boastfulness are not desirable qualities. A note of caution to avoid these is hinted at in a poem of four stanzas - Crow and the Ant.

English literature abounds in voluminous nursery songs such as *Rhymes without Reason*, *A Book of Non-sense Rhymes* and *The Oxford Book of Nursery Rhymes*. They include poems that could be called as cacophonous, high-sounding, artificial and mere hotch-potch. Devoid of all these jumbles, what the Tamil poet does is realistic, enlivening and interesting. Bharatidasan's co-eval is Deiskavinayagam Pillai. But unlike Kavimani who sought source material from English poets like William Blake, Emerson and Goodrich, Bharatidasan is original as well as reasonably imaginative.

Bharatidasan wrote *Ilaigar Ilakkiyam* in his sixty seventh year of his age. He had the credit of having written more than hundreds and hundreds of poetical lines. Surprisingly, such a proven experience and

maturity have not made him desist from writing for young children. This is comparable to what is said of Rabindranath Tagore. Satyajit Ray says that the great Nobel Laureate wrote in his old age, a book of nursery rhymes which in Bengali called *Khapchhara*. Strictly speaking what Tagore wrote was also of a variety of nonsense lyrics unlike Bharatidasan who wrote songs for the young objectively and picturesquely but without any detriment to simplicity, humour, fun and amusement, the essential pre-requisites for nursery poems in general.

One may argue that non-sense lyrics and jingles are essential for nurselings. What stands in favour of this argument is that most of the English non-sense rhymes date from the 17th Century onwards. This is not either universal or need not necessarily be so. The capacity to understand poetry is inborn in every child. Hence it has to be carefully developed into a source of joy to last a life time. The poems thus offered should also be within the comprehension of children, both in ideas and language. The rhymes should keep pace with children's growth, physical, mental and psychological. Such being the case, it is desirable that even the nursery rhymes avoid unmeaning epithets, weird, queer and uncanny creations in a world of fantasy. It is refreshing to note that Bharatidasan is devoid of such artificiality in his juvenile poems. It appears that he did not like irrationality to impinge upon the young nurslings in any form whatsoever.

The only juvenilia of Bharatidasan is meant for boys and girls of primary stage. But in practice, this slender volume is sold among the adults excepting the fact that certain individual songs are printed for class-use in the text-books of elementary sections. What is desirable is that this entire volume should be printed with nice illustrations so as to be evocative

and appealing among the young learners. A rhyme book will be uninteresting to young children unless it is accompanied by illustration of a moderate size without out-doing the text. In the days to come, if not earlier, leading publishers in Tamil Nadu should think of bringing out the short and simple poems of this volume with multi-colour illustrations. That will also prove to be a tribute to the memory of Bharatidasan, the dynamic poet of the modern age.

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*Cirubar Cirumiyar Desiyu Geedham*

*Thondar Padaip-pattu*

*Kadar Irattinap-pattu*

*Anthology of Poems-Vol I.*

*Edirparadha Muttham*

*Kudumba Vilakku Part I*

*Pandiyar Paricu*

*Kathal Ninaivugal*

*Irunda Veedu*

*Kudumba Vilakku-Part II*

*Azhakin Cirippu*

*Tamiliyakkam*

*Edhu Isai*

*Bharatidasan Athichoodi*

*Isaiamudhu-Part I*

*Kathala? Kadamaiya?*

*Mullaikkaadu*

*Kudumba Vilakku-Part III*

*Dravidar Tiruppadal*

*Viduthalai Vedkai*

Anthology of Poems-Part II  
*Kudumba Vilakku*-Part IV & V  
*Isaiamudhu* Part II  
 Anthology of Poems -Part III  
*Thenaruvi*  
*Thayin Mel-aanai*  
*Ilaignar Ilakkiyam*  
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*Kuyil Padalgal*  
*Kadhal Padalgal*  
*Oru Thaayin Ullam*  
*Nal malargal*  
*Pugazh malargal*

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*Karkandu*  
*Porumai Kadalinum Peridu*  
*Amaithi*  
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