



## SPECIAL FEATURE

# SUBRAMANIA BHARATHIYAR POET, FREEDOM FIGHTER AND A REFORMER

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### INTRODUCTION

**Subramania Bharathiyar**, was born as Chinnaswami Subramia, at Ettayapuram (present day, Thoothukudi) on December 11, 1882, to Chinnaswami Subramania Iyer and Lakshmi Ammal. Bharathi had his early education in Tirunelveli and Varanasi. From a very young age, he was musically and poetically inclined. Bharathi lost his mother at the age of five and was brought up by his father who wanted him to learn English, excel in arithmetic, and become an engineer.

### EARLY YEARS

Bharati became a Tamil scholar at an early age. He received little formal education, however, and in 1904 he moved to Madras (now Chennai). There he translated English into Tamil for several magazines and later joined the Tamil daily newspaper *Swadesamitran*. and worked as a journalist with many newspapers, including *The Hindu*, *Bala Bharata*, *Vijaya*, *Chakravarthini*, the *Swadesamitran* and *India*.

### A SOCIAL REFORMER AND A FREEDOM FIGHTER

He was a Tamil writer, poet, journalist, Indian independence activist, social reformer and polyglot. Popularly known as **Mahakavi Bharathi** (Great Poet Bharathi), he was a pioneer of modern Tamil poetry and is considered one of the greatest Tamil literary figures of all time. His numerous works included fiery songs kindling patriotism during the Indian Independence movement. He fought for the emancipation of women, against child marriage, stood for reforming Brahminism and religion. He was also in solidarity with Dalits and pioneered for equality amongst all castes of Hindus. He was against caste bias. In 1908, an arrest warrant was issued against Bharathiar by the government of British India and that made him to move to Pondicherry where he lived until 1918.



Subramanya Bharathi and his wife Chellamma

His influence on Tamil literature is phenomenal. Although it is said that he was proficient in around 14 languages including 3 non-Indian foreign languages. His favorite language was Tamil. He was prolific in his output. He covered political, social and spiritual themes. The songs and poems composed by Bharathi are very often used in Tamil cinema and have become staples in the literary and musical repertoire of Tamil artistes throughout the world. He paved the way for modern blank verse. He wrote many books and poems on how Tamil is beautiful in nature. His poetry is known for its appeal to the liberty and strength of the people.

A proficient linguist, he was well-versed in Sanskrit, Hindi, Telugu, English, French and had a smattering of Arabic. Around the age of 11, he was conferred the title of *Bharathi*, the one blessed by *Saraswati*, the goddess of learning by the *Raja of Ettayapuram* seeing his excellence in poetry. He lost his father at the age of sixteen, but before that when he was 15, he married *Chellamma* who was seven years old.

During his stay in Varanasi, Bharathi was exposed

to Hindu spirituality and nationalism. This broadened his outlook and he learned Sanskrit, Hindi and English. In addition, he changed his outward appearance. He also grew a beard and wore a turban due to his admiration of Sikhs, influenced by his Sikh friend. Though he passed an entrance exam for a job, he returned to Ettayapuram during 1901 and started as the court poet of Raja of Ettayapuram for a couple of years. He was a Tamil teacher from August to November 1904 in Sethupathy High School in Madurai. During this period, Bharathi understood the need to be well-informed of the world outside and took interest in the world of journalism and the print media of the West. Bharathi joined as Assistant Editor of the *Swadesamitran*, a Tamil daily in 1904. In December 1905, he attended the All-India Congress session held in Banaras. On his journey back home, he met *Sister Nivedita*, Swami Vivekananda's spiritual heir. She inspired Bharathi to recognize the privileges of women and the emancipation of women exercised Bharathi's mind. He visualized the new woman as an emanation of Shakti, a willing helpmate of man to build a new earth through co-operative endeavour. Among other greats such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, he considered *Sister Nivedita* as a Guru, and penned verses in her praise. He attended the Indian National Congress session in Calcutta under *Dadabhai Nowroji*, which demanded Swaraj and boycott of British goods.

Cover page of the 1999 Magazine *Vijaya*, published first from Madras and then from Pondicherry. The cover page of the 1909 Magazine *Vijaya*, was published first from Madras and then from Pondicherry. The cover showing *Mother India* (Bharat Matha) with her diverse progeny and the rallying cry *Vande Mataram*.

In 1908, the British instituted a case against V.O. Chidambaram Pillai. In the same year, the proprietor of the journal *India* was arrested in Madras. Faced with the prospect of arrest, Bharathi escaped to Pondicherry, which was under French rule. From there he edited and published the weekly journal *India*, *Vijaya*, a Tamil daily, *Bala Bharatham*, an English monthly, and *Suryodayam*, a local weekly in Pondicherry. The British tried to suppress Bharathi's output by stopping remittances and letters to the papers. Both the weekly journals, *India* and *Vijaya* were banned in India in 1909.

During his exile, Bharathi had the opportunity to meet many other leaders of the revolutionary wing of the Independence movement like *Aurobindo*, *Lajpat Rai* and *V.V.S. Aiyar*, who had also sought asylum under the French. Bharathi assisted Aurobindo in the *Arya* journal and later *Karma Yogi* in Pondicherry. This was also the period when he started learning Vedic literature. Three of his greatest works namely, *Kuyil Paattu*, *Paanchaali Sapatham* and *Kannan Paattu* were composed during 1912. He also translated Vedic hymns, Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* and *Bhagavat Gita* into Tamil. Bharathi came out of Pondicherry near Cuddalore in November 1918 and was promptly arrested. He was imprisoned in the Central prison in Cuddalore in custody for three weeks from 20 November to 14 December and was released after the intervention of *Annie Besant* and *C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar*. He was stricken by poverty during this period, resulting in his ill health. The following year, 1919, Bharathi met *Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*. He resumed editing *Swadesamitran* from 1920 in Madras (the present-day Chennai)

Bharathi is considered one of the pioneers of modern Tamil literature. Bharathi used simple words and rhythms, unlike previous century works in Tamil, which had complex vocabulary. He also employed novel ideas and techniques in his devotional poems. He used a metre called *Nondi Chindu* in most of his works, which was earlier used by *Gopalakrishna Bharathiar*.



Portrait of Bharathi by Suren

He is known to have said, "Even if Indians are divided, they are children of one Mother, where is the need for foreigners to interfere?" In the period 1910-1920, he wrote about a new and free India where there are no castes. He talks of building up India's defense, her ships sailing the high seas, success in manufacturing and universal education. He calls for sharing amongst states with wonderful imagery like the diversion of excess water of the Bengal delta to needy regions and a bridge to Sri Lanka.

The exposure to political affairs led to his involvement in a faction of the Indian National Congress party that favoured armed resistance against the *British Raj*.



Subramanya Bharathi and his family



# SPECIAL FEATURE



As a result, he was forced to flee Pondicherry (the present Puducherry), a French colony, where he lived in exile from 1910 to 1919. During this time Bharati's nationalistic poems and essays were extremely popular. Bharati's best-known works included *Kannan paattu* (1917; *Songs to Krishna*), *Paanchaali sapatham* (1912; *Paanchaali's Vow*), and *Kuyil paattu* (1912; *Kuyil's Song*). Many of his English works were collected in *Agni and other Poems and Translations and Essays and other Prose Fragments* (1937). *Kuyil Paattu* was translated in Japanese by *Shuzo Matsunaga* (8 October 1983).

## ACHIEVEMENTS

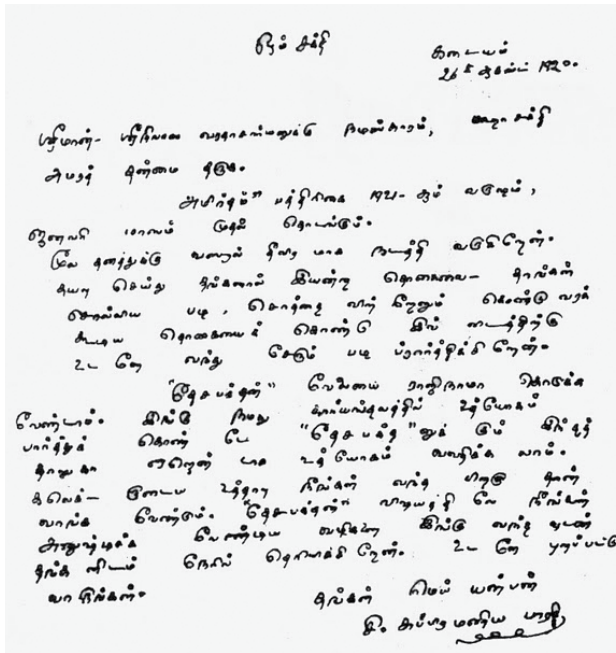


Subramanya Bharath 1960 Stamp

Subramanya Bharathi was a Tamil poet, reformer and freedom fighter during the pre-independence era. His used the adeptness at poetry to the best of his ability to coax the masses in the south to join the great Indian struggle for independence. Bharathi's name is counted amongst the

most celebrated bards of the country. Subramanya Bharathi was a Tamil poet, reformer and freedom fighter during the pre-independence era. Also referred to by the name of *Mahakavi Bharathiyar* meaning, Great Poet of Tamil. Bharathi's name is counted amongst the most celebrated bards of the country. He was an expert at both prose and poetry and used these to the best of his ability to coax the masses in the south to join the great Indian struggle for independence. His time was the most eventful one in the history of India and his contemporaries included the likes of Mahatma Gandhi, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Sri Aurobindo and V.V.S. Aiyar. Subramanya Bharathi, got attracted to the Hindu spirituality and nationalism during his stay at Varanasi. In 1905, he attended the meeting of the All-India National Congress and on his return also got the opportunity to meet Sister Nivedita, the spiritual daughter of the great Indian philosopher and thinker, Swami Vivekananda. Subramanya Bharathi felt very impressed on meeting Sister Nivedita and this proved to be a crucial turning point in the life. Bharathi began to publish his poems regularly and the themes often delved from complex religious hymns to rousing nationalist sentiments to songs on the Russian and French revolutions. He was simultaneously against social poverty, exploitation and abuse of the downtrodden people and the British ruling over the country. Though he lived a life of utter poverty, he was always positive in his thoughts and action.

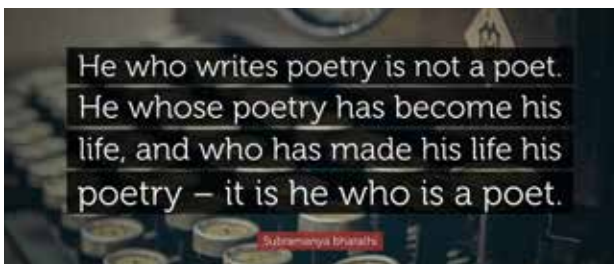
His national integration songs earned him the title *Desiya Kavi* (National Poet). He composed Tamil *keertanais* on love, devotion, fearlessness, mysticism. His stepbrother C. Vishwanaata Aiyar and V.V.S. Aiyar tell us that he himself set his songs to music and could sing them well in a variety of raagas. In *Bharata deviyin tiru dasangam*, he used 10 raagas. His patriotic songs emphasize nationalism, unity of India, equality of man and the greatness of the Tamil language, set himself to folk tunes. He sang these himself at Congress meetings at the Madras beach. In an article in *Sangeeta Vishayam* (Issues in Music), Bharatiyaar rebukes musicians for singing songs of the Trinity, *Patnam Subramania Aiyar* and others without knowing the meaning because the songs are all in Sanskrit or Telegu. Without knowing the meaning, singers are unable to sing with proper expression. He also says songs usually portray devotion and love and not about other emotions like courage, anger, wonder, fear, and hatred. He emphasized that musicians should not sing songs which they don't understand and should learn from Hindustani musicians how to train their voices. Bharathi is considered as a national poet due to his number of poems of the patriotic flavour through which he exhorted the people to join the independence struggle and work vigorously for the liberation of the country. Instead of merely being proud of his country he also outlined his vision for a free India. He published the sensational *Sudesa Geethangal* in 1908. In his early days of youth, he had good relations with Nationalist



Bharthi in his own handwriting during freedom struggle

Tamil Leaders like V.O.Chidambaram, Subramanya Siva, Mandayam Thirumalachariar and Srinivasachari. Along with these leaders he used to discuss the problems facing the country due to British rule. Bharathi used to attend the Annual sessions of Indian National Congress and discuss national issues with extremist Indian National Leaders like Bipin Chandra Pal, B.G. Tilak and V.V.S. Iyer. His participation and activities in Benaras Session (1905) and Surat Session (1907) of the Indian National Congress impressed many national leaders about his patriotic fervour. Bharathi had maintained good relations with some of the national leaders and shared his thoughts and views on the nation and offered his suggestions to strengthen the nationalist movement. Undoubtedly, his wise suggestions and steadfast support to the cause of nationalism rejuvenated many national leaders. Thus, Bharathi played a pivotal role in the freedom of India.

The emancipation of women exercised Bharathi's mind greatly. Bharathi visualised the 'new woman' as an emanation of Shakti, a willing helpmate of man



to build a new earth through co-operative endeavour. During this period, Bharathi understood the need to be well-informed of the world outside and took interest in the world of journalism and the print media of the West. Bharathi joined as Assistant Editor of the *Swadeshamitran*, a Tamil daily in 1904. Bharathi participated in the historic Surat Congress in 1907, which deepened the divisions within the Indian National Congress between the militant wing led by Tilak and Aurobindo and the moderate wing. Bharathi supported Tilak and Aurobindo together with V. O. Chidambaram Pillai and Kanchi Varathaachariyar. Tilak openly supported armed resistance against the British. In Madras, in 1908, Bharathi organised a public meeting to celebrate Swaraj (independence) Day. His nationalistic poems Vanthe Matharam, Enthayum Thayum and Jaya Bharath were printed and distributed free to the audience. Bharathi is referred to as the National Poet of India.

In 1908, Bharathi gave evidence in the case which had been instituted by the British against V.O. Chidambaram Pillai. In the same year, the proprietor of the journal *India* was arrested in Madras. Faced with the prospect of arrest, Bharathi escaped to Pondicherry which was under French rule. From there he edited and published the weekly journal *India*, *Vijaya*, a Tamil daily, *Bala Bharatha*, an English monthly, and *Suryothayam*, a local weekly of Pondicherry. The British tried to suppress Bharathi's output by stopping remittances and letters to the papers. His poetry expressed a progressive, reformist ideal. His imagery and the vigour of his verse symbolise Tamil culture in many respects. Bharathiyaar famously espoused greater freedom and respect for women: "We will destroy the idiocy of denigrating womanhood." Bharathi also fought against the caste system in Hindu

society. Although born into an Orthodox Brahmin Family, he gave up his own caste identity. One of his great sayings meant, 'There are only two castes in the world: one who is educated and one who is not.' Bharathi considered all living beings as equal and to illustrate this he even performed upanayanam to a young harijan man and made him a Brahmin. Bharathi also scorned the divisive tendencies being imparted into the younger generations by their elderly tutors during his time. Bharathi openly criticised the preachers for mixing their individual thoughts while teaching the Vedas and the Gita.

## SUBRAMANYA BHARATHI LANGUAGE

Bharathi was devoted towards his mother tongue Tamil language and was proud of its heritage. Bharathi was fluent in many languages including Telugu, Bengali, Hindi, Sanskrit, Kutchi, French and English and frequently translated works from other languages into Tamil. Bharathi had a voracious appetite for learning ancient and contemporary Tamil literature especially ancient poems. Mahakavi has delivered his last speech at Karungalpalayam Library in Erode, which was about the topic *Man is Immortal*. The last years of his life were spent in a house in Triplicane, Chennai.

## DEATH

He was badly affected by the imprisonments and by 1920 when a General Amnesty Order finally removed restrictions on his movements, Bharathi was already struggling. He was struck by an elephant named Lavanya at Parthasarathy temple, Triplicane, Chennai, whom he used to feed every day. When he fed a coconut to Lavanya (the elephant), the elephant got fired up and attacked Bharathi. Although he survived the incident, his health deteriorated few months. He died early morning on 12 September 1921 at around 1 am. Though Bharathi was considered a people's poet, a great nationalist, outstanding freedom fighter and social visionary, it was recorded that there were only 14 people to attend his funeral. He delivered his last speech at Karungalpalayam Library in Erode, which was about the topic *Man is Immortal*. The last years of his life were spent in a house in Triplicane, Chennai. The house was bought and renovated by the Government of Tamil Nadu in 1993 and named *Bharathi Illam* (Home of Bharathi).

## INDIAN PM MODI'S THOUGHTS ON BHARATHIYAR

Prime Minister *Narendra Modi* recalled Bharati's rich scholarship and multi-faceted contributions to the nation, while also hailing his ideals on social justice and women empowerment. *India is proud to be home to the world's oldest language, Tamil*. On the 100th punya tithi (anniversary) of Subramania Bharati, (1 am) honoured to announce the setting up of *Subramania Bharati Chair of Tamil studies at Banaras Hindu University, in Kasi* said the PM after inaugurating the Sardardham Bhavan in Ahmedabad via video conferencing. Importantly, the announcement by the PM came a day after the Tamil Nadu government declared that the poet's death anniversary will be observed as *Mahakavi* day. The philosophy of *Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat* envisioned by *Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel* has been shining with full divinity in the Tamil writings of *Mahakavi Bharati*, PM said in his address. He noted that Bharati drew inspiration from Swami Vivekananda and was influenced by Sri Aurobindo. Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid tributes to Tamil poet and writer Subramania Bharati on his 138th birth anniversary as he addressed the International Bharati festival. Lauding his work as *fearless*, PM Modi said that today's youth can learn so much from Bharati's work, *especially being courageous*. One can only marvel at his work, poems, philosophy and his life, said PM Modi. He also said, Mahakavi Bharathiyar's definition of progression had a central role for women. One of the most important vision was that of independent and empowered women. He wrote that women should walk with their head held high while looking people in the eye. We are inspired by Bharathiyar's vision of independent and empowered women and we are working to ensure women-led empowerment, said PM Modi. The prime minister quoted a few lines from the works of the revered poet. He read out the lines in Tamil and also the translation in Hindi. "Several years before our independence, Bharati had dreamt of a vision for India. He had said that India would show the whole world a way to get rid of all kinds of bondage".