

The Poet of Revolt

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'Bharathi Thasan' whose real name is Kanagasabai Suppurathinam, was born in 'Puthuvai', on 29-4-1891. He will be 68 years old on the day this article is handed over to the Editor of *The Tamil Culture*. His father, Kanagasabai Mudaliyar, was a progressive merchant in the then French colony, 'Puducherry'.

After his early education in a French school in his native town, he proceeded to a Tamil School from where, at the close of a brilliant scholastic career, he 'graduated' to become a teacher in a Tamil School, at the age of 18.

An event that was destined to influence greatly his future was the occasion of a friend's marriage feast. He had been invited to sing a few of the songs of the great Bharathi. Bharathi himself, we are told, was present at the function, and was impressed by the rendering of his poems by Suppurathinam. That was his first 'introduction' to the reigning poet of the day, though they did not actually meet on that occasion.

Sometime later, when in the company of his friends, we are told, he was actually introduced to Bharathi. When his friends told the great poet of the talents of Suppurathinam, Bharathi is said to have requested the youth to compose a poem. He sang the now famous poem of 16 lines entitled, 'Sakthi'. The great Bharathi at once recognised in the young man a 'poet'.¹ For nearly ten years later he was an ardent disciple of the older poet. His love and admiration for Bharathi he has expressed in 'mellifluous

¹ For a fuller description of Bharathi Thasan's early life reference may be made to the volume of his poems published by Pari Nilayam, 59, Broadway, Madras.

language, in a number of poems found in his volume of poems entitled *Bharathi Thasan's Kavithaigal* (Pari Nilayam). In fact today he is more popularly known as 'Bharathi Thasan' (the disciple of Bharathi), in honour of his association with the great Master.

Bharathi Thasan is known to the Tamil world as the 'Poet of Revolt'. Born and bred in a French colony (before India won Swaraj) in the South of India, educated in a French school in his early days, he had imbibed some of that love of freedom, a faith in the equality and brotherhood of man, and a breadth of outlook on the larger problems of religion, politics and social life characteristic of the true Frenchman. Three types of influence must have had a profound effect in shaping his views, and in giving him the impetus and inspiration for his refreshing novelty of style, his courageous approach to the problems confronting the social life of contemporary Tamils, the choice of his subjects and his outspoken condemnation of many things held 'sacred' by his fellow Tamils in their everyday life.

The first and the most significant of these influences, no doubt, was the French environment in which he grew up, and the French education he had received during the formative years of his life. Secondly, a sensitive mind like his must have been greatly moved by the struggle of his great mother country, under the leadership of the Mahatma, against the British Imperialistic hold on India. The third but not the least of the influences was his contact with the great Bharathi and the impact of the soul-animating strains of his fearless literary Guru. Bharathi, by far the greatest of our poets since Kamban, has stirred the hearts of millions of Tamils in a way few poets in the past had done. His range of subjects was wide; his knowledge of Tamil literature was profound; his love for the language and his country, and his sympathy for the people, particularly the poor and the down-trodden, were so deep, that his

magnificent gift of poetic expression clothed in words that touched every human emotion and raised it to a pitch never before felt or experienced, must have churned young Suppurathinam's heart too to its very depths. Here are a few lines of tribute to his master :—

“ சீருயர்ந்த கவிஞரிடம் எதிர்பார்க்கின்ற
செம்மை நலம் எல்லாமும் அவர்பாற்கண்டோம் ”

and again

“ பழையநடை, பழங்கவிதை, பழந்தமிழ்நூல்
பார்த்தெழுதிப் பாரதியார் உயர்ந்தாரில்லை ” ²

There has been a long succession of poets since Kamban of Ramayana fame and Saint Thayumanavar. But the dizzy heights the incomparable ‘Emperor of Poesy’ and the weaver of quaint magic garlands to the Divine had reached seem to have left the lesser lights that followed so dazzled by their refulgence, that they could give us only pale reflections of their glory, without contributing anything new or striking. It was left to Bharathi and to his brilliant disciple Bharathi Thasan to tune the harp anew and stir us with new melodies and fresh harmonies.

It has been said that to read contemporary literature is not only a pleasure but a duty. It is not enough that we become familiar with the best that has been thought and known in the world in the past. It is equally our duty and pleasure to make ourselves familiar with the best that is thought and known in our own time as well. The culture that confines itself to the literature of the past is an imperfect culture, for all good literature, whether old or new, is good and fresh only in so far as it is living. The ultimate test of any new work in a language is whether it can be absorbed in the store of the accepted literature of the people who speak it. “A breach with the past, the abjuration of tradition, is of course, the characteristic symp-

² Bharathi Thasan Kavithaigal Vol. 2, p. 88 (Pari Nilayam).

tom of revolt. Where literature has frozen into bleak etiquette some vigorous breaking up is necessary. But there is revolt that means revival and revolt that means degeneration into the dissidence of dissent..... An artist of the first rank accepts tradition and enriches it, an artist of the lower rank accepts tradition and repeats it, an artist of the lowest rank rejects tradition and strives for originality".³

The true artist, the artist of the first rank, selects that which is genuinely valuable in tradition and throws overboard that which is spurious, that which is only a superficial accretion in the history of a people.

The traditionalists among the Tamils, and their name is legion, have looked askance at some of the vigorous and frank criticism of Bharathi Thasan, of the accumulated superstitions encrusting the superstructure of the ideals of the Tamil people. These fail to realise that living in the modern age we are yet circumscribed by old customs and beliefs which keep us bound to a dead or dying past. A literature that could revolt against these devitalising encrustations was long overdue. The great task originated by Bharathi has been taken up by his younger contemporary, Bharathi Thasan. He extends his revolt not merely to false beliefs and congealed outmoded customs, but to the modes of poetic expression as well. It is not suggested that one should give importance to what is modern merely because it is modern or to what is old merely because it is old. "What really matters is absolute value. Eminence and especially moral eminence must be preserved at all cost. The Artist who repudiates moral eminence repudiates life itself".⁴ The enduring indefectible 'virtues of art' are the aristocratic virtues so nobly exalted in the literature of the Tamils by the Kural, Silappatikaram, and in Kamban's Ramayanam.

³ *The Concise Cambridge History of Literature* EPILOGUE, George Sampson.

⁴ *Ibid.*

"Whatever our form of belief or disbelief one cannot evade the duty of man, his duty towards God and his duty towards his neighbours—that is the need for aspiration above the self and the need for expression beyond the self. Literature as an art need not make the inculcation of this duty its prime business, but literature that brings this duty to contempt has gone over to the enemy of life and art. It has joined the mob to whom art is folly, it has joined the cheap jacks and charlatans to whom Art is deception."⁵

Judged by these tests Bharathi Thasan's poetry does not go counter to those eternal verities cherished and upheld by the best of the Tamil poets, as will be revealed by a close study of his published works.

"We artists" wrote John Drinkwater, "have the world to fight. Prejudice, indifference, positive hostility, misrepresentation, a total failure to understand the purposes and power of Art, beset us on every side. Nevertheless if the world is to be renewed it will be renewed by us".

Yes, if the Tamil world is to be renewed, re-invigorated and re-inspired it is only the study of poets like Bharathi and Bharathi Thasan could do so. Bharathi Thasan, in a sense, has been more daring and outspoken than even his master in touching and probing the sore spots of Tamil beliefs, customs and superstitions.

Each generation demands its own poet to express in the language of the day the passing phases of life as viewed from the standpoint of the thinking section of that generation, and also newly to interpret many things of the spiritual, social and the world of nature. Unlike many of the revered poets of the past, Bharathi Thasan speaks to us truly in the language of the day, in the language of the common man, in a language simple, intelligible and redolent of the fresh breeze of the dawn.

⁵ *Ibid.*

He sings to us of the dangers of false beliefs raised to the dignity of religion, of the sufferings of the worker who is the real builder of the world, of woman, her charm and power, her wisdom and the need to free her from the shackles of dead custom ; of nature, of birds and beasts, of rivers, hills and flowers, of the charm of home, the worth of elders and the delight of children.

Some have accused Bharathi Thasan of being irreligious. There is no reason to infer from his works that he is anti-religious. On the contrary if Religion is an aspiration after the ideal, the spirit of devotion to the perfection of human life, the love of fellow beings and the pursuit of what is true and beautiful and good, the poems of Bharathi Thasan breathe the true spirit of Religion.

In his poem சேசு பொழிந்த தெள்ளமுது (a poem on Jesus), he asks :

கோல நற் சேசு

குறித்தது தானென்ன ? தோழி—

and answers :

“கோயி லென்றால்

அன்பு தோய் மனம்” என்றனர் தோழர்.

‘The mind steeped in Love’ is what Jesus means by ‘temple’; the poet uses the word Ko-il (temple) which in Tamil means, ‘where god dwells’. He is not against true religion—but is against formal religion which exalts form while ignoring the essence of the spirit of Religion.

His sympathy for the toiling labourer, here in particular the Tamil labourer, scattered far and wide away from his home in distant climes, is expressed in the following lines :

“கற்பிழந்து, மலைபிளந்து, கணிகள் வெட்டி
கருவியெலாம் செய்துதந்த கைதான் யார்கை?
பொற்றுகளைக் கடல்முத்தை, மணிக் குலத்தைப்
போய் எடுக்க அடக்கிய மூச்செவரின் மூச்சு?”

and again :

“பொழுது தோறும்,
புனலுக்கும் அனலுக்கும், சேற்றினுக்கும்,
கக்கும் விஷப் பாம்பினுக்கும், பிலத்தினுக்கும்,
கடும் பசிக்கும், இடையறு நோய்களுக்கும்
பலியாகிக் கால் கைகள், உடல்கள், சித்தம்,
பச்சை ரத்தம் பரிமாறி, இந்த நாட்டை
சலியாத வருவாயும் உடையதாகத்
தந்ததெவர்?”

These lines remind us of the poem of Martin Armstrong, a contemporary English poet, who in his ‘Epitaph’, mourns—

“These are the unthrifty souls
Who watered dusky streets with wine ;
Gathered pearls from Indian shoals⁶
And cast them royally to swine ;
.....
Poured for the heartless, healing tears ;
Fed the tyrant with their grief ;
.....
Paid the price they never owed ;
Prayed to gods who claim no prayer ”

In the poem ‘புரட்சிக்கவி’ (the Poem of Revolt), the composition after which the poet has since been known, Utharanan, the young tutor of the Princess Amuthavalli, who is in love with her, exclaims :

⁶ “Ancient fisheries in the Gulf of Mannar, Ceylon, and at Tinnevely on the Madras side of the strait”.

“காதல் நெருப்பால் கடலின்மேல் தாவிடுவேன்,
சாதி எனும் சங்கிலி என் தானைப் பிடித்ததடி!
பானைச் சிரிப்பில் நான் இன்று பதறி விட்டால்,
நானைக்கு வேந்தனெனும் நச்சரவுக் கென்செய்வேன்”

He wonders how they could overcome the bar of caste that stands between him and his beloved. She replies :

“சாதி உயர்வென்றும், தனத்தால் உயர்வென்றும்,
போதாக்குறைக்குப் பொதுத்தொழி லாளர்சமூகம்,
மெத்த இழிவென்றும், மிகுபெரும்பாலோ ரைஎல்லாம்
கத்திமுனை காட்டி காலமெலாம் ஏய்த்துவரும்,
பாவிகளைத் திருத்தப் பாவலனை நம்மிருவர்
ஆவிகளை யேனும் அர்ப்பணம் செய்வோம்”

Let us, she tells her lover, sacrifice our lives so that we might change the hearts of those who in the name of caste and wealth, would thwart true love and treat with contempt the lowly. The king who is informed of the romance orders the execution of Utharan. Amuthavally appeals to her father, the King—

“ஒருவனும் ஒருத்தியுமாய்—மனம்
உவந்திடில் பிழையென உரைப்பதுண்டோ?
அரசென ஒருசாதி—அதற்
கயலென வேறொரு சாதியுண்டோ?”

‘Does a king belong to one caste and his subjects to another caste? Is it wrong for a youth and maid to become heart-united in-love?’

The king remains unmoved and Utharan turns to the people—for the people are more important than the king; the voice of the people is the voice of God. He tells them that he had been invited by the king to instruct his daughter in Tamil poesy. They had learned to love each other even as they loved the beauty of Tamil poetry. “Is the love of Sweet Tamil to be the cause of my death?”, he asks,

“தமிழறிந்த தால்வேந்தன் எனை அழைத்தான் ;
 தமிழ்க்கவியென் றெனை அவனும் காதலித்தான் !
 அமுதென்று சொல்லுமிந்தத் தமிழ் என்னாவி—
 அழிவதற்குக் காரணமா யிருந்ததென்று
 சமுதாயம் நினைத்திடுமோ ? ”

He appeals to the people to save at least, Amuthavalli, the young poetess who longed to make the hills, the rivers and the bowers of their land immortal with her song.

“அவனைக் காப்பீர் !
 அழகிய என் திருநாடே ! அன்பு நாடே !
 வையகத்தில் உன் பெருமை தன்னை, நல்ல
 மணிநதியை, உயர்குன்றைத், தேனை அள்ளிப்
 பெய்யுநறுஞ் சோலையினைத், தமிழாற்பாடும்
 பேராவல் தீர்ந்ததில்லை ! ”

The people rush to the rescue of the lovers. They declare :

“புவிபாட்சி தனிஉனக்குத் தாரோம்என்று
 போயுரைப்பாய்’ என்றார்கள் ! போகாமுன்பே,
 செவியினிலே ஏறிற்றுப், போனான் வேந்தன் !
 செல்வமெலாம் உரிமையெலாம் நாட்டாருக்கே
 நவையின்றி யெய்துதற்குச் சட்டம் செய்தார் !
 நலிவில்லை ! நலமெல்லாம் வாய்ந்ததங்கே ! ”

‘We shall not allow you to rule us any more. All wealth, all ownership belong to the people’, they proclaim, and proceed to draw up a democratic constitution.

* * * *

‘சஞ்சீவி பர்வதத்தின் சாரல்’ is one of the finest narrative poems of Eharathi Thasan. It deals with an incident described by Kamban in the Ramayanam. The poet makes use of the incident to show how gullible people could be, and accept uncritically the most fantastic tales and myths found in old tales. The opening lines of the poem constitute a remarkable example of the poet’s

mastery of the language, and his ability to make music out of the simple words used in everyday life. Describing the approach to the mountain and its environs, the poem reads,

“குயில்கூவிக் கொண்டிருக்கும்; கோலம் மிகுந்த
மயிலாடிக் கொண்டிருக்கும்; வாசம் உடையநற்
காற்றுகுளிர்த்தடிக்கும்; கண்ணாடி போன்றநீர்
ஊற்றுக்கள் உண்டு; கனிமரங்கள் மிக்கஉண்டு;
பூக்கள் மணம் கமழும்; பூக்கள்தோறும் சென்றுதே
னீக்கள் இருந்தபடி இன்னிசை பாடிக்களிக்கும்;
வேட்டுவப்பெண்கள் விளையாடப் போவதுண்டு.
நெஞ்சில் நிறுத்துங்கள்; இந்த இடத்தைத்தான்
சஞ்சீவி பருவதத்தின் சாரல் என்று சொல்லிடுவார்.

* * * *

“சஞ்சீவி பர்வதத்தின் சாரலிலே, ஓர் நாளில்,
கொஞ்சம் குறையமணி நான்காகும் மாலையிலே,
குப்பன் எனும் வேடக்குமரன் தனியிருந்து,
செப்புச் சிலைபோலே தென்திசையைப் பார்த்தபடி
ஆடாதசையாமல் வாடி நின்றான். சற்றுப்பின்,
வாடாத பூழுடித்த வஞ்சி வரக்கண்டான்
வரக்கண்டதும் குப்பன் வாரி அணைக்கச்
சுரக்கின்ற காதலோடு சென்றான்.—“தொடாதே”!
என்று சொன்னான் வஞ்சி. இளையான் திடுக்கிட்டான்”

No high school education is necessary to understand the language. The meaning is as clear as crystal, clothed in words which a child could understand. The description of the natural scenery is graphic, and the music of the words rings in our ears.

(To be continued)

