

BHARATHI AND SANSKRIT

Dr. C. Markandan¹; Dr. D. Thenmozhi²

Associate Professor, Vels University, Chennai – 117

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ABSTRACT

Subramania Bharathi is widely regarded as a revolutionary Tamil poet who advocated social reform, nationalism, and women's liberation through his writings. At the same time, his works reveal a significant influence of Sanskrit language and literary traditions. While Bharathi employed Tamil as the primary medium for his creative expression, he often portrayed Sanskrit as a classical and superior language. This dual perspective reflects a complex linguistic and cultural position within his literary ideology.

This article examines the relationship between Bharathi and Sanskrit by analyzing his poems, essays, and linguistic views with suitable textual evidence. It explores the extent of Sanskrit influence in his vocabulary, style, themes, and philosophical outlook. The study further investigates whether Bharathi's admiration for Sanskrit affected his commitment to Tamil linguistic identity. By critically evaluating these aspects, the article seeks to present an objective understanding of Bharathi's language consciousness and his place within the broader discourse of Tamil–Sanskrit relations.

Keywords: Subramania Bharathi, Tamil literature, Sanskrit influence, Tamil–Sanskrit relations, linguistic identity, language ideology.

INTRODUCTION

Subramania Bharathi is celebrated as a revolutionary poet of the Tamil language. Bharathi's literary works stand as revolutionary voices raised for causes such as social liberation and women's emancipation. However, it cannot be denied that the dominant influence reflected in Bharathi's writings is that of Sanskrit. He appears to possess a partial inclination in which Tamil is viewed as a language for creative expression, while Sanskrit is regarded as a superior language. The objective of this article is to examine such a self-contradictory stance in Bharathi, supported with appropriate evidence, in order to arrive at the truth.

Divine Language

Although Subramania Bharathi had Tamil as his mother tongue, he regarded Sanskrit — the Aryan language of his ancestors — not only as a superior language but also as a divine language.

Bharathi appears to have shown great enthusiasm in proclaiming Sanskrit as a divine language. In most of his writings, one can observe a strong inclination toward Aryan cultural imposition and an intention to elevate the Aryan language. In other words, Bharathi's deep attachment to Sanskrit can be understood through the following statement:

“The Sanskrit language, which our forefathers celebrated as a sacred language and which we too continue to honor by following them, is truly marvelous. Calling it a divine language is no mere exaggeration. If we describe all other ordinary languages as human languages, should there not be a special name for a language that excels beyond all of them? It is for this reason that we call it the divine language.” From this, it becomes evident that Bharathi's objective was not merely to praise a language, but also to construct Aryan culture and the Aryan script-language tradition as superior and primary.

Bharathi believed that the languages of India attained refinement and greatness only after coming into contact with Sanskrit. He further stated that Tamil originally lacked a proper grammatical structure and that it was the Aryans who systematized its grammar. In this regard, Bharathi writes:

“It is true that the grammar of the Tamil language was first formulated by Agastya and by his disciple Thirananadhoomakki (Tolkappiyar), who was an Aryan sage. It is also true that Tamil grammar has, for the most part, been structured in accordance with Sanskrit grammar.” (Bharathiyar Katturaigal, p.46, Vanathi Publications, Chennai, 1981)

Furthermore, Subramania Bharathi did not even write his own name in pure Tamil form; instead, he signed it as “C. Subramania Bharati” using Sanskritized orthography. Most of the poems found in his original manuscripts were also written using Grantha characters mixed with Sanskrit forms.

Regarding this, researcher K. Kailasapathy observes:

“In 1949, the government under Omandurar purchased the publication rights to Bharathi’s works. In 1950, the government formed a publication committee for Bharathi’s books. Scholars such as Ra. Pi. Sethupillai and Mu. Varadarasanar, who were members of the committee, completely removed the Grantha letters that had existed in Bharathi’s original poems. Even in the 1909 publication Janmabhoomi, beneath the dedication and preface, Bharathi had signed himself as ‘C. Subramania Bharati.’” (Bharathi Aayvugal, p.180, 1984) From these observations, it may be understood that Bharathi not only admired Sanskrit linguistically, but also accepted its script tradition and cultural influence as integral to literary expression.

No matter how great Subramania Bharathi was in his command over Tamil, his fascination with Sanskrit never left him. Since Sanskrit was regarded as the mother tongue of the Aryans, this attachment toward Sanskrit also became deeply rooted in Bharathi.

Even while praising the greatness of Tamil and Tamil Nadu in poems such as “Senthamizh Nadu” and “Tamil”, Bharathi wrote:

“When the words ‘Pure Tamil Land’ are uttered,

Sweet honey flows into the ears...

Tamil Nadu filled with the Vedas,

Tamil Nadu enriched with noble valour.”

These lines reveal that even in glorifying Tamil Nadu, Bharathi associated its greatness with the Vedas and Aryan cultural traditions.

In 1915, an announcement was published in Swadesamitran stating that the Madurai Tamil Sangam would award a prize for the best poem written on the greatness of Tamil and Tamil Nadu. Bharathi reportedly ignored the announcement at first. However, Bharathi’s friends in Puducherry, including Vathiyar Subramania Iyer and others, urged him to participate and write poems for the competition. According to Bharathi’s friend S. G. Ramanuja Naidu, it was only because of their insistence that Bharathi composed these songs. (Bharathiyar Katturaigal, p.47, Vanathi Publications, Chennai, 1981)

The same opinion was also expressed by Bharathidasan. Thus, it is argued that Bharathi composed the songs “Senthamizh Naadenum Pothinile” and “Yaamarindha Mozhigalile” only because of the insistence and compulsion of his friends. For these songs, the Madurai Tamil Sangam awarded him a prize of Rs.100. (Bharathiyar Katturaigal, p.50, Vanathi Publications, Chennai, 1981)

It is argued that Bharathi praised Tamil and Tamil Nadu very highly only while writing for the prize competition.

However, in the very same year, in a separate work titled “Sudhesa Desangal”, Bharathi presents Tamil Mother as saying:

“Primordial Siva gave birth to me;

An Aryan sage named Agastya rejoiced on seeing me

And bestowed upon me a complete grammar.

The three Tamil kings nurtured me

With deep and enduring love.

Among the noble languages,

I lived equal to the exalted Aryan language.”

(Bharathiyar Katturaigal, p.46, Vanathi Publications, Chennai, 1981)

Here, Bharathi appears to suggest that Tamil originally lacked grammar and that Aryan Brahmins formulated and provided its grammatical structure. Furthermore, he describes Aryan (Sanskrit) as the superior language. Critics therefore argue that, even while writing about Tamil Mother, Bharathi was unwilling to portray Tamil as the highest language. (Keetru Online Magazine; Vaalasa Vallavan, 2010)

In the July 1915 issue of the journal Gnanabhanu, Subramania Bharathi wrote an article titled “Ezhuththu Kurai” (“Deficiency in Tamil Letters”). In it, he argued that:

“Just as Sanskrit possesses varga letters for hard consonants such as ‘ḍa’ and similar sounds, Tamil suffers from a deficiency because it lacks such varga letters.” (Bharathiyar Katturaigal, p.56, Vanathi Publications, Chennai, 1981)

However, critics point out that if certain sounds and their corresponding symbols exist in one language but not in another, that does not constitute a deficiency in the latter language. Pronunciation systems and phonetic symbols are natural linguistic characteristics unique to each language. Therefore, Bharathi’s criticism that Tamil lacked Sanskrit-style varga letters is viewed as linguistically unacceptable.

Scholar V. O. Chidambaram Pillai strongly refuted Bharathi’s statement in the September 1915 issue of the same journal, Gnanabhanu. He argued:

“Those who claim that Tamil has deficiencies in its letters are mostly supporters of Sanskrit and people who have not studied Tamil grammar and literature properly. They must certainly study the great grammatical work Tolkappiyam as well as literary classics such as Silappathikaram, Manimekalai, Seevaga Chinthamani, and Thirukkural.” (Bharathiyar Katturaigal, p.46, Vanathi Publications, Chennai, 1981)

It is further argued that Bharathi used the claim of “deficiency in Tamil letters” as an opportunity to deliberately introduce an excessive number of Sanskrit words into Tamil writing. According to critics, this tendency can be clearly observed in his later literary works.

Bharathiyar’s Linguistic Position

In his article published in Gnanabhanu, Subramania Bharathi approaches the issue from a linguistic perspective. He argues that the Sanskrit language possesses “varga letters” (ka-varga, ca-varga, ṭa-varga, ta-varga, pa-varga) in order to classify sounds systematically.

For example: ka, kha, ga, gha, ṇa

These letters distinctly represent differences in sound, such as voicing and aspiration. However, in the Tamil writing system, a single letter such as க, ச, ட, த, or ப can represent multiple sounds. For example: “க” may

be pronounced as ka, ga, or kha depending on the context.

Because there is no separate symbol for each sound, Bharathi critically observed that “Tamil possesses a deficiency in letters.” Bharathi’s argument that Tamil contains a limited set of phonetic symbols appears to serve as a justification for incorporating Sanskrit characters into Tamil writing. Therefore, it becomes difficult to understand Bharathi as a strong advocate of linguistic purity who opposed the mixing of other languages with Tamil.

Furthermore, the following observations indicate that Bharathi, at several levels, held positions that were contrary to strict Tamil linguistic nationalism.

At the same time, some of Bharathi’s ideas may also be viewed positively from a modern linguistic perspective. His suggestions that the relationship between sound and script in Tamil should be made clearer, and that new letters could be introduced for new sounds, can be interpreted as attempts to develop Tamil scientifically and linguistically. However, despite these linguistic arguments, Bharathi does not appear to have openly discussed or critically examined the broader issue of language mixing in Tamil within his literary works.

Later Developments

In later periods, Grantha letters such as ஜ, ஞ, ஸ, ஹ, and கூ came to be used in Tamil script to represent certain sounds. This development is often interpreted as supporting the view that Subramania Bharathi favored the incorporation of Sanskrit words into Tamil writing and considered such usage appropriate. Bharathi’s article “Tamilil Ezhuththu Kurai” (“Deficiency in Tamil Letters”) is frequently cited in this context. (Bharathiyar Katturaigal, “Tamilil Ezhuththu Kurai,” p.130)

Lack of Attachment to the Mother Tongue

Although Bharathi is celebrated as a national poet, critics argue that he displayed contradictions in his attachment toward his mother tongue. The following incident is often cited as evidence for this claim.

In 1915, the Madurai Tamil Sangam published an announcement in Swadesamitran declaring that a prize would be awarded for the best poem praising Tamil and Tamil Nadu. Although Bharathi saw the announcement, he initially showed no interest in participating. However, one of his Puducherry friends, Vathiyar Subramania Iyer, along with several others, repeatedly urged him to take part. According to Bharathi’s friend S. G. Ramanuja Naidu, it was only because of their insistence that Bharathi eventually composed the poems.

One of the famous songs written in this background was: “Senthamizh Naadenum Pothinile” This poem was composed in praise of the greatness of Tamil and Tamil Nadu. According to S. G. Ramanuja Naidu, Bharathi had first ignored the competition announcement published in Swadesamitran in 1915, but later wrote poems celebrating Tamil only after persistent pressure from his Puducherry friends. This incident is often described as reflecting Bharathi’s distinctive personality and his independent nature. Suddhananda Bharathi also records this event in his memoirs.

Explanation of the Incident

On one occasion, Subramania Bharathi was invited to deliver a speech on Thirukkural at a school in Ettayapuram during an evening gathering. Bharathi accepted the invitation and came to speak. However, instead of speaking about the Thirukkural, he spent nearly twenty minutes singing the song: “Ulagatthu Nayagiye Engal Muthumari”, a devotional song in praise of Goddess Mariamman, while dramatically moving his hands and legs. The chairman of the gathering then requested Bharathi to speak about the Thirukkural. In response, Bharathi humorously remarked:

“It has been a long time since I read the Kural. It is certainly a very good book. I remember only two lines:

‘Porulillarkku ivvulagam illaiyaam’ (‘For those without wealth, there is no world.’)



Ah! How true!”

After saying this, Bharathi himself announced, “The meeting is over,” and walked away from the venue. This anecdote is often cited to illustrate Bharathi’s unconventional attitude and his seemingly casual approach toward the Thirukkural.

CONCLUSION

The above discussions raise serious questions regarding Subramania Bharathi’s attachment to the Tamil language. Critics argue that a person who showed little interest in speaking about the Thirukkural — celebrated as the universal moral scripture of the Tamils — could hardly be considered a true champion of Tamil linguistic identity. According to this perspective, it was Bharathi’s followers who constructed and promoted the image of Bharathi as a passionate devotee of the Tamil language within Tamil society.

The arguments and incidents discussed above are presented as evidence that Bharathi lacked a deep attachment to his mother tongue, particularly toward Tamil. Instead, he is viewed as someone who regarded Sanskrit as superior to Tamil and who approached Tamil culture through an Aryan ideological framework. Furthermore, Bharathi’s writings are said to contain a substantial mixture of Aryan linguistic and cultural elements. Therefore, it is argued that Bharathi’s literary works should be studied and approached with an awareness of these Sanskritic and Aryan influences.

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