

Subramania Bharati's Works in My Translation

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What is Subramania Bharati to me and me to him?

First of all he and I hail from the same place, Pondicherry, the Land of the Spirit, in whatever sense your mind could decipher. He lived there for just a decade (1908-1918) and produced all the best known of his works, both in Tamil and in English. What brought him to Pondicherry makes an interesting story.

Pondicherry may be a speck on the tourist map of the world. Yet it is a significant speck...a glorious one at that. It is so because several were the warriors from various lands who invaded this one-time fishing village, later transformed into a port city. The Greeks came. Then the Chinese. And at a later date came the Portuguese and the Dutch. Finally the British and the French. A great tussle went on between the last mentioned two and as we all know only one could win. But whoever last didn't lose it forever. Both countries being very powerful forces, fought tooth and nail over the city they demolished and built in turn. Then it was the French who gained the upper hand and got hold of their favourite land only to rebuild it in their own fashion and rule over it for 280 years.

In their long tenure as rulers of Pondicherry, the French were not only kind and affectionate to the local people but also extended their compassionate hands towards the political refugees from various other states of India during the raging storm of Quit India movement. Bullied by the British for joining the movement and working for its success many intellectuals sought shelter in Pondicherry as they were sure that the French would never betray them. The French were more humane than humane could be.

The first intellectual to reach Pondicherry was Subramania Bharati, who sang his fiery songs to raise the soft flowing blood of the Tamils and insisted that "All Citizens without any exception are kings of India". Bharati's depression was partially alleviated by the arrivals of other intellectual revolutionaries, among them V.V.S.Iyer and Subramania Siva. They gave him the much-needed spiritual comradeship, and together they spurred a veritable renaissance in Tamil Literature.

The Tamil literary historians still debate on the first short story in Tamil, whether it was Bharati's 'Aaril oru Pangu' or Iyer's 'Oru Kulanthangarai Arasamaram'. But we, in Pondicherry feel proud that both the stories were penned in Pondicherry. And I, as an individual, puff out my chest to register here that I was the first to translate both the stories into English.

Bharati found an excellent literary companion in Sri Aurobindo, another eminent political refugee who called Pondicherry his 'Cave of Tapasya'. Bharati's friendship with Sri Aurobindo, made him write his essays in English for the monthly journal, *Arya*, edited by the latter. In those days the elites of Pondicherry thronged to listen to Sri Aurobindo's 'Sat Sang' every evening. While many left after the spiritual discourse, a few intimate ones stayed back with the Yogi for their evening talks. Bharati never missed such an opportunity. From spirituality to philosophy, from literature to psychology, from sex to super consciousness, from sociology to what not...their discussions meandered and branched out and the two literary giants thereby enriched each other.

Both of them being well versed in the Sanskrit language joined their heads for the study of Bhagavad Gita. Since it represents the essence of Hinduism, much as the Sermon on the Mount presents the essence of Christianity, Sri Aurobindo made an English translation and Bharati a Tamil translation of the great devotional classic. Sri Aurobindo learnt the Tamil language and with the help of his poet-friend translated excerpts from Tamil Classical literature, say several couplets from Thirukural, pasurams of Andal, etc. Bharati for his part learnt the Bengali language from his soul mate and translated several short stories of Rabindranath Tagore into Tamil.

Together the Mahakavi and the Mahayogi made a thorough study of the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*. The fruit of such a labour was Sri Aurobindo's several volumes of discourses in English on both the works and Bharati's philosophical work *Vachana Kavithaigal* in Tamil.

I, being the son of this divine soil Pondicherry, very much associate myself with the writers and yogis who live in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. In fact, it is the Ashram journals and their kind editors, who like the lead kindly light, showed me the path towards a successful writing career.

Way back in the last seventies of the last century, I began my writing career as a reviewer for *Mother India*, a monthly review of culture from the Ashram. As I enjoyed the company of its editor, K.D.Sethna, himself a poet of the first order and a well known Historian, I met him quite often to gather knowledge of things

that are beyond books. During one such meeting we took up the topic of Indian humour. For my turn I told him several funny folktales of a guru and his shishyas and made him roll with laughter. After a while he advised me to retell those tales for the non-Tamil readers for possible publication in his monthly. I did. I translated Veerama Munivar's humorous Tamil classic *Paramartha Guru Kathai* into English and *Mother India* serialized it under the title *The Stupid Guru and His Foolish Disciples*, which later saw its publication in book form in 1981 under the banner of Akaram, Sivaganga.

The Stupid Guru and His Foolish Disciples was my first attempt at translation. The bouquets my translation received from book reviewers and critics encouraged me to take a leap into an altogether different world of translation. I am a staunch believer in the saying "A good writer must necessarily be a good reader". Even today visitors to my house invariably tell me that I am living in a library. Of course, I love books and spend my leisure hours in my study. And so, at that time I was reading Modern Poetry in Tamil. Once I came to read somewhere that it was Subramania Bharathi who was the forerunner of the *vers libre* movement in Tamil, though Na. Pitchamurthy and others pushed it to greater heights. I began reading Bharati's *Vachana Kavithaigal*. These prose poems of Subramania Bharati liberate Tamil Literature from the tyranny of prosody. The influence of Walt Whitman's poetry made him enrich Tamil Literature with soulful poetry. His prose poems pulsate with life and are a real feast for the meditative readers. I thought I should give it to the English speaking world.

When I told my guru K.D.Sethna of my second venture in translation, he immediately advised me to know at least the gist of the Vedas and the Upanishads for a proper understanding of Bharati's prose poems. I was quite young at that time, still in my twenties and the ancient text was a hard nut to crack. But with the help of my guru who was always ready to show me the right path, gave me a series of lectures on the Vedic and the Upanishadic thoughts in the light of his mentor Sri Aurobindo. I was able to grasp the ideas he was pushing into my head. Now that my homework was over, I plunged into the ocean of Bharati's thoughts.

The Vedic texts have worked miracle in the thought-process of Bharati. Here is an example from my translated version to know how ecstatic a poet could go and what he means by the word 'Joy':

Rapturous is this universe. Rhapsodic is the sky. Pleasant is the wind. Glorious is the fire. Admirable is the water and the land charming.

Wonderful is the Sun. Pleasing is the Moon. Marvellous are the winking stars. Alluring is the rain. Thunder is captivating and the lightning fascinating.

The sea is entralling. Lovely is the mountain. Beautiful is the forest. The river is entrancing. Exquisite are the minerals, trees, plants, creepers, flowers and fruits – ripe and unripe.

The birds are attractive. Reptiles are bewitching. Graceful are the animals and benevolent are the creatures of the water.

Winsome are human beings. Handsome is man. Beautiful is woman. The child is pretty. Youth is splendid and age is wonderful. Life is good and Death lovely. (p.13-14)

Here is a small chunk from his prose poems, to serve as a sampler of Bharati's reflections on 'Wind':

Look at the ant. How tiny in size! How well its legs, hands, mouth and stomach are made and set aptly in its body!

Who did it? Who else but Mahashakti! Every part of the ant has its own function to perform. The ant eats. It takes rest. It makes love and brings forth offspring. It runs about and tireless are its searches. It fights and safeguards its territory from its foes. And it is the wind who supports the ant for all its actions.

Mahashakti, backed by the wind, sports with lives. We sing songs in praise of the wind. It is the courage in our wisdom and it becomes in our hearts our likes and dislikes, and in our soul, the soul itself. We know and we do not know its actions in the outside world. Long live the God of Wind. (P.40-41)

I have heard many well known translators complain of the difficulty in translating the *Vachana Kavithaikal* of Bharati. I too would have said the same had I not listened to the discourses of K.D.Sethna. I overcame the difficulty and when my translation of this work began to appear serially in *The Call Beyond*, a Delhi based philosophical monthly, Veteran translators like M.S.Ramasamy and T.N.Ramachandran patted my back by writing letters to the editor. When Annam Publishers, Sivaganga published it in a slim volume, *The Sun and the Stars* (1982), magazines and newspapers wrote very rave reviews of my translation. I was on cloud nine.

A good friend of mine, a school teacher well versed in the prose works of Bharati once advised me to take up the short stories of Bharati for translation. He gave me his personal copy, a 1957 edition of *Mahakavi Bharatiyar Kathaikal* and told me to begin with the lovely story titled 'Kudirai Kombu'. I read the story with lot of interest and found how beautifully Bharati had reclassified the classic *Ramayana*. It is not Ramayana in a nutshell but the myth of Rama and Ravana is given a jolt. Since I was familiar with several Tamil short stories based on Agalya myth and since each writer had looked at her from an angle different from the rest, I thought I should take Bharati's story to English and tell the non-Tamil readers what a great storyteller was Bharati. I translated the eight page long short story and got it ready for publication. I was thoroughly satisfied with my

translation because grand was the original story and I loved it to the core. This is what happens when a story or a poem grips you and beckons you to export or import it.

When my creative effusion or translation is ready to move out of my study in search of audience, I always approach bigger newspapers. So I wrote to *The Hindu* giving the story in a nutshell. "Oh, no!" said its magazine editor, perhaps damn scared. But the editor of the *Sunday Standard (Indian Express)* welcomed the translation and gave top priority to the story by publishing it in two spread-out full pages, with bigger illustrations on either side. I knew that that story in my translation was going to cause an enormous furore. I believe in the saying "Know risk to know life".

The week that followed the publication of my translation "Horse's Horn" brought me bouquets from lovers of literature from several parts of India. But Literature has its other side too. Religious fanatics hurled all sorts of expletives at me and at the newspaper. The editor, as bold as I am, advised me to keep calm and play soft as he did. The music I faced emboldened me to translate more of Bharati's short stories and the *Sunday Standard* eagerly took them up for publication.

I should say Bharati really loved me. In fact, it was he who recommended me to Kalaignar Karunanidhi when he was Chief Minister of Tamilnadu. Having read my translations of Bharati, he took a liking for them and me. When Macmillan, New Delhi took up Kalaignar's complete works for translation Kalaignar assigned me to translate all his short stories. I translated twenty-five of his best and gathered them under the title *As is in the Original* (2009).

My mammoth task of translating almost all of Bharati's short stories began when Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi took up a major project, like the one they did for Rabindranath Tagore. Subramania Bharati in two huge volumes, comprising his complete Tamil writings in English translation. Bharati and the Akademi chose me. I obliged to their request. I felt it an honour, a great one at that, to translate a great thinker of the twentieth century and beyond.

I feel proud to say that I have contributed my share to the growth of Bharatiana. Who would not love Bharati for writing of a utopia wherein men and women were equal and all traces of casteism eradicated. It was his religion of love that integrated the lowliest with the most exalted, the poorest with the richest.

Sahitya Akademi has already brought out in 2016 the first huge tome containing only the radical bard's complete poetical works. The second volume would appear anytime fresh from the press and it is bound to speak volumes about his prose writings including his short stories I have translated, and that would run to several hundred pages.

I too await the great occasion

P.RAJA (October 07, 1952) a son of this divine soil, Pondicherry, India famed for its spiritual heritage, writes in his chosen language, English, and also in his mother tongue, Tamil. More than 5000 of his works – poems, short stories, interviews, articles, book reviews, plays, skits, features and novellas – have seen the light through newspapers and magazines that number to 350 in both India and elsewhere. He has 30 books for adults and 8 books for children in English and 14 books in Tamil. Apart from contributing special articles to *Encyclopaedia of Post-Colonial Literature in English* (London), *Encyclopaedia of Tamil Literature in English*, and to several other edited volumes, he has also written scripts for Television (Delhi). He broadcasts his short stories and poems from All India Radio, Pondicherry. He was **GENERAL COUNCIL MEMBER** of **CENTRAL SAHITYA AKADEMI**, New Delhi (**ENGLISH ADVISORY BOARD -- 2008-2012**) representing Pondicherry University. He is **EDITOR** of **TRANSFIRE**, a literary quarterly devoted to translations from various languages into English. His website: www.professorraja.com