

BHARATHI AND KUYIL PAATTU

- Dr. A.F. Mohamed Ashraff -

Bharathi is the godfather of modern Tamil poetry. He is a genius in the exact sense of the term, is a polyglot and a polymath. His carrier as a school student was not extraordinary, yet he exposed sparkling signs of a budding poet. He was conferred the title 'Bharathi' when he was only just eleven years old by *Virudai Sivagnaana Yogi*.

Two stages spot his movement. His stay in *Kasi*, it should be remembered, was divinely ordained. He joined the college in *Kasi* known as *Jaya Narayana*. Thereafter, he passed the Entrance Examination of the *Allahabad University*. His main subjects were *Sanskrit* and *Hindi*. He secured a first class.

While in *Kasi* he would sit on the steps of the *Ganga* and pore over with rapture the poems of Shelley. Not only that, he explicated Shelley to his willing friends. He established the '*Shelleyan Guild*' in *Ettayapuram*.

During his exile in Pondicherry he became friends with *Shri Aurobindo* from whom he learnt the secrets of *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*. He indicted verses Vedic in spirit. He had translated '*The Bhagavad Geetha*' into Tamil. And he had translated a portion of the *Pathanchali Yoga Sutras* too.

Bharathi was well familiar with the four Dravidian tongues. To this he makes a pointed reference in his article entitled 'The Occult Element in Tamil Speech'. In Pondicherry he learnt French. He had also translated 'The National Anthem' of France into Tamil. His mastery of the English tongue is extraordinary. 'Agni and Other Poems and also Essays and Other Prose Fragments' testify to Bharathi's mastery of English. P.Mahadevan's statement in this connection is fraught with significance. "..... Bharathi's admirers must ever regret that he did not write more extensively in English".¹

Bharathi was well familiar with Shakespeare, Milton, Byron, Keats, Shelley, Swin Burne, Walt Whitman and other poets. Even during his days he was able to elicit handsome encomia from the Irish poet James H.Cousins (1873-1956) and the Flemish poet Emily Verhaeren (1855-1916). The latter was well known for his poems in French.

Bharathi was conscious of his value as an extraordinary poet. In his dispatch to the Raja of Ettayapuram he wrote thus:

Did not the stigma that there is no prince of bards.
For the land of Tamils, who could uplift
Sky-high the Tamil Tongue, that the whole world
May hail it,
Disappear thanks to me?²

Again of his poesy Bharathi stated:

Its taste is novel: its grace is fresh;
Its fecundity is new so are the vocables;
Aflame with novel marvel is this –
My modern verse par excellence and athanasic”³

Of his *Kuyil Paattu*, Mahakavi Bharathi said that it was the outcome of his reverie.

This I saw in a reverie long, as oft
In chances to poets in day-light broad⁴

The surroundings of the *Kuyil Paattu* is a garden, still known today as *Kuyil Thoppu* which is located in the west of Puduchery.

Bharathi was in this place during a morning where a female *Kuyil* was seated on a high branch of a tree. She was singing sweetly. Bharathi listened the sweet song of the bird in rapture. Somehow he was able to reach the meaning of its musical notes which is about love. Bharathi held a conversation with her and learnt from her that she was pining for his love and that if love be denied to her, she would but pain for death. Bharathi was charmed by the bird that told him to visit her four days hence.

Bewitched by the bird, the poet returned home and yet he but thought of her all the time. He was unable to wait for the arrival of the fourth day. The very next morning he was back at the garden. However, he was surprised to see the bird repeating the very words of love to a monkey with which she addressed to the poet. Restraining his mounting anger the poet listen to her. Hearing the words of the bird the monkey fiercely fell in love with her. The foolish monkey began to leap and jump and clap in glee. He blabbered his response in his own way. Enraged of this, the poet flung his sword at the monkey. The monkey, unhurt, disappeared at once. So too the *Kuyil*. Vexed beyond measure, the poet returned home. He became unconscious. It was evening when he came to himself. Hearing about his plight, his friends gathered around him and peppered him with many questions. The poet but told them that he would answer all question the next day and bade them go away. At this his friends moved away. Then his mother gave him good food with a cup of milk. As hunger appeased, he had a deep sleep.

When he woke up the next morn, he came to the same garden. Once again he was surprised to find the *Kuyil* engaged in addressing a new lover, this time a bull. Controlling his anger, he listened to the words of the *Kuyil*. She praised the old bull in full-throated ease. No wonder the bull became enamored. Even the poet was swept off his feet by the divinely sweet voice of the *Kuyil*. As its song ended, the poet, as on the previous day, unsheathed his sword and threw it at the bull. The bull disappeared unhurt. The *Kuyil* too vanished. The poet returned to his house. He felt extremely unhappy that a monkey and a bull became his cruel rivals. He thought of his plight but he could not discern anything. His eye-lids closed and he slept deeply.

The fourth day arrived. Unable to do anything the poet was resting in the top floor of his home. Then he eyed a black-bird in the sky. “Could this be the vile *Kuyil*?” thought he. Great was the distance between him and the bird. He came down to the street. He moved out the view the bird from a vantage point. When he moved the bird too moved. When he stopped, it would

also stop. The bird guided him to the garden at which he arrived. Then he confronted the bird and condemned and contemned it harshly.

The bird listened to the accusations and then said: “O Lord, you are the sole passion of my life. You may kill me or bless me to live. I heard your inculcation. I do not blame you at all. I cannot contradict your words; yet I am blameless. You may not believe me. Such is my present plight”.

Then the bird persuaded the poet to listen to her in patience. She said that in the distant past in the *Podigai* Mountain, she met a sage, paid obeisance to him and addressed him thus: “I am a mere bird; but unlike other *Kuyils* I am vested with a strange blessing. I am endowed with human understanding. How is this so?”

The sage answered the bird thus: “In your former birth, you were the daughter of *Muruga*, a hunter-chief of the *Chera* realm. *Maadan*, your uncle’s son fostered great love for you. You promised to marry him, not out of love but out of pity. While so, *Mottai Puliyan*, the king of bow-men approached your father and sought your hand in wedding for his son *Nettai-Kurangan*. Your father readily gave his assent to this wedding. The wedding was to take place in twelve days. Coming to know of this *Maadan* was distressed beyond measure. When he confronted you, you told him that even if you were to be married as arranged, you would devise ways and means to achieve estrangement, fling your *taali* away, come back and live as *Maadan*’s wife. This you said, not out of love, but out of pity.

The sage told the *Kuyil* that she was in those days known as *Chinnakkuyili*. A few days before the marriage, you with your friends went to the adjacent copse to play. Thither came, on hunting bent, the son of the *Chera* King, all alone parted from his company, chasing a stag. He beheld you and you, him. You two fell in love with each other instantaneously. When you raised a few objections, the Prince did not mind them at all, knowing that you did intensively love him. He kissed you and you two embraced each other. He promised to marry you in the Vedic form and solemnly struck your right palm, thus plighting his word.

Meanwhile *Nettai Kurangan* who arrived at the village, hearing about your visit to the adjacent copse came running thither and beheld everything to his chagrin. *Maadan* too had arrived there and witnessed everything. Neither he nor *Nettai-Kurangan* saw each other. They both saw, the Prince and *Kuyil* were imparadised in one another’s arms, the eyes of both shut completely. *Maadan* and *Kurangan* both rushed, each, stabbing the Prince on his back who turned round quick the while unsheathing his sword and in flourishes two, struck them both to the earth. Down they fell dead. The Prince consoled *Kuyili* with these words. He assured her that both will be born and will certainly become spouses. This said, the Prince passed away. *Maadan* and *Kurangan* became ghouls. By *Maadan*’s withchery, the sage said, that she became a *Kuyil* bird. He also said that the Prince was reborn in *Thondaimandalam*, that he would meet her and love her. He added that the devilish *Maadan* and *Kurangan* would pursue her, cause *phantam* scenes causing the Prince to get confused. Believing these, the Prince would doubt *Kuyil*’s feeling. Of the real end, the sage said the *Kuyili* would learn later and move away saying that he had to perform the evening ritual.

The poet heard in patience the narration of the *Kuyil*. He was eventually convinced of her innocence. When the bird eventually fell into the poet's hand saying that her life was in his hands, he uplifted his hand and kissed it.

The sweet scenario suddenly ended when the poet's reverie ended. The story is best completed with the following observations of Bharathi.

THEN.... the grove and all, with the gem of a
Total disappeared. "Woe's me" I loud shrieked
And swooned; when I my eyes opened and surveyed
I found around me my old books, my pen.
My journals in a heap and my old mat-
All in their wonted order; then it dawned on me that the grove,
The Kuyil, her episode of love and all
Were nothing but the hallucinations
Of an eve when Fancy doth run amuck
O ye Tamil bards, though this be fancy
Is there not in this, aught of the mystique?
Try then to dig up the arcana perdue.⁵

Truly speaking, Bharathi began to live only after his death. During his lifetime only a few were friends with him and none of them were well-to-do persons. However, these adored Bharathi, this side of idolatry. Chill penury was his lot. Off and on he did receive some money which he spent almost at once.

He was not well received by the pandits of his day. So it can be said that he was not a popular figure. His funeral was attended by a very few deep sympathizers who could be counted on one's fingers. Barring Somasundara Bharati, Surendranath Aarya, V.V.S.Aiyar, Bharatidasan who yet to gain due recognition, K.S.Venkataramani, Mu.Ragava Iyengar, U.Ve.Swaminatha Iyer, Sarkarai Chettiyar, Subramaniya Siva, V.O.Chidhambaram pillai, Justice Mani Iyer, G.A.Natesan and a few others took note of him. His verses met with harsh criticism. Yet Bharathi chose to pursue his chosen path, undaunted.

There is ample evidence in his *Kuyil Paattu* to show that he did something to hoodwink his critics, Mahadevan commenting on the conclusion of the *Kuyil Paattu* says: "Thus the poem ends on a dry, almost ironical note merely for the purpose of forestalling the type of critic who is obstreperously impercipient."⁶

The dramatist personae of the *Kuyil Paattu* are Bharathi, a polyglot *Kuyil*, a monkey, a bull (the last two being in essence ghouls) a couple of young hunters a saint and a few nominal characters. Bharathi deliberately provided enough room for Pseudo-critics to animadvert his work. So, he clearly, though casually subjoined to his poem a riddle that would baffle all cynics, critics, criticasters and also a few good readers. Mahadevan quotes two lines from Milton's *L'Allegro*.

Such sights as youthful poets dream
On summer eve by haunted stream.

Mahadevan also says: “The ‘*Kuyil Paattu*’ may be compared to a great inland lake or sea whose waters lap the shore with the surf and swell of storms and tempests, suggesting the elemental fury of the ocean beyond, but which are free from the taint of destruction or death. The artist soul freed from the urgencies and conflicts of mundane existence floats on a sea of unalloyed happiness. Mortality falls away from it until it becomes disembodied being. Only the realization is momentary, though the memory of it is a perpetual benediction.”⁷

Of *Kuyil Paattu* J. Parthasarathi (Bharati’s Longer Poems, 1982) says: “In ‘*Kuyil Paattu*’ or ‘The Cuckoo Song’ the poet or ardent nationalism is seen in a new aspect as a story-teller with a magic wand. The fable that he relates combines the simplicity and passion of his utterances on patriotism with the graces of narrative art-surprise of incidents, clash of character and sparkle of humour.”⁸

While appreciating the work of J. Parthasarathi, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar in his foreword to the former’s work says: “After mentioning the current philosophical interpretations of ‘*Kuyil*’ Parthasarathi reads the tale as a critique of the nature of true poetry. I would rather read ‘*Kuyil*’ considering the time of its composition, as a political parable with a fierce contemporaneous urgency. Perhaps the *Kuyil* that affirms in dulcet tones undying love, now for the poet, now for the monkey and then for the bull, was meant to signify the vagaries of public opinion at the time: the nationalist swearing by the ‘extremism’ associated with *Tilak*, *Aurobindo* and *Lajput Rai*, the moderates aligning themselves with the *Gokhale* school and still others-the cringers and the climbers-readily collaborating with the alien bureaucracy.”⁹

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar gives a superior version of the above in his foreword to the translation of the ‘*Kuyil Paattu*’ by T.N. Ramachandran: “It is not possible to read ‘*Kuyil Paattu*’-as we often read ‘*Panchali Sapatham*’ - as a political parable? The two poems were conceived and written at about the same wonderfully fecund period of the poet’s life. Bharathi was then a political exile in Pondicherry, and his close companions were Sri.Aurobindo, V.V.S. Iyer, Mandayam Srinivasachariar and Subramania Siva. They were the children of the Mother, Knight-errant’s in her cause, sterling patriots and flaming apostles of Nationalism. But around them-in Pondicherry and in India-there were also the cringers, calculators, collaborators, the traders, double-dealers, traitors who crept, intruded or climbed into the confidence of the alien despotisms. Popularity and public opinion were the harlots of the times. There were people who thundered about “the benefits of British rule to India, and there were those who lustily, cried, ‘God save our gracious King! While they were afraid even to hear ‘*Vande Mataram!*’ and there were the spies and spoofers and quislings that didn’t hesitate to betray the Mother for the proverbial mess of pottage. Could it be that the *Kuyil* that affirms in dulcet tones external love, now for the impassioned poet, now for the monkey, and then for the bull, was meant to signify the diverting-self-stultifying-vagaries of political opinion that, now swore by the religion of patriotism as preached by *Tilak-Aurobindo-VOC*, now felt overwhelmed by the glories of the British connection and then felt safe and secure with the capitalists and calculators and collaborators? The *Kuyil* was certainly the ‘Soul’, but as yet only the flawed national soul veering between the right and wrong ends and means, or between *Sreyas* and *Preyas*. And even looking back into the right of history, the sort of complications and catastrophe implied in the *Kuyil-Kurangan-Madan* drama had been played often enough in India. The incandescence of

Draupadi as ‘*Panchali Sapatam*’ is part of our national heritage, but the flirtatious easy-going pliancy of the *Kuyil* is also part of the national character. Perhaps, after the projection of the mystical tremendum of *Draupadi* as incarnate Mahashakti, Bharati wanted to set the record straight: and hence the fascinating masterpiece, ‘*Kuyil Pattu*’.”¹⁰

Footnotes:

1. P.Mahadevan, **Subramania Bharati-Patriot and Poet**, p. 43.
2. T.N.Ramachandran, **Bharati patalkal**, p. 300
3. T.N.Ramachandran, **Bharati patalkal**, p. 300
4. T.N.Ramachandran, **The Song of Kuyil**, pp. 17, 28-29.
5. T.N.Ramachandran, **The Song of Kuyil**, p.73
6. P.Mahadevan, **Subramania Bharati-Patriot and Poet**, p. 49.
7. P.Mahadevan, **Subramania Bharati-Patriot and Poet**, p. 49.
8. J.Parthasarathi, **Bharati’s Longer Poems**, p. 33.
9. J.Parthasarathi, **Bharati’s Longer Poems**, p. 35.
10. T.N.Ramachandran, **The Song of Kuyil**, p. 2.

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