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## Nationalism and Internationalism in the Poetry of Bharathidasan and Robert Frost

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It is true that Bharatidasan (1891-1972), a Tamil poet, has treated themes on Tamil Nadu, Tamil Society and Tamil Language enthusiastically in several of his poems. This has misled some people to think that he is a regional poet with a narrow vision. But his poetry bears ample testimony to the fact that he has universal outlook and his broad vision includes not only his nation but also the nations of the world. Robert Frost (1874-1963) is also generally regarded as a regional poet for his depiction of the life and characters belonging to the rural areas of New England and New Hampshire. But, in fact, he looks much beyond that region to human life in general and he has combined in his poetry the local with the universal. His poems like those of Bharatidasan are full of wisdom and contain universal outlook. This article endeavours a comparative analysis of select poems of the two poets

Bharatidasan appeals to the people of his nation and the world to get united and to live together. His poem “*UlakamUnnutayatu*” (‘The World is Yours’) can serve as a good illustration here:

Demolish the wall between your home and that of your neighbour;  
Remove the curtains amidst streets,  
Unite the nations and march ahead;  
Ascend the mountain sky-high,  
Ascend higher and ascend further;  
Behold the people of the earth!  
Behold the expanse of your kind!  
Behold the battalion of your brethren  
Rejoice at the sight of the ocean of humanity  
Which has engulfed you as its kin.  
Extent your wisdom into an endless expanse  
Broaden your vision and devour the people  
Merge with it making a confluence

And cry joyously; ‘I am the ocean of Humanity.’ [Bharatidasan*Kavithaikal*Vol I.

[149-150]

The wall is a traditional symbol for anything that divides. Bharatidasan and Robert Frost bestow “a measure of impressive vitality” on this traditional symbol. In his poem “Mending Wall” Frost expresses that he does not want walls that separate people and nations and he believes.

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall;  
“But his neighbour is of the opinion that  
Good fences make good neighbours.” [An Anthology of American  
Literature (1890-1965) 387]

With the juxtaposition of these two views, we are provoked to ponder over a bigger and pertinent question: Should the world be divided by walls and boundaries?

The broad-minded poet realizes that divisions are unnatural and unnecessary. Nature herself is against the idea of erecting artificial barriers among people, regions and nations. Therefore the liberal and modern-minded speaker of the poem explicitly says that walls must be dismantled. Referring to the traditional and orthodox views of the neighbour who insists on maintaining a boundary wall, he humourously remarks:

He is all pine and I am apple orchard  
My apple tree will never get across  
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him. [An Anthology of American  
Literature (1890-1965) 387]

But the neighbour refuses to change his stand. He wants to follow the traditional rule that in order to live as a good neighbour there must be a fence, a line of demarcation which should be honoured by both the parties. So he is seen straining himself to mend the wall that has fallen:

I see him there  
Bringing a stone firmly by the top  
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.  
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,  
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.  
He will not go beyond his father's saying,  
And he likes having thought of it so well  
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbours." [An Anthology of American  
Literature (1890-1965) 387]

Though the stand of the neighbour is conservative and unprogressive, yet it has got its own justification, and it has been presented most realistically.

Both Bharatidasan and Frost desire that the geographical frontiers of different nations must fast disappear and the whole mankind must become one great family. Dividing walls must be brought down and unification must be promoted. Nations are interdependent as individuals are. Parochial, regional, communal, linguistic and other such considerations must give way to the growth of nationalism and internationalism. The walls may represent metaphorically the cold wars and the eventual power struggle in the arena of international politics.

The broadened vision of Bharatidasan is aesthetically expressed in one of his poems written for children which is worth quoting here:

Many are the flowers and many their scents  
Yet no religions have they;  
Many are the animals and many their colours  
Yet no differences among them;  
Many are the waters and many the lands  
Yet no castes have they;  
Many are the tunes and many the melodious songs  
Yet no fire of enmity;  
Many are the mountains and many the gorges  
Yet no stupidity in them;  
Many are the waters and many the deep seas  
Yet no sects they know;  
Many are the people and many their languages  
And discrimination they have;  
Yet they have ruined themselves  
All due to caste, sect and religion." [OruTayinUllamMakilkiratu 59]

Bharatidasan in a subtle and ironic way exposes the folly of human beings. His words sound like prophesy because today, as rightly pointed out by him, in the name of caste, sect and religion we construct walls between men and nations. It is really a pity that in recent years communal clashes have marred the unity of our nation.

Bharatidasan has become an institution and he very much deserves the honour heaped on him by the people. When China declared war against India over the border issue, he, stoutly defended Indian cause and wrote many poems throwing overboard all regional sentiments. Through his inspiring songs, he appealed to all Indians to unite and resist the march of the Chinese. Through his poems like *CinavaiEtirppatuTamilarKatamai* (Fighting the Chinese is the Duty of Tamils) he awakened the Tamils by telling them that the Chinese have always been posing a threat to Tamil culture.

Bharatidasan was unduly accused of promoting regional sentiments and was called ‘a propaganda artist.’ When an artist decides to educate and guide people, propaganda becomes a necessity. Bharatidasan’s regionalism may be considered in the light of broader sympathies. He strongly fought for the liberty of the nation and at the same time upheld the freedom of the individual. In his poem *VitiyaVituttalaiVitivattuEnnal* [When Will be the Dawn of Distant Liberty?] he writes:

Liberty is neither given nor received;  
It is got at the cost of million lives.  
V.O.C. Vanchi, Va.Ve.Su. Bharati  
And other such revolutionaries of the struggle;  
Tilakar, Gandhi, Bagat Singh, Sarojini’s family,  
E.V.R., Singaravelanar, Jeeva –  
All honourable men with self-respect –  
And many more in thousands and thousands  
Mindful of their duty to the nation alone  
Did their precious lives sacrifice to free the nation.  
Alas, that freedom is now in the clutches of fanatics  
The Dravida Nadu may perish!  
Religious bigotry and casteism shall rear their ugly head!  
Communal clashes shall several lives devour!  
Language feuds may brew;  
Socialism will never dawn;  
Secessionists, entanglement, enmity and hatred  
In all regions may thrive;  
The untold misery of the poor and the suppressed  
May plague the nation terribly.[NalMalarkal (Potunalam – 15-1-47) 83]

Bharatidasan participated in the Indian Freedom struggle. He was with the radicals of the National Congress till he joined the Self-Respect and Social Reformist Movement of Periyar E.V.R. He rescued one Madasamy from the police in Pondicherry. He did send a pistol concealing it in an idol to Vanchinatan with which he was to shoot down a collector. (MannarMannan, *DinamaniKatirdt.* 5 April 1979) He hailed the leadership of Gandhi and sold *khaddar* clothes. Through several of his poems, he made the people realize the urgent need for a unified struggle against the English.

In his short poem *Cutantiram* (Freedom), Bharatidasan emphasizes the need for freedom. In this poem the lives of two parakeets are juxtaposed: one enjoying a free life and the other caged and crying all the time ‘akkaakka’ (the vocative for elder sister) which is generally taught as the first word while teaching it to speak. The poet ironically and humourously questions the bird: “Do you think that freedom is a piece of ginger or pepper, for your elder sister to come at your call and handover it to you.”<sup>7</sup>

In another poem entitled ‘*VituttalaiVetkaiUyirinIyarkai*’ (Love of Liberty is the Law of Nature), a free black dog refuses to share the life with a domesticated white dog living in a rich man’s house. The black dog stands for the Indians while the English are represented by the white dog.

Robert Frost has expressed almost similar sentiments in his patriotic poem, *The Gift Outright*, in spite of its historical perspective:

The land was ours before we were the land's.  
She was our land more than a hundred years  
Before we were her people. She was ours  
In Massachusetts, in Virginia,  
But we were England's, still colonials,  
Possessing what we still were unpossessed by.  
Possessed by what we now no more possessed.  
Something we were withholding made us weak  
Until we found out that it was ourselves  
We were withholding from our land of living,  
And forthwith found salvation in surrender.  
Such as were we gave ourselves outright  
(The deed of gift was many deeds of war)  
To the land vaguely realizing westward,  
But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,  
Such as she was, such as she would become.[Bharatidasan *Kavitaika* Vol I. 180]

The land of America was already in existence much before the people who constitute the modern American nation went there and settled finally. Massachusetts, Virginia and other important states were in existence even before the vast land was colonized. For a long time the colonists regarded themselves as the owners of the land but they were not possessed by a sense of belonging to the country. After sometime the colonists realized that the affection which they have been withholding from the country of their adoption made them weak but soon after they had surrendered themselves to their land; they felt great strength in themselves. After surrendering themselves to the land of their adoption, they started advancing more and more towards the western part and they gave themselves outright to the land known as America or New England. Frost makes it clear that a total surrender to the nation one belongs to is essential. This sense of belonging alone can promote nationalism.

When the late president Kennedy took up office at the White House in 1961, Robert Frost was called upon to recite this most famous song at the inaugural ceremony. The sonorous and inspiring voice in which this poem describing the complete identification of the American people with their land was delivered, produced a nationwide effect equivalent to the Inaugural speech of the youthful President Kennedy. Both stood together as two symbols of the American nation – one the statesman, the other the poet. And as the reputation of President Kennedy, who on account of his deep humanism and love for the freedom of the whole human race, had travelled all over the globe, the influence of Robert Frost as a poet was not only confined to America, but had spread in other English-speaking and English-knowing countries of the world, and touched the heart of one of the greatest apostles of peace that the modern world has produced, the late Prime Minister Nehru who had dedicated his life to the service not only of his people, but of the whole human race. After his death, it was discovered that on the office table of Jawaharlal Nehru, there lay a piece of paper bearing the following four lines (written in his own hand) from Robert Frost's most explicated poem, "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening":

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep  
And miles to go before I sleep. [An Anthology of American Literature, 416]

Perhaps in his last months, when the burden of age and ill-health was falling heavy on him, there came a temptation to relax a little in the midst of some beautiful natural spot away from human habitation. These lines of Robert Frost must have reminded the late Prime Minister Nehru that his

promise to build a strong and prosperous India had to be redeemed to the fullest extent, and that therefore he must give the last drop of his blood for the service of the nation and go on working with untiring zeal for good of his country, because a stupendous work lay ahead of him to be accomplished before the final curtain was drawn on his earthly life. The poem conveys thus an idea which has universality of application while portraying a local scene. It is suggested that one must always think of one's duty to one's nation and should never fail to contribute one's share to the growth of the spirit of nationalism. We are also reminded of our duty to our fellow citizens. Kennedy and Nehru have demonstrated the extent to which selfless service can foster national and international integration.

Frost's love for humanity echoes in several of lines of Bharatidasan. Both emphasise the need for service to the humanity. Such a service must be based on an unshakable faith in human nature. In his poem "*ManitaCakti*" (Human Power) Bharatidasan says

With the help of human nature  
One can rule over the world  
And that we have already seen  
Hence, brother, believe in human nature.  
If you have heard of any force  
Equivalent to that of human nature  
Please tell me . . . [BharatidasanKavitaikalVol I. 145]

Bharatidasan's concern for the entire mankind made him to ponder over the various political and social happenings of the world. As a well-wisher of humanity, he has expressed his reactions to such happenings very freely and boldly in unequivocal terms. The various revolutions that took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the earlier part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century gave Bharatidasan an optimistic hope in the power of the common people. The French Revolution put an end to monarchy in 1798. The American Revolution of 1775 resulted in the birth of a free America. The Russian Revolution of 1917 brought the autocratic Tzarist regime in Russia to an end. The significance of all such Revolution lies in the demonstration of the power of the people in the making of a government and a nation. Revolts and revolutions are the means followed by people to establish the form of government they prefer and to ensure liberty and equality.

Bharatidasan found fault with the Americans for unnecessarily interfering in the growth of Vietnam which had just started progressing after obtaining freedom from the French. He had the firm view that a country must belong to its people and that other countries have no right to meddle with its progress. He criticized the capitalistic tendencies which were ready to destroy small nations like Japan:

The bomb that fell in Japan  
will, without fail, the world destroy [145]

Bharatidasan cautioned. He did not even spare Russian Communism. In "*VaricaiKettaRuciyaNaadu*" [The Dishonourable Russia], he criticized the country for spending enormous amount of money on space research; he suggested that the amount could as well be utilized for promoting the welfare of the poor. He also criticized the Russian government for its recommendation that women need not marry.

Even earthquakes which took the lives of many people and destroyed properties did not escape the poet's concern. In *KuvettavilKuttukkolai* [Mass Murder in Quetta]. He gives a pathetic account of the havoc caused by an earthquake. In his poem *Kutiyanavan* [The Farmer], Bharatidasan writes about Hitler's role in the Second World War. He sympathizes with the nations which were invaded by Germany-Belgium, Poland, France and Russia.

Bharatidasan and Robert Frost concentrated their attention on certain regions in order to study more accurately and thoroughly human life which is basically the same in all regions, climes and ages. Thus their regionalism did not in any way stand in the way of their wider human outlook and therefore their poems have universal appeal.

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