



Humanism in Bharathiyar's Poems

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Introduction

Mahakavi Subramania Bharathiyar (1882–1921) occupies a unique place in modern Tamil literature as a poet, journalist, social reformer, and nationalist. His poetry transcends the boundaries of patriotism and literary excellence by advocating universal human values such as equality, freedom, justice, compassion, and fraternity. At a time when Indian society was deeply divided by caste discrimination, gender inequality, poverty, religious intolerance, and colonial oppression, Bharathiyar envisioned a society founded on the principles of human dignity and social harmony. His poems challenged oppressive social structures and inspired people to embrace equality, self-respect, and mutual love.

Humanism forms the core of Bharathiyar's literary and philosophical vision. He believed that every human being, irrespective of caste, religion, gender, language, or economic status, possessed equal worth and deserved equal opportunities. His famous declaration, "There are no castes, dear child", reflects his uncompromising opposition to caste hierarchy. Similarly, his poems advocating women's education, equal rights, and freedom of choice reveal his progressive understanding of gender justice. Bharathiyar also condemned hunger, poverty, and exploitation, insisting that a society cannot be considered civilized if even one person remains deprived of food or basic human dignity.

Beyond social reform, Bharathiyar's humanism was universal in scope. He regarded political freedom as incomplete without social and spiritual liberation. His vision extended beyond India to encompass the unity of humanity, where truth, knowledge, compassion, and justice would replace hatred, inequality, and oppression. His devotional songs likewise emphasize service to humanity, presenting human welfare as the highest expression of devotion to God.

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This study examines the various dimensions of humanism reflected in Bharathiyar's poems, including his opposition to caste discrimination, advocacy of women's emancipation, concern for the poor and marginalized, promotion of education, and vision of universal brotherhood. By analyzing these themes, the study highlights Bharathiyar's enduring relevance as a poet whose ideals continue to inspire contemporary discussions on social justice, equality, and human rights.

Abstract

Subramania Bharati (1882–1921), fondly known as Mahakavi (The Great Poet), holds a seminal position in modern Tamil literature as a social reformer, revolutionary, and visionary humanist. Operating during the height of British colonial rule and severe internal social stratification in early 20th-century India, Bharati redefined the purpose of literature by centering it on human liberation, dignity, and universal equality. This paper examines the overarching theme of humanism across Bharati's poetic oeuvre. It explores how his literary work transcended simple anti-colonial nationalism to articulate a holistic vision of human upliftment.

Key themes analyzed include his fierce condemnation of the caste system, his pioneering crusade for women's emancipation (Pudhumai Penn), his advocacy for the dignity of labour, and his radical empathy for the poor and marginalized. Through simple yet emotionally resonant Tamil verse, Bharati dismantled traditional feudal mindsets and challenged both foreign imperialism and indigenous oppression. The paper highlights how Bharati's humanism synthesized ancient Vedantic philosophy—viewing all life as an expression of the Divine—with modern progressive ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that Bharati's literary legacy lies in his establishment of a people-centric poetry that frames human dignity and social justice as the ultimate prerequisites for true freedom.

Keywords: Subramania Bharati, Humanism, Tamil Poetry, Social Reform, Caste Abolition, Women's Emancipation, Dignity of Labour, Egalitarianism.

Bharati's era was the early 20th century, a time when the freedom struggle for independence was underway across India. People were subjected to a life of bondage not only politically but socially as well. In this context, Bharati created literature aiming for the political and social liberation of the people. In the world of Tamil poetry, he was the very first to express progressive social and political feelings passionately. Most importantly, he raised his voice in support of workers, the oppressed, and the poor. This voice was contrary to traditional modes of thought.



In this manner, he served as a pioneer of people's literature. In the preface to the short story Aaril Oru Pangu ("One Sixth Part"), he states, "I dedicate this book to the pure-hearted Vaisya brothers, such as the Pallas and Paraiyas, who engage in agriculture in the land of Bharat, provide us all with food, and protect us." This demonstrates the affection he harboured for the working class.

He raised his voice in support of the working class, advocating that workers should be valued and held in high esteem. During the national uprising, his writings served as a clarion call for the vibrant and fiery struggles of workers and farmers. He viewed himself as one with the oppressed working class. He expressed his devotion to public welfare in the poem titled Viduthalai ("Liberation"), stating, "Everyone should perform capable, harmless work and attain refined education and wisdom."

He envisioned living as equals without caste discrimination, living as exact equals among all human beings, and burning away the ignorance that degrades women so that men and women live as equals as the very definition of freedom. He voiced strong opposition to the caste oppression that was deeply entrenched in Indian society. He condemned both caste discrimination and White (British) authoritarianism as inhumane. Imagining that both of these would be buried under the soil in an independent India, he sings a joyful song of celebration (Pallu).

"The time when a Brahmin was called Aiyar has passed;

The time when the white foreigners were called masters has also passed."

Through these lines, Bharathiyar expresses his vision of an egalitarian society and his unwavering commitment to the cause of human equality. He argues that as long as caste-based oppression exists among Indians, it only benefits the British rulers while bringing suffering to the Indian people.

He further writes:

"Have your caste conflicts ended?

Have your religious conflicts ended?"

Here, he imagines the British questioning those who demand freedom. Through this poetic device, he condemns the foolishness of one human being enslaving another. He also sarcastically asks: "You demand freedom—but are you truly worthy of it?" This rhetorical question highlights that political freedom is meaningful only when society is free from internal divisions such as caste discrimination and religious conflict.



"Will you live together in unity?"

Have your petty and narrow-minded attitudes disappeared?"

In these lines, Bharathiyar continues his critique of social divisions. He questions whether Indians are truly prepared to live together in harmony and whether they have overcome the narrow-mindedness, prejudices, and petty attitudes that divide society. The rhetorical questions emphasize that genuine freedom requires social unity, mutual respect, and the elimination of divisive mindsets.

Bharathiyar points out that the lack of unity among the Indian people was one of the reasons the British were able to enslave them. Instead of addressing the caste-based inequalities to influential people who upheld the caste system, he chose to convey these ideas to children, whom he regarded as pure and godlike.

He writes:

"There are no castes, dear child—

It is a sin to speak of high and low birth.

Those who possess justice, lofty intellect,

And abundant love alone is truly noble."

Through these lines, Bharathiyar rejects caste discrimination and asserts that a person's worth should be determined not by birth but by virtues such as justice, wisdom, and compassion.

Likewise, at a time when the oppression of women was deeply entrenched, Bharathiyar raised his voice in support of women's equal rights. He broadened the idea of women's liberation by advocating for access to higher education for women, the abolition of child marriage, a woman's right to choose her husband, and equal rights in property ownership. He strongly emphasized the necessity of these reforms. In this context, the following poem highlights his advocacy for women's higher education.

"We have come so that women may govern kingdoms

And frame the laws of the land.

In all the eight branches of knowledge,

Women are in no way inferior to men—dance with joy!"



These lines express Bharathiyar's humanistic vision that women should have the same opportunities for higher education as men. He emphasizes that women are equally capable of excelling in every field of knowledge and should be empowered to participate in governance and lawmaking.

Furthermore, Bharathiyar advocated gender equality by insisting that the same moral standards applied to women should also apply to men. Just as women were expected to remain faithful within marriage, he argued that men too should be bound by the principle of monogamy and chastity. He challenged the prevailing double standards by asking, if men abandon chastity and commit wrongdoing, would not the virtue of women also be undermined? Through such questions, he asserted that chastity is not a virtue exclusive to women but a moral value that equally applies to both men and women.

In this regard, the following lines of poetry illustrate Bharathiyar's belief that chastity is a common virtue expected of both sexes.

"They speak of chastity as a noble ideal;

Let us make it a common standard for both sexes.

Let us trample underfoot the custom

Of forcing women into arranged marriages against their will."

In these lines, Bharathiyar argues that chastity should not be demanded only of women but should be upheld equally by both men and women. He also condemns the practice of compelling women into marriages without their consent, calling for the abolition of such oppressive customs.

Furthermore, Bharathiyar's poems place great emphasis on the suffering of the poor and the need to eradicate poverty. He laments the injustice of a society where some people possess an abundance of food while others die of hunger. He insists that such inequality must come to an end. According to him, all human beings are equal and should regard one another as brothers. The wealthy, therefore, have a moral responsibility to ensure that the poor do not go hungry. If this cannot be achieved through individual compassion, he proposes that the state should establish laws declaring land to be the common property of all, thereby ensuring a more just distribution of resources. In this way, Bharathiyar offers practical and humanitarian solutions for eliminating poverty and promoting social equality.

"Let us establish a new law,

And uphold it forever:



If even a single person is left without food,

We shall destroy the very age itself."

With these powerful lines, Bharathiyar passionately speaks on behalf of the poor and the oppressed. His words reflect righteous indignation against hunger and social injustice. The poem serves as a powerful call for the equality of the working class and the economically marginalized.

Bharathiyar proclaims his vision of India as an unparalleled egalitarian society founded on the principles of common ownership and social justice. His deep commitment to the welfare of society and his profound concern for the collective good are reflected in the following lines.

"My heart cannot bear it—

Even when I think of it again and again, I cannot bear it.

Some people do not even have gruel to drink.

Nor do they know the reasons for their misery..."

Through these lines, Bharathiyar expresses his deep anguish and indignation at the miserable condition of the people of his time. The sight of widespread poverty and suffering deeply troubled him.

Bharathiyar believed that India's independence should be inseparably linked with the liberation of all humanity. He declares:

"Shall there ever again be a custom

Where one human being snatches away another's food?"

With these words, he solemnly vows that exploitation and injustice should have no place in a truly free society.

For Bharathiyar, the freedom that India attained should not be confined merely to political independence; it must also encompass social liberation. He emphasised the need for spiritual freedom—a state in which individuals are free from fear, oppression, and every form of bondage.

He sings:

"May every chain that has bound humankind



Upon this earth be shattered."

He further proclaims:

"The age has arrived when all are one;

The age has arrived when falsehood and deceit shall disappear."

Through these verses, Bharathiyar envisions an ideal society founded on equality, truth, justice, and universal human brotherhood. His concept of freedom extends beyond the end of colonial rule to include the eradication of caste discrimination, gender inequality, poverty, exploitation, fear, and all forms of social oppression, thereby establishing a truly humane and egalitarian society.

Bharathiyar envisioned the awakening of Asia and the unity of the world. Through the power of reason and the guidance of human emotion, he wished to break the chains that oppressed humanity and to transform this earthly world into a heaven on earth.

Even Bharathiyar's devotional songs are fundamentally concerned with the welfare of the people.

He writes:

"Would anyone craft a fine veena

Only to throw it into the dust and let it perish?"

Through these lines, he prays that his life should be devoted to serving the welfare of the people. He believed that poetry should become a powerful instrument for eradicating disease, poverty, and suffering. He advocated an ethical vision in which all human beings are united in heart, enabling everyone to live happily and benefit equally.

Bharathiyar also criticizes the superstitions and social divisions that had become deeply rooted among the people, urging them to eliminate such evils. He condemns caste discrimination, social conflicts, bonded labour, religious divisions, racial discrimination, and class inequality and appeals to people to free themselves from these forms of oppression.

He writes:

"Food must first be placed

In the stomachs of every living human being;



Then they must be given abundant education..."

Here, Bharathiyar emphasizes not only the importance of feeding the poor but also the necessity of providing education to everyone as the means of uplifting society.

He further declares:

"Let there be no cruelties of caste—

Let the world flourish in the abundance of love..."

Through these lines, he strongly advocates humanism. He believes that love for one another will eliminate social divisions and pave the way for a prosperous and harmonious world.

He also writes:

"Knowledge must be elevated...

It should belong equally to everyone...

If we uplift those who are considered small..."

Bharathiyar argues that the true path to human progress lies in promoting knowledge without discrimination between the so-called high and low. He insists that when the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized are uplifted, it is an act worthy of divine blessing. Thus, he emphasizes that unity, equal access to education, compassion, and the upliftment of the disadvantaged are the foundations of an ideal human society.

Thus, Bharathiyar believed that all people are equal. He strongly condemned the evils of the caste system, religious intolerance, and gender inequality that prevailed within Indian society. He emphatically declared that there is only one human race. According to him, no human being is inherently superior or inferior to another. True humanism can flourish only when every individual treats others with equal love and compassion. Only then can people lead lives of happiness, dignity, and harmony. This vision of universal equality and human brotherhood is the central theme that permeates Bharathiyar's poetry.

Conclusion

Subramania Bharati's poetic legacy is defined by a deep, enduring commitment to human dignity, equality, and compassion. Writing during a period marked by foreign rule and rigid social divisions, he used



his poetry not merely as an artistic outlet but as a vehicle for profound social transformation. His vision of freedom went far beyond political independence from British rule; it demanded the total liberation of the individual from social prejudices, economic exploitation, and intellectual stagnation.

By fiercely attacking the caste hierarchy, championing the emancipation of women, elevating the status of the working class, and asserting the oneness of all living beings, Bharati redefined Indian humanism through a modern, progressive lens. He grounded his humanistic philosophy in the timeless principle that every individual possesses inherent worth and divine potential.

Ultimately, Mahakavi Bharati transformed Tamil poetry into a powerful voice for the marginalised and oppressed. His literature established a bold precedent: true progress cannot exist where human beings are divided, degraded, or enslaved by tradition. Decades after his passing, Bharati's humanist vision remains remarkably relevant—a timeless call for a world built on mutual respect, social justice, and absolute equality.

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