Chapter 4

SUBRAMANIA BHARATI AND THE TAMIL MODERN

Newspaperman Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundaram (Thiru. Vi. Ka.) wrote in his famous memoir of a wondrous encounter with the poet Subramania Bharati. It was 6 April 1919, the first great satyagraha in the Madras Presidency, described in the Introduction. Tens of thousands of people danced their way to the beach in groups singing devotional songs (*bhajan*s). It was an extraordinary day. Thiru. Vi. Ka. wrote that the day did not dawn so much as it bloomed (*malarntatu*):

> The air hung with the fragrance of Adigal's [Mahatma's] *ātma sakti* [soul force]. As planned, Royapettai *bhajana* groups and others paraded by the Desabhaktan office. [M.] Subbaraya Kamath and I joined in the procession; by the afternoon we had reached the Guhananda Nilayan of the Sri Balasubramania Bhakta Jana Sabhai. At some point or another Subramania Bharati had joined the procession. As soon as he appeared, our ears were enslaved to his song. I asked Bharati to sing. The great Tamilian began singing the song, "*Muruga, Muruga . . .* " The song—a Tamil song, a Murugan song sweeter than honey—stirred the Murugan in the picture to start moving. It appeared as though the form in the portrait came surging out. The devotees' bodies began to sweat and shake; some fainted; some fell down; everyone was enraptured in joy. And Bharatiyar [Bharati] became the figure in the painting. I saw

> with my eyes and my heart the true unity of the song and the image in the portrait. Then, after a little while, Bharatiyar took his leave and left us. ([1944] 2003, 236–37)

I will return to the dream-like quality of Thiru. Vi. Ka.'s strange meeting later in this chapter, considering the song Subramania Bharati sang and the time in which he sang it. Before that, however, this chapter thinks about Bharati's life, his contributions to Tamil literary and political culture, and the relationships between the two.

But for the moment I suggest that the dream-like quality of this description is not merely an expression of the creative force of Thiru. Vi. Ka. This event occurred only a few months after Bharati was released from jail following an exile of nearly ten years in the French Establishment of Pondicherry. At the time of the satyagraha, Bharati was residing in southern Tamil Nadu in his wife's village and keeping a low profile; he was not engaged in active politics, nor would he do so again. His political contributions had already been written and would be sung for the remainder of the twentieth century in his songs celebrating India, Tamil Nadu, and freedom. As for 6 April 1919, scholars of Bharati believe that he was not actually in Madras. We ask later what it means, if anything, whether Bharati danced the god that day or Thiru. Vi. Ka. dreamed it. Dreamed or not, the account, I argue, says the same thing about Bharati and the Tamil modern.

Poet, songwriter, orator, and activist, C. Subramania Bharati (1882–1921) was the greatest Tamil poet of the twentieth century and remains the national poet of the Tamil people. His language was new. Yet Bharati's new language would not be spun of whole cloth. In perfect accord with his wider ideologies and passions—and as a very icon of universal interpellation—Bharati eschewed the high forms of cultural production available only to a small literary elite and embraced folk language, song, and meters.[1] In particular, he deployed and borrowed from nonspecialist forms of devotional singing, known as *bhajan*s, and folk dance and song forms,

FIGURE 4. C. Subramania Bharati

such as *cintu* and *kummi*. Though he spectacularly renounced signs of his own Brahminical privilege—for instance, he sported a mustache and sat down to eat with non-Brahmins—he embraced these two forms, which were quite common within Brahmin families at the time. In this way, his language perfectly models some of the odd contradictions of and intimate connections between linguistic and political modernity: they are new but built with old forms that index cultural continuity through time; they involve signs that are transparent, intelligible to vast numbers of people, and are thus fit for universal interpellation; and they are produced by elite agents who articulate them as elements of the folk.

In this chapter, we therefore interrogate the relationship between poetic language, oratory, and the emergence of the mass political with a consideration of Bharati and a singularly *Tamil* modern. Bharati's poems and oratory embody

the universalizing semeiotic introduced by Protestant missionaries with the singular aesthetics of South India—as discussed in previous chapters—to produce a culturally contingent Tamil politics. More than that, Bharati was one of the key agents of that synthesis.[2]

I focus on a set of three speeches and three songs. The first song serves as an introduction to Bharati's vision of Indian society as a force that is both new and ancient. The second song was sung during an event that involved a procession, music, and a large public meeting on Marina Beach on 9 March 1908. It was during this time that Bharati wrote some of his most famous nationalist songs in a simple Tamil set to folk meters and melodies perfect for interpellating a new political agency: the Tamil people. The third song, already mentioned, was reported to be sung eleven years after the second at a crossroads not very far from Marina Beach during a procession of fervent political actors moving toward the first great satyagraha of the Madras Presidency, 6 April 1919. By that time, Bharati had been broken of politics through exile and opium addiction; yet the enigmatic poet was sighted, perhaps dreamed, dancing in and out of events associated with the political form that he had helped establish and that had persisted into the unfolding history of the twentieth century.

Bharati's *Samutāyam* (Society)

Bharati is an uncanny figure. He is very familiar to Tamil speakers as an icon of modern Tamil nationalism and piety. But he is also very strange. By virtue of his songs, his oratory, his writing as a journalist, and his unprecedented political action, Bharati was a fulcrum of history. He stands as the archetype of the Tamil political modern and set out a framework for its unfolding in the twentieth century. In a word, he modeled what became the vernacular politician, the orator to the masses, the central figure of the ritual of the mass meeting that modeled a vision of the mass political (Bate 2009b).

Consider a piece of Bharati's verbal art that demonstrates that uncanniness; in this case, one of his last nationalist songs, "Long Live Indian Society!" (*Bārata samutāyam vāḻkavē*).

Pallavi:
Long live Indian society (*samutāyam*)!
Long live! Long live!
Long live Indian society!
Victoriously! Victoriously! Victoriously!

Anupallavi:
The association (*saṅgam*) of thirty crore [three hundred million] people
will enjoy rights common to all (*muḻumaikkup potu uḍaimai*)!
An unequaled society,
a new wonder to all the world (*ulakattukkoru putumai*)!

Saraṇam 1:
Will we continue a culture in which man steals food from man?
Will we henceforth live lives in which man torments man?
Will we see such a life in our lifetimes?
Will we tolerate such a life among ourselves?

(*Pallavi, Anupallavi*)

Saraṇam 2:
A great country filled with uncountable sweet gardens and vast
fields
A bountiful land filled with countless fruits, tubers, and wonderful
things
They will be without number.
They will be without number forever.

(*Pallavi, Anupallavi*)

Saraṇam 3:
We will take a new vow—and we will keep it forever:
If only one human being lives without food
We will destroy the whole world!

(*Pallavi, Anupallavi*)

Saraṇam 4:
"I live within all lives (*ellā uyirkaḷilum nānē irukkiṟēn*)," so said

Lord Krishna
India will bestow the scripture that so casts to the entire world for all people
Yes, India will give it to the world!
Yes, yes, India will give it to the world!

(*Saraṇam 1*, *Pallavi*, *Anupallavi*)

Saraṇam 5:
All are one lineage, all are one kind
All are one Indian people (*Intiyā makkaḷ*)
All have one standing (*niṟai*), all have one value (*vilai*)
All are kings of this country! We
all are kings of this country! Yes,
all are kings of this country!

(*Pallavi*, *Anupallavi*)

Bharati's nationalist songs (*tēsiya gītaṅkaḷ*) were written as lyrics within a number of different genres of singing. This one appears as a *patam*, a form that cycles through a series of refrains (*pallavi*), secondary refrains (*anupallavi*), and verses (*saraṇam*), and thus the song continuously turns back on itself as it moves forward in time. Or, as Davesh Soneji puts it, the song "oscillates between past and present" (2012, 104). Such oscillation laminates the time of narration upon the narrating time, the stories told upon the telling of the stories, producing a peculiar imagination of time that has been called *itihāsa* (Guha 1998). Such an experience of history would have been appropriate within ritual contexts such as those massive public meetings on the broad sands of the Marina in Madras, where they were first sung in the high passions and new spirit of the Swadeshi movement.

Here Bharati worships Indian society (*samutāyam*) as a deity, an entity that encompasses the entirety of India itself. Like a sovereign, she is bountiful and provides for all the people; she is rich and fertile, giving and ample. She is a deity, a Mother as he wrote in some of his other nationalist songs (*tēsiya gītaṅkaḷ*) published in 1907 and 1908, especially his translation of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's "Vantē mātaram" (Mother, I bow to thee). We can find

analogues of this kind of theme for over a thousand years in the subcontinent in the worship of Siva, Vishnu, and kings who, like gods, make water flow over the land and thus make it fertile and green. The musical form of *patam* is relatively newer, an innovation of eighteenth-century Thanjavur. But one might imagine that the song speaks of ancient themes in what had, by 1907, become a classical genre.

Although familiar, this song is also strange. In the very title of the piece, Bharati evokes the concept of *samutāyam*, a "society." Not a specific society of known individuals, however, but one that is made up of some thirty crore (three hundred million) people (*muppatu kōṭi janaṅkaḷ*). Imagine that, if you can. Since when did numbers attach themselves to populations, especially such vastly imagined populations such as three hundred million? Modern censuses had been conducted by the colonial officials in India beginning with some enthusiasm in the 1820s, exactly the same time that Europe experienced an "avalanche of printed numbers" regarding the new art of statecraft called statistics (Hacking 1982, 281–82; Cohn 1987, 233–34). But besides statisticians, and those who might one day read their reports, why should a poet in the first decades of the twentieth century sing of a population imagined numerically to a crowd gathered on Marina Beach in Madras or publish it so it could be read and sung widely? These three hundred million people form an association, a *saṅgam*, a term that also evokes an ancient lineage in Tamil—the academies or associations of scholars dating back to the first centuries of the Common Era. But such *saṅgam*s were scholars and poets, grammarians, people whose names historians know. They were *saṅgam*s, we might imagine, in which every member knew—or knew of—every other member.

Bharati sings of a *saṅgam* of millions of ordinary, unnamed people, an abstract *saṅgam* corresponding to an abstract society. Likewise, the members of that *saṅgam*, each unnamed and unknown individual, will have rights. The term *potu uḍaimai* means "general, unrestricted, undemarcated, or common" (*potu*) "property/possession" (*uḍaimai*). For this is a place where if only one person were to go hungry, were to be treated unjustly, then the world itself would be destroyed.[3] No, where we the people, all three hundred million of us, would rise up and destroy it. Here, in this vast, abstract social order, each person is mysteriously related to every other person; we are a part of one family,

one lineage, one Indian people (*Intiyā makkaḷ*), where each one is sovereign over himself—"All are kings!"—and bears the same relationship to the larger abstract social order (*samutāyam*), association (*saṅgam*), and people (*makkaḷ*) as any other. So this vast association is one that could never physically instantiate itself in any one place; it is an association that can only (not to say merely) be imagined: an association in which each person holds rights equal to any other, has the same standing as any other, where all are related in some strange way to each other, where the suffering of one is equivalent to the destruction of the whole society—what Bharati sings is a modern social imaginary. And truly, as Bharati stresses in no uncertain terms, India, like this poem, is both a wonder (*putumai*) and a newness (*putumai*) in this world.

The presence of Krishna, of course, imbricates that newness with something old. For the incarnation of Krishna in this song and his citation of one of the key lines from the *Bhagavad Gita* as he articulates this *putumai* suggest that the ideas he articulates here are actually quite old: *ellā uyirkaḷilum nāṉē irukkiṟēṉ*, "I live within all lives."

This is not to say that singing *patam*s to Krishna, a universal being, is strange; indeed, we will later find ourselves grappling with the ubiquity of Krishna in the imaginings of modern political men throughout India during this moment (such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Aurobindo; see Singer 1968, 1972; Banerjee 2002; Davis 2015). What is strange, uncanny even, is that Krishna becomes an *avatāram* of India itself, representing the principle of unity that exists within all human beings—"I live within all lives"—and teaching the world that all human beings are one. All are one people.

Such universal values have been articulated before in Indian thought. Here is an ancient line from a *saṅgam* poem recognizable to everyone in Tamil-speaking worlds today: *yātum ūrē yāvarum kēḷir*, "everywhere is home, all are kin." Today, we take this phrase to be a commonplace of modern political and civil belonging. But this is the vision of a renunciate (*turavi*), someone who has given up the ties to home, family, wife, the world (*samsāram*) of the householder. His rootlessness gives him, and only him, the freedom of his impartial universality. There is a kind of particularity in this universal love. And Krishna himself, the *avatāram* of Vishnu in the *Bhagavad Gita*, represents a monism of soul, as it were, a kind of metaphysical underpinning of all reality.

It is a beautiful idea. And it is quite ancient. But it is far from the social order that most people lived within, far from the massively hierarchical complexes of caste, lineage, and status that have characterized Indian society for millennia. It is, in other words, far from the social imaginary that is articulated in this song, a modern social imaginary of an abstract social order of three hundred million theoretically equal human beings, a modern social imaginary that is infused with the idea of Krishna.

This song was penned, it is thought, in Bharati's final years and printed a year after his death in 1921. Sung in political meetings throughout the mass political movement for Indian independence and beyond, this song offers a glimpse into Bharati's uncanny sense of things. It is clearly familiar to political moderns, those who imagine large-scale abstract social orders in which all individuals are, theoretically, the same. It is also strange. For the songs index a very peculiar social milieu and activities for the political modern, for instance, singing praise to God. And the image of God and society is as a charioteer/philosopher offering counsel to a warrior; a cowherd playing a flute; a mischievous baby stealing butter; a young man sitting in a tree teasing girls; a lover who seems always to break his word about meeting us where and when he promised. Bharati's Krishna/*samutāyam* represents a crystalline form of the object I have been seeking to uncover in this book, a peculiarly modern image of social and political order—the abstract society and the equally abstract individual—in the form of a being who can utter an instantly familiar phrase from Indian thought and literature as an element of a modern social imaginary.

The New Spirit

A profoundly precocious child, Subramaniam was given the honorific due a poet, "Bharati," by a council of learned men under the raja at Ettiyapuram in 1897 on the occasion of his marriage.[4] After some time as a tutor for the raja, he worked for a short while at the Sethupathi School in Madurai in 1904, where he was discovered by the leading journalist and Congressman of the day, G. Subramania Iyer, who brought him to Madras, where he worked for the nationalist daily, *Swadesamitran*. Within a year or so, Bharati would begin his own paper, *India*, which took a more aggressively nationalist position. Bharati came to political consciousness as a young nationalist at the outset

of the Swadeshi movement discussed in Chapter 3, a period described at the time as the "New Spirit of India" (Nevinson 1908). Many of the key features of the Indian Independence movement were born during this short-lived movement, including economic Swadeshism, which involved the boycott of foreign (*paradeshi*) goods and the promotion of Indian-made (or *swadeshi*) goods, in particular, clothing; and national education, or schools and colleges run not by the government but by nationalist Indians.

Perhaps the most profound invention of the period was the use of vernacular languages and the eschewal of foreign ones in political meetings, as we saw in the previous chapter. For nearly the first time in the Madras Presidency, political leaders systematically addressed non-elite audiences in vernacular—or *swadeshi*—languages, consciously interpellating a new Indian political public. Economic and educational Swadeshism, in other words, would be paralleled by a linguistic Swadeshism. When G. Subramania Iyer began to speak in Tamil during one of the meetings discussed in this chapter, he was interrupted by the audience, imploring him to speak in English, as he was known as one of the most eloquent English orators of India at the time. He replied with the following admonition (according to police notes; punctuation as indicated in the report):

> Gentlemen. The subject which I am going to deal with is Swadeshi and Swaraj. As the subject relates to these, it will not be consistent with our principles to lecture in a foreign tongue. Since most of the audience are not conversant with English and all of you know Tamil. I request you all to listen to it carefully.[5]

At least from the point of view of the activists, if not from the point of view of common folk, there was a clear linkage between linguistic and political modernity.

Also critical to recall from Chapter 3 is that the Swadeshi movement in Madras—if not in Bengal—was mostly led by very young members of upper castes, although not by established political elites. From the perspectives of both official India and established Indian society, these relatively low-status upstarts did not understand how politics was conducted, who one needed to know, to whom one needed to speak. The meetings that they conducted

were themselves composed of young people, students in Bharati's meetings on Marina Beach, or "coolies, farmers, and labourers" in the meetings in the bazaars of provincial towns such as Madurai or in the villages of the Andhra deltas. And where they spoke, too, indexed their lack of status. While proper gentlemen of cities and towns spoke a highly cultivated English in halls (such as Pachaiyappa's Hall or Victoria Public Hall in Madras or Victoria Edward Hall in Madurai) that were socially controlled spaces of ritual and social coherence where people of a certain class could gather and discuss the important matters of the day, a bazaar or beach was a space of mixing, of discourse and commerce between people who were very different from each other. Such places were the first sites of vernacular public oratory (Chapters 1, 3). And that "publicness" was a part of their vulgarity, another index of the low status of those who spoke there.

On the Beach

For a little over a year in 1907–8, there was a vast expansion of meetings and processions. Here, the "New Spirit of India" was in full efflorescence in Madras. Bharati and the Telugu speaker Ethiraj Surendranath Arya became the two chief speakers during this time in Madras City—Bharati on Marina Beach and Arya in an open area behind Moore Market in north Madras, described in Chapter 3. Bharati's speeches, at least, were accompanied by nationalist songs and poems, many of which would become standard in the coming decades of the Independence movement: "Bharati's poems and speeches were immediately translated and sent out to the Chief Secretary of the Madras government. The opposition to imperialism in these poems and speeches attracted the attentions of the Government officials" (Kesavan 1991, 79).

The processions and meeting of 9 March 1908 were held to celebrate the release from jail of Bipin Chandra Pal, a prominent Bengali Swadeshi activist. The meeting was said to have about eight thousand people in attendance,[6] a crowd made larger, claimed the acting secretary to the Government of Madras, due to a football match by Presidency College students on the beach that day.[7] There were multiple processions, at least one with music, from "all over to the city" to the foreshore of the south beach, that part of the Marina opposite

Presidency College. The Chennai Jana Sangam had petitioned Commissioner of Police H. F. Wilkieson to process with music, but he refused to do so "for obvious reasons."[8]

An index of how strange the vernacular political oration was at this time is that we have very few transcriptions of Bharati's speeches; those we have were mostly done by police in English translation (Bate 2012b). The sub-inspector who made the translation/transcription on 9 March 1908 noted that Bharati "spoke in Tamil," and his transcript indicates various parenthetical clarifications and ironic bracketing of terms with quotation marks:

> A public meeting was held on the foreshore of the South Beach, Triplicane on the evening of 9 March 1908 in connection with the release of Bipin Chandra Pal. One of the speakers Subramani Barati spoke in Tamil as follows,
>
> When will this thirst for freedom be quenched. When will these fetters of ignorance be removed. Oh Lord that caused the great war of Mahabaratha. Are Plague and Famine intended only to your devoted. Are strangers to prosper while we suffer. Oh Lord of the universe and protector of the good. Is it not your principle to shield the innocent and the suffering! Have you forgotten about the patient suffering?
>
> He further said,
>
> Gentlemen, you have daily seen and heard of people being sent to jail and released therefrom but you never troubled yourself about them. But why have you all assembled here today? You have not come here for honoring a Maharaja or another with grand titles. But it is to celebrate the release of Bepin Chandra Pal [*sic*] today. We have been drawn together here not on account of Pal's character. But we have met here because on account of the faith we have in Swaraj (or on account of the love we have in our country) we are toiling for the welfare of our country. Pal had such views and experienced the troubles that arose from them. All of us too should suffer, according to our might for our principles of swaraj and love of our country. We are prepared to obey the laws framed by foreigners but not always. We will not submit to those laws the moment those foreigners frame

> laws which are hostile to our "natural rights." In conformity with the above declaration though, the Commissioner of Police prohibited the playing of music today, since such an order was opposed to our principles, we ignored that order and conducted the procession with music playing. So we should all join and work for (or fight) for our principles of Swadeshi and Swaraj.[9]

The police report noted that the speech was "very vehement and was received with applause and approbation by the audience." Bharati then sang the song mentioned earlier, what we now know as "Enṟu taniyum inta sutantira tāgam" (When will this thirst for freedom be quenched?), a fateful song that would become standard fare during India's Independence movement.

The speech and song were echoed by the venerable G. Subramania Iyer,[10] one of the founding members of the Indian National Congress and *The Hindu* newspaper, as well as the founding editor of *Swadesamitran*. Iyer's speech began with a *longue durée* history of India, a land that was prosperous for thousands of years and had a civilization while "other nations were barbarians and were living in forests." India's wealth and education were such that other nations traveled to India to learn of them and partake of its prosperity. But India's fortunes changed, "as everything under the sun has to experience the vicissitudes of fortune." He said:

> Whenever the country was reduced to such a state, there had appeared great men or mahatmas who had risen above considerations of self and endured all sorts of trouble, reformed the country (the state) and raised it to the level of prosperity. During the reign of the Hindu Rajas, many sages or maharishis appeared and sacrificing their personal welfare worked for the good of the country. Then followed Manu and Manthatha and others who ruled for the welfare of the people. Then came Ramachandra (an incarnation of God) who put down the "Mlechas" and removed all the difficulties from the way of the people. Before the Muhammadan conquest Budha reformed the country when it was in need of reform. It was followed by Sankarachariar, Ramanujachariar and Maduachariar who by their religious discourse and preaching introduced order in to the society. When the people were afflicted with Muhammadan oppression Sivaji came to the front overcame the Muhammadans and ruled the country as Hindu Rajas of old.

He then acknowledges that India has again come to a time when it has been laid low, and he suggests that Bipin Chandra Pal is another mahatma who has been appointed by God to be "a new force" to raise up the people of India. "Moreover," he continues,

> the men who did good to the country till now were not High Court Judges or men with titles or those that drive a pair but only those that had sacrificed the pleasures of the world and had suffered privations and troubles for the way of the people.[11]

That part of Bharati's speech reproduced here models a Protestant appeal to faith, faith in the country and faith in *swaraj*, that is, faith in a generalizable principle of social and political reform. Bharati also holds up Bipin Chandra Pal as an exemplar of suffering because he was true to his faith: "Pal had such views and experienced troubles that arose from them." As a preacher extols his flock to follow the example of Christ, so, too, does Bharati exhort his audience to follow the example of Pal: "All of us too should suffer. . . . We should all join and work for (or fight) for our principles of Swadeshi and Swaraj."

But just as Pal is placed in the position of a suffering God and an exemplar of social and spiritual action, so, too, is he cast in G. Subramania Iyer's speech as an incarnation of God. Only in this speech, God is Vishnu, or to be more specific, the avatar of Vishnu who appears as a savior when mankind falls into dark times—like Krishna of the *Bhagavad Gita*. And Subramania Iyer takes it a step further by placing Pal as an avatar within a historical, linear time frame that includes lawgivers, bhakti saints, Gauthama Buddha, and the Maratha warrior Sivaji. Subramania Iyer concludes, "When we consider [Pal's] actions of the last four or five years, it can not but be said that he appears as though he was reincarnated and has inherited new force."

Both speeches, in short, are fully within the Protestant modern, the first in the rhetorical and aesthetic sense of appealing to the soul, to the sacrifices of self on behalf of faith and a larger purpose; the second as a well-structured oration that casts Hindu ethics and heterogeneous dense time into an ethic that remains constant over the *longue durée* of homogeneous historical time—sometimes called modern time, the time of nations, the time of capital (Chatterjee 2004). And, of course, the speech is universalizable—or

nearly so, given the last few restrictions placed on who might be in an evening audience composed of upper-caste men on the beach. From the point of view of the speakers, these speeches were addressed to all Indians, even though, tellingly, most of the activists would not necessarily consider Dalits, Muslims, and women members of the Swadeshi public.

The Tamil Modern

But what of the Tamil modern? What makes this a *Tamil* event rather than merely an expression of a universal (read: European) modernity? No doubt the uptake of the modern form of the sermon, complete with modern themes universalizable to a general public—to a modern social imaginary (Taylor 2003)—qualifies this event as one among so many around the globe that newly interpellated "the people" as a new kind of entity, a new collectivity made up of what Sudipta Kaviraj has called "zero-degree individuals" (1990, 90), those quintessentially modern beings free from the restricting bonds of social categories such as caste, at least in theory.

But is that all? Is the Tamilness of this event reducible only to the Tamil spoken? Is Tamil, then, only a kind of linguistic icon of the idea that modernity was simply translated into new lands, a European form that carries with it European senses and imaginations? In addressing these questions, we turn to the music accompanying the procession and the song that Bharati sung that day. For it is in the musical and poetic elements of language that we discern a vernacular modernity—a *swadeshi* modernity, a Tamil modern. And here lay its power, a power to which the authorities were not insensitive.

H. F. Wilkieson, commissioner of police in Madras, was certain that these meetings represented a grave threat to the British. In a letter to J. N. Atkinson, acting chief secretary to the Government of Madras, he wrote that the "spirit of lawlessness exemplified . . . on the 9th" when speakers "openly defied the law" was not merely a one-off event but rather a "sign of the times":

> That afternoon, many bazaarmen in Triplicane closed their shops ostensibly in honour of Bipan Pal's release, but I have little doubt that it was really a sign of the times: I think it would be a good thing if we could stop the local agitators speaking in public. Though what they say may not be

> very serious still their words are understood by the ignorant mob as purely anti-British.[12]

The open violation of the law that particularly outraged Wilkieson was the playing of music during the procession after he had expressly refused to give permission for it. A High Court *vakil* (lawyer, or advocate), Tirumala Chari, BA, BL, the secretary of the Chennai Jana Sangam, had appeared before him a few days before the event to request permission to process with fireworks and music. "The Sangam," Wilkieson quipped, "is in no sense a musical society."[13] "For obvious reasons I refused to grant a license."[14] Nevertheless, and in violation of Wilkieson's refusal, some members of the procession did have music.

> On 9th March 1908 all the processions started from different parts of the city and proceeded towards the South Beach where a public meeting was convened. The processions were orderly till they reached the Victoria Hostel where music was commenced and used till they reached the South Beach. . . .
>
> After the procession met on the foreshore of the South Beach two of the speakers named Subramania Bharathy and Ethiraj Surendranath Arya in the course of their speeches said that in defiance of the Commissioner's orders they used music and that the audience should take an oath that they must be within the legal bounds of law as far as it did not interfere [unclear] natural rights but when it did so they must infringe the same and break [unclear].
>
> The musicians who played the music are liable to be [unclear] under the City Police Act. If they state before the court that they played the [unclear] their own accord without being engaged either by the organizers of the procession or by the aforesaid two speakers, it will be difficult [unclear] the persons who really abetted the commission of the [unclear] City Police Act. Unsuccessful prosecution would merely make martyrs of the [unclear] positively insignificant men.[15]

Despite Wilkieson's alarm and calls for prosecution, officers at Fort St. George, on the advice of Advocate General P. Sivaswamy Aiyar, were unable to bring

Bharati or Arya to book as they did not yet have the legal tools to prosecute these speeches. The form of the speeches was simply so new that laws had not been written to deal with them; neither did they have surveillance procedures or recording technologies (in this case, shorthand) that would enable them to prove charges of sedition under existing law—laws devised to monitor, record, and prosecute *printed* instances of sedition (Chapter 3).[16]

It is worth paying attention to the fact that Bharati and Arya vehemently objected to being denied permission to play and sing music in procession. A common theme in both their speeches that day was the insistence that a ban on singing constituted violations of their "natural rights." The deployment of the Enlightenment concept masks something singular to their attachment to the music. For it is in the music and poesy of the event that the Tamil modern inheres.[17]

The song Bharati sung, it turns out, became a famous one. Though first published in Bharati's paper, *India*, during the freedom struggle, it was sung for decades in public meetings quite regularly from at least the late 1920s.[18] It was so famous by 1944 that when the great poet Namakkal Kaviñar V. Ramalingam Pillai published his autobiography, *En Katai* (My story), he provided a long discussion of when he first heard of the song and whether the printed versions available were missing verses first sung during Swadeshi meetings in 1907–8 (Viswanathan 1998, 3:123–26).[19] Indeed, it was this song that first drew police attention to Bharati:

> Bharati first drew the attention of the police because he sang songs which imparted a striving for liberty within patriotic sermons, in meetings intended to create a passion for liberty among the illiterate people. The police faced many struggles to take action against Bharati for his sermons on liberty. (3:126)

Viswanathan writes that the poem was first printed in Bharati's *India* on 7 March 1908, just two days before it was first sung on the beach (3:121). Bharati titled it "Sri Krishna Stottiram" (Psalm to Sri Krishna). In translation, it reads:

> When will our thirst for freedom be quenched?
> When will our love for slavery die out?
> When will the chains on our mothers' wrists be broken?

When will our afflictions [*innalkaḷ*] end?
O, Lord of the Mahabharata!
O, Protector of Aryas!
Is it not by you alone that we are victorious?
Is it right that your true devotees should languish without your aid?

Should famine and disease be the fate of your devoted?
For whom else are the good things of this world?
Will you forsake those who have sought your refuge?
Will a mother cast away her own children?
Is it not yours to soothe our fears?
O, Noble Lord! Have you forsaken us?
O, Slayer of evil Rakshasas!
O, Crescent Jewel of Warriors? O, Lord of the Aryas!

Of the many things about this song that warrant analysis, two elements stand out: the key signature/scale, or *rāgam*, of the song and the discursive form in which such a song might be sung. *Rāgam*s are something like keys or scales/modes in Western music and have associated with them, at least theoretically, singular sets of emotions or feelings: *rasa*. The *rāgam* in which this song was sung is *kamās*, a *rāgam* sometimes described as "tuneful" or "folksy." Many of the nationalist songs that Bharati composed were set to familiar tunes often expressly considered folksy (*nāṭṭuppuṟa meṭṭu*), at least from the point of view of twentieth-century music specialists such as his granddaughter, Lalitha Bharathi (1986). *Kamās* is often the *rāgam* of shorter, lighter tunes (*kriti*s, *tukkada*s), which conclude concerts on an upbeat or happy note. The *rasa*, or feeling associated with this *rāgam*, is said to be *sringara*, or the erotic, which gives it a somewhat playful feeling. This might strike us as odd when the song, and its initial English translation for the police, reads almost like a lamentation of Job. How is this "playful" or "erotic"? And why would a psalm to Krishna be an appropriate accompaniment for a speech on Swadeshi?

These questions lead us to the second thing to be said about this piece: it is quite possible that Bharati was borrowing from another new form in early twentieth-century Madras, the *bhajan*.[20] *Bhajan*s involve home-, temple-, or even street-based worship sessions that involve singing devotional—or

bhakti—songs to personal deities, in particular the beautiful lord Krishna and his consort, Radha, set amid scenes of the old stories, the *purāṇa*s. Among the most common scenes is Krishna's teasing and forsaking the cowherds, the young women (*gopi*s) who pine for his love. Although, in practice, *bhajan*s were restricted to Brahmins, at least ideologically they cut across caste, sect, and lineage divisions among higher-caste organizations. Again, ideally, their practitioners saw themselves as engaging in a universalizing discourse, such as public meetings, that were probably a great deal more restricted than the ideology held. For instance, they were almost always male-only events, at least among the adults.

Regardless, a major theme in *bhajan*s, especially those involving Krishna, was erotic longing by Radha, or more commonly, by the *gopi*s, the cow girls, who longed for his embrace. Men singing these songs cast themselves in the role of the *gopi*s, each hoping to be Krishna's lover. In one song taken from the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, Krishna grants each of them her heart's desire and dances with all of them simultaneously. But Krishna is mercurial, fickle, difficult to pin down. He often fails to do what he says, to show up for the secret meeting arranged with his lover. And Bharati actually composed a cycle of songs about Kannan—as both male and female lover, Kannan *and* Kannamma—failing to meet for agreed-on trysts. Here is an excerpt, in translation, from "Kannammā en kātali" (Kannamma, my lover):

> You told me to wait there,
> On the other side of the river,
> In the southernmost corner
> of the Chenbaga garden,
> that you would come there
> with your friend in the pale moonlight.
> You lied, Kannamma! My heart is broken.
> And I see images of you everywhere I look.

In Bharati's discourse, this same feeling of longing is now cast in a nationalist idiom, clearly understood and taken up by nationalists over the course of the freedom movement and into postcolonial democratic politics. And like so many powerful poetic images, this one, too, is polysemous, refracting several

possible senses at once. On the one hand, Krishna is the mercurial god who may or may not grant our boons and fulfill our longings. At the same time, while Bharati plays the role of *gopi*, of a pining girl waiting for her fickle lover, Krishna is also cast as the Leviathan, the people who could, if only they willed it so, shake off the shackles of British rule in a day—indeed, such a call to action by three hundred million people was a part of most speeches during this day, 9 March 1908, throughout the Madras Presidency. It was a democratic movement Bharati longed to lead, if only they would rise up and exert the power they had in their hands.

As it turned out, Krishna would fail him.

The Apotheosis of Subramania Bharati

On the day Bharati sang this song, events elsewhere in the Madras Presidency provoked a crackdown that would bring the Swadeshi movement to an end. In particular, Bharati's friend and colleague in the Chennai Jana Sangam, V. O. Chidambaram Pillai (V. O. C.), along with his charismatic companion Subramania Siva, violated a ban on holding a meeting to celebrate Pal's release in Thoothukudi and were arrested a few days later, as I discuss in the next chapter. This arrest sparked a riot during which a district magistrate's office was gutted and a police firing resulted in four deaths and several dozen wounded. Over the next few months, young leaders of the Swadeshi movement across the land were rounded up and charged with sedition (see Chapter 3).

The authorities even went as far as to arrest the venerable G. Subramania Iyer, a shocking turn of events that led to a general outcry among prominent citizens and his rather speedy release after signing a document promising not to print seditious sentiments in his paper. He did not have to admit that he had done so. A few of the younger men begged for leniency and forgiveness for their youthful transgressions, and elders in the communities wrote letters on their behalf promising to take responsibility for them; in some cases the charges were dismissed at the cost of the young men's humiliation. Others received the full brunt of British outrage: V. O. C. was given two life sentences while Subramania Siva was given ten years of rigorous imprisonment, sentences that were reduced to six years each, of which they served every day.

Bharati was never charged for sedition because the authorities failed to move quickly enough against his violation of the ban on music. But fearing for his freedom, he fled to French-governed Pondicherry, where he would remain in bitter exile until late 1918.

And it was indeed bitter. Despite writing many letters to newspapers and British officials, he was never certain he would not be arrested should he return to Madras. Although he continued for a year and a half to publish *India*, Bharati's exile in Pondicherry ultimately broke him of politics. It broke him in many ways. Unable to engage in steady newspaper work, he and his family were reduced to poverty. They often went hungry. He also took to opium, which, at least from his friend V. O. C's account, fundamentally transformed him. He continued to write brilliant poems, many beloved to this day.

Even though he would not engage in formal politics when he finally returned to the Madras Presidency in 1918, there were several reports of him showing up at various kinds of meetings at which he sang devotional songs. Two intelligence reports mention him at labor meetings, some of which would prove to be among the most influential in the development of the mass political in Tamil lands. For these were the meetings that expressly addressed the working man and woman—that called them to the political, "to persuade them into speech and action," as one labor leader put it (Wadia 1921; Bate 2013; see Epilogue). These were the latter-day incarnations of those meetings convened by V. O. C. and Subramania Siva on the beach of Thoothukudi during those forty days of oratorical incandescence just prior to their arrests in 1908, or the Telugu Swadeshi meetings of working men and women—"coolies"—addressed at Madras's Moore Market by Ethiraj Surendranath Arya. So while Bharati had an uncanny ability for showing up at what would become the most important political events of the day, his songs were not pointedly political like his earlier *swadesha gītaṅkaḷ* (national songs). Strangely, he appeared at political events as a nonpolitical actor.

Among the final reports of these strange apparitions is the famous memoir by Thiru. Vi. Ka., activist and editor of the nationalist papers *Desabhaktan* and *Navasakti*. This satyagraha was a political meeting par excellence, a form that would become the very archetype of Indian political action throughout the Independence movement and into postcolonial democratic politics—the

essence of the Indian mass political. Reports by nationalists, opposition newspapers, and police all agreed some one hundred thousand people showed up that day. And the stages were set up on the very same spot where Bharati and his comrades gave their speeches and sang their songs eleven years earlier—on the Marina, across from Presidency College.

Bharati did not speak, of course. But he did sing. Thiru. Vi. Ka. describes *bhajan* groups singing and dancing their way to the beach—just as they had eleven years earlier to celebrate Bipin Chandra Pal's release from jail. Only on this great day, the crowds were ten to twelve times larger. Thiru. Vi. Ka. joined a group that passed his newspaper office, and they made their way toward the beach, singing and dancing along with everyone else. In the afternoon, after they passed the meeting place of a major devotional group (Sri Balasubramania Bhakta Jana Sabai) in Royapettah, a few blocks away from the beach, Thiru. Vi. Ka. noticed that "at some point or another Subramania Bharati had joined the procession": "As soon as he appeared, our ears were enslaved to his song. I asked Bharati to sing. The great Tamilian began singing the song 'Muruga, Muruga.'"

Let me break from this description, recounted in full earlier, to speak of this song. This is another hymn, a short song, a folksy *rāga* called "*nāṭṭukuriñci*." It is almost certainly composed as a *bhajan*, a simple tune with a simple idea that enables a group of nonspecialists to embody the devotional mood in music and song. Again, the song is sung to the beautiful young god Murugan, the son of Siva, a hunter and warrior—and like Krishna, a god of passion. Unlike Krishna, however, Murugan is not so unreliable. The first stanza (*pallavi*) of this tune is as follows:

> Muruga, Muruga, Muruga!
>
> You come riding a peacock
> With your bright spear you come
> And you give us your goodness, worthiness, and praise
> Your penances, your divinity, your quality, your renown,
> Muruga, Muruga, Muruga!

Let us return to Thiru. Vi. Ka.'s description:

> The song—a Tamil song—a Murugan song sweeter than honey—stirred

> the Murugan in the picture to start moving. It appeared as though the form in the portrait came surging out. The devotees' bodies began to sweat and shake; some fainted; some fell down; everyone was enraptured in joy. And Bharatiyar became the figure in the painting. I saw with my eyes and my heart the true unity of the song and the image in the portrait. Then, after a little while, Bharatiyar took his leave and left us. (Kalyanasundaram [1944] 2003, 236–37)

What are we to make of this description? Was it merely the collective effervescence of the moment? Here the quintessential Tamil deity, Murugan, seems to be awakened from his merely representational avatar in a framed print and merges with (indeed, is textually emblematized by) the poet who, more than anyone, spoke the Tamil people. Here, too, is an image of a deity to whom Tamils all over the world perform awesome, trance-inducing austerities to become the peacock vehicle of the god, dancing for hours on end with a palanquin festooned with peacock feathers on their shoulders, swinging above a crowd from hooks piercing the muscles in their backs, as their wives and children dance below them. Their austerities that day had been to sing and dance for miles along the streets in midday sun near the height of the Tamil summer as Bharati danced the god.

Recall that this event occurred only some months after Bharati was released from jail after his more than ten-year exile in Pondicherry and that scholars of Bharati believe that he was not in Madras on the day of the great satyagraha.[21] What does it mean, if anything, whether Bharati danced the god that day or Thiru. Vi. Ka. dreamed it? I do not know.

There were other accounts of Bharati's uncanny presence in political events during that time, ghostly presences that we think were imagined, such as an alleged encounter with Mohandas Gandhi (which was largely reported over much of the latter part of the twentieth century) and a failed speech in Madras where he began singing but did not speak and had to be escorted from the stage (Mahadevan 1957, 119). But whatever we make of these sightings, it is clear that these kinds of austerities, passions, and poesies would be a part of the formation of the Tamil modern from the beginning of mass politics. Ranajit Guha (1973) argues in his essay on the Rowlatt satyagraha that such shows of enthusiasm in the political realm were elements of elite demonstration of their own legitimacy in the face of

British rule. That may be true. But it is also the case that such enthusiasm cannot be reduced to the mere machinations and intentions of elite political will but was the modality in which the political—the modern mass political—would be danced, sung, imagined. Dreamed or not, Thiru. Vi. Ka.'s account offers a truth about Bharati and Tamil political modernity, for the event entered into written history and became an element of truth regarding Subramania Bharati and the forms of politics that followed in his wake.

Conclusion

We might conclude with the speculation that Bharati is one of an entire class of beings around the world during this period. The first nationalist orators around the world were, after all, disproportionately creative verbal artists, poets, and playwrights. This is no accident in two respects. First, structurally speaking, homiletic oratory vies with print as the mass medium par excellence for the enunciation of nationalist time, space, and belonging. And even if there were oratorical traditions prior to missionization in the Philippines (Rosaldo 1984), Madagascar (Keenan 1973; Bloch 1975; Jackson 2013), Papua New Guinea (Kulick 1992), or West Africa (Irvine 1989; Yankah 1995), modern nationalist oratory across the globe seems to have had Protestant forms of textuality at its basis. So, in opposition to print—which theorists such as Benedict Anderson ([1983] 2006) assert was spread by capitalist means of production—modern oratory spread in South Asia, and far more broadly, largely through affective motivations, in appeals to the heart and the imagination and in promises of salvation and of the universalization of concepts of natural or human rights. Orators and poets were the first to articulate this new, queer social imaginary in a way that we understand it today, a modern social imaginary (Taylor 2003). At least it was the orators and poets who articulated and ritually instantiated that imaginary in moments of an odd collective effervescence that became known as public meetings (*potukūṭṭaṅgaḷ*).[22] Creative verbal artists, young, iconoclastic, and beautiful, would stand at the forefront of this process. And poets, I imagine, would have been prominent among this new class of actors.

Second, it is no accident that it would have been poets to effect these revolutions, as poets brought to oratory a language that would contain within

its codes the very essences of the truths and beauties felt by the people from whom they arose and to whom they spoke. The poet, young and idealistic, dares to use a new language to speak a people into being.

Combining orator and poet in one person also combined both kinds of poetic world building that have concerned me in this book. The first is Roman Jakobson's (1960) poetic function of language—what he also later called *poeticity* (1987, 368)—that aspect of every utterance that calls attention to the form of the message, which stipulates the form of communicative action being instantiated, the kind of activity being engaged, and the kinds of participants engaging in that activity. The new agency born in this new communicative structure, the Tamil epideictic oration, the secularized avatar of the Protestant sermon, involved the ability to interpellate an entirely new entity, a generalized public, "zero-degree individuals" devoid of class or caste (Kaviraj 1997, 90), yet all Indian—the modern political subject (with all the elisions and erasures such a social imaginary involves). In other words, through the metapragmatic stipulation of a new mode of speaking, the modern political actor—the vernacular politician—and the modern social imaginary of national citizenship were instantiated.

The second mode of poetic world building is the one traditionally understood by the term "poetry," but perhaps not entirely understood as having structuring effects. This includes the relationship language draws between sound, myth, emotion, and the imagination, what we might broadly call the aesthetics of language. Jakobson called this the "palpability of language" (1987, 378). We might also include under this heading not only poetry but rhetoric, the tools of the Sophists so despised by the Platonists yet the fundamental elements of political practice in modern polities. It is through these poetic processes that people's imaginations are lit afire in national passion. And my guess is that worldwide, through both modes of poetic world building, it was poets who disproportionately invoked this passion.