

# Bharathiyar and Translation

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## ABSTRACT

Subramania Bharathiyar emerged as a remarkable translator and poet, bridging Tamil literature with global literary traditions. A polyglot, he mastered Tamil, English, Sanskrit, Telugu, Bengali, Hindi, French, and Chinese. Bharathiyar translated literary works from other languages into Tamil and his own Tamil poems into English and French, making them accessible to a wider audience. His translations are marked by literary finesse, clarity, and cultural sensitivity, reflecting themes such as Tamil welfare, Indian freedom, women's liberation, and the rejection of caste discrimination. Through his translation work, Bharathiyar enriched Tamil literary expression while fostering cross-cultural literary exchange, establishing himself not only as a poet but also as an outstanding translator and social thinker.

**Keywords:** Bharathiyar, translation, multilingualism, Tamil literature, world literature, social thought, literary richness.

## INTRODUCTION

Subramania Bharathi is a treasure bestowed upon the Tamil language and the Tamil people. Language, at its core, is born for dialogue among individuals. Bharathi stands as a shining example of how language, when handled with grace and mastery, can bring about tremendous social transformation. Even though more than a century has passed since his lifetime, it is essential that we continue to recall the greatness of his linguistic prowess; only then will the present generation draw inspiration from it.

When a person speaking one language wishes to communicate with another person speaking a different language, translation becomes essential. The foundation of Bharathi's excellence in translation lies in his multilingual proficiency. His early life spent away from home, and his experiences living in diverse linguistic environments from Ettayapuram to Kasi, and later Calcutta, Chennai, and Puducherry significantly enriched his knowledge of multiple languages.

### Multilingual Proficiency

Bharathiyar was a multilingual poet who, apart from his mother tongue Tamil, had knowledge of many other languages. Because of his father's admiration for English, Bharathi received his education through the English medium, which enabled him to acquire strong proficiency in the language. His stay in Kasi helped him learn Sanskrit and Hindi. During his years in Pondicherry, he gained familiarity with French and Bengali. When the First World War began, he also showed interest in German, Latin, and Urdu. While living in Chennai, he learned Telugu as well. It is known that he had exposure to about twelve languages including Arabic and Malayalam. Among these, he had reading and writing proficiency in seven languages, while he could understand the rest when spoken to him. He deeply enjoyed reading English poetry, especially the works of Byron, Keats, and Shelley. It was from the poems of Shelley flowing with a yearning for freedom that Bharathi first experienced a powerful sense of liberation. He was well-versed in Tamil, Sanskrit, Telugu, Bengali, Hindi, English, and French. This is affirmed by his own statements:

**"I am acquainted with four or five languages; yet none possesses the strength, skill, and emotional bond that Tamil has."** (Bharathiyar Katturaigal, 'Tamil', p.167) and

**“Of all the languages I know, nowhere do I find a tongue as pleasant Tamil.”** (Bharathiyar Kavithaigal, ‘Tamil’, p.193)

Through these assertions, it becomes evident that Bharathi was endowed with remarkable multilingual proficiency. The purpose of this article is to explore the greatness of Mahakavi Bharathiyar’s contribution to the world of literature through the domain of translation.

### **Bharathi’s Translation**

Bharathi’s experience working for several Tamil journals Sudesa Mithran, Chakravarthini, India, Vijaya, Suryodayam, Karmayogi, and Dharmam and for the English journal Balabharata served as an important catalyst for his translation activities. In addition to these, his writings and translations appeared in Vivekabanu, Gnanabanu, Commonweal, Arya, The Madras Standard, New India, Penkalvi, Kalaimagal, Desabhaktan, and Katharathnakaran. Explaining the benefit he himself derived from such translation work, Bharathi remarks,

**“Since English is a very refined language, I had to find precise Tamil equivalents that would convey its ideas to Tamil readers without distortion. It was during this effort that the dignity and richness of the Tamil language became even clearer to me.”** (Ilakkumanapperumal N., Kaalathaal Karainda Kavignan, p.14) Furthermore, he states:

**“The great scholarly works of other nations**

**Must be translated into the Tamil language.”** (Bharathiyar Kavithaigal, ‘Tamil’, p.193)

In these lines, Bharathi emphasizes the need to bring exceptional works from other languages into Tamil. In the same poem, in the next two couplets, he asserts:

**“There is no greatness in merely**

**Retelling our old tales to ourselves.**

**True scholarship lies in earning**

**The reverence of foreign nations.”** (Bharathiyar Kavithaigal, ‘Tamil’, p.193)

Through these lines, Bharathi underscores the importance of taking great Tamil works to other languages as well. He himself undertook both of these tasks: bringing foreign works into Tamil and taking Tamil thought outward. Bharathi translated works from other languages into Tamil in two forms direct translation and adaptation. The lines spoken by Arjuna to Krishna,

**“O Purushothama, know Thyself!**

**Thou who art all beings!**

**Lord of all beings, God of gods,**

**Lord of the universe!”**

and Krishna’s reply,

**“Behold My celestial forms—**

**In hundreds, in thousands,**

**Of diverse kinds,**

**Of varied colors and dimensions!”** (Bharathiyar’s Bhagavad Gita, p.69)

are examples of his simple and elegant style of translation. Bharathi also wrote a lengthy research-based introduction to the Bhagavad Gita. This introduction presents the Gita as a guide for life and conduct. Given its style, intent, and literary flavor, Bharathi's Bhagavad Gita can more appropriately be regarded not merely as a "translation," but as a true Tamil rendering (Tamilakam) of the text.

### **Patanjali Yoga Sūtra**

Bharathiyar translated the first section of Patanjali's Yoga Sūtras into Tamil. This translation appeared between 1909–1911 in the magazine Karmayogi, and in 1928, it was published in book form.

The first section of Patanjali's Yoga Sūtras is Samādhi Pāda, which contains fifty-one aphorisms. Bharathiyar translated fifty of these sūtras and provided an explanatory commentary. Regarding this work, Sri Aurobindo stated,

**"Bharathi was a genius who realized Indian philosophies through experience.**

**His translation of Patanjali's Yoga Sūtra is excellent."** (Bharathiyar Pukazhmālai, p. 208)

### **Vyasa Bharata**

Drawing from the Sabha Parva episode ("The Dice Game") of Vyasa's Sanskrit Mahabharata, Bharathiyar composed the short epic 'Panchali Sabadam' (The Vow of Draupadi). In this work, he envisioned Draupadi as Bharata Māthā herself and used the narrative to inspire nationalist sentiment. In his preface to Panchali Sabadam, Bharathiyar writes,

**"One who creates a work with simple words, simple style, easily understood rhythm, and tunes that appeal to the common people, gives new life to our mother tongue. It must be written so that even those with just a year or two of reading experience can understand it clearly, without diminishing the subtleties of the theme.**

**The task is great; my ability is small. Out of sheer desire, I publish this work not as an ideal model, but as a guide. In this book, I have portrayed Dhritarashtra as one endowed with noble qualities, disinterested in dice, and displeased with Duryodhana. Some consider him as evil as his son. My portrayal follows Vyasa's conception.**

**Largely, this work may be regarded as a translation of Vyasa's Bharata. My own contributions in the narrative are very few; I am responsible only for the Tamil style. Since it is the Divine Mother who inspired me to undertake this work for the rebirth of Tamil society, I firmly believe that its style will endear it to our people."** (Bharathiyar Kavithaigal, pp. 414–415)

Through these words, one understands that Bharathiyar wrote in an elegant yet simple Tamil so that even moderately educated readers could understand his work. Example of Bharathi's Poetic Translation Style, When describing Hastinapura, the capital city of Duryodhana, Bharathi writes:

**"Men drunk with fiery liquor roam everywhere**

**like raging elephants;**

**Kings flourishing like Indra upon earth—**

**such are the streets they adorn."** (Bharathiyar Kavithaigal, p. 420)

Here, he uses vivid similes and accessible Tamil, demonstrating his skill in adapting Sanskrit epic descriptions with poetic beauty. Praise for Panchali Sabadam, The patriot and writer Subramania Siva said,

**"Most people of Tamil Nadu know Bharathi's poetic brilliance and style.**

**His Panchali Sabadam (Part I) is filled with splendid descriptions.**

**It is a book that lovers of language and lovers of the nation must read.”** (Bharathiyar Pukazhmālai, p. 211)  
This recognition underscores the literary excellence and cultural significance of the work.

### **Bengali**

Bharathiyar translated several Bengali literary works into Tamil. Among these, his Tamil rendering of the song **“Vande Mataram”** and his translations of Tagore’s stories are considered exceptional. Sharma, a native of the Tanjore district, translated Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s novel **“Anandamath”** into Tamil. At Sharma’s request, Bharathiyar created a Tamil version of the song **“Vande Mataram.”** A few years later, Bharathi translated the song once again. Explaining the reason for translating the same song a second time, Bharathi wrote,

**“Earlier, I translated the entire song into akaval metre. However, since it was not easy to sing, I have now translated it again using a variety of metrical patterns.”** (Thirunavukkarasu, K.T. Tamil Kavithaiyil Bharathiyin Thaakkam, p. 394)

This statement appears in the preface to the song. Many of the themes and expressions found in **“Vande Mataram”** also appear in several of Bharathi’s patriotic songs. For instance, the lines,

**“Vande Mataram, let us say;**

**Let us bow to our Motherland.”**

serve as evidence of this influence. The Bengali revolutionary Aurobindo wrote a work titled **“The Secret of the Vedas”** which contains profound insights about fire (Agni). After studying these ideas, Bharathiyar composed a celebrated poem titled **“Agni-k Kunju”** (The Fire Bird) in which he personifies fire,

**“I found a little fire-bird,**

**Placed it in a nest within the woods;**

**The forest burned and cooled again—**

**Can a fledgling become an elder**

**In a single burst of flame?**

**Thaththarikida thattharikida thiththom.”** (Bharathiyar Kavithaigal, p. 567)

Through such poems, Bharathiyar creatively adapted and reinterpreted Bengali philosophical and literary inspirations in his own inimitable Tamil idiom.

### **English**

Bharathiyar possessed deep mastery over the English language. He translated into Tamil the works of several English poets whom he admired. He rendered the poem **“The Town of Let’s Pretend,”** written by the English poet John Sker and published in the magazine *The Messenger of the Stars*, under the Tamil title **“Karppanaiyur”** (The City of Imagination). He conveyed the essence of the English poem in simple Tamil suited to Tamil culture:

**“There exists a city called Imagination—**

**Where the gandharvas sport and play;**

**A radiant land called the dream-world—**

**A place of joy to all who dwell therein.”** (Bharathiyar Kavithaigal, p. 121)

He also translated a poem written by the English woman poet M.R. Sherman, publishing it under the Tamil title “India’s Call.” The opening lines, “**Beloved India! For all religions, nations and humankind...**” gave a new sense of awakening to the Tamil people of that time.

Bharathi translated a letter written by Noguchi, the Japanese poet, and included it in his Tamil work “Kadithangal” (Letters). He also translated a haiku poem by the Japanese poet Hokushi, as follows:

**“The flame burned bright—**

**What serenity rests**

**In the falling flower!”**

In addition to these, Bharathiyar translated several important English works into Tamil, including: the policies of the New Party, Tagore’s “Five Vedas,” Tagore’s short stories, Bharata Jana Sabha (first two parts), the speeches and letters of Swami Vivekananda.

### **French**

During the ten years he lived in Pondicherry, Bharathiyar learned the French language. He translated the French national anthem “La Marseillaise” into Tamil under the title “Annai Nannaatin Makkal” (Children of the Noble Motherland). This effort eventually inspired Bharathi to compose a national anthem in Tamil.

### **Chinese**

The Tamil translation of a poem written in Chinese by the woman poet Si Yu Tsuni appears in the volume Bharathi Katturaigal, under the section titled “The Sermon Delivered by Siu Xeen.” The theme of women’s liberation is expressed by Bharathi in these lines:

**“For freedom, let all women**

**kindle earnest desire;**

**With firm resolve,**

**gathered around the cup of truth,**

**let us pledge together**

**our sacred cause.”** (Bharathiyar Kavithaigal, p. 577)

### **Tamil to Other Languages**

Bharathiyar also translated several Tamil literary works into English. He translated some of his own poems into English, and scholars of English and French published them in prestigious journals of their respective countries. Bharathi translated into English, the history of the Congress Mahasabha, the hymns of Nammalvar and Nachiyar, the Tiruppugazh of Arunagirinathar, among others.

Bharathi did not show great interest in translating Tamil short stories. He translated only eleven Tamil short stories into English. A keen social thinker and reformist, Bharathiyar observed the world with a sharp and compassionate vision. He wrote poetry for people of all ages, without distinctions of gender, status, or caste. Through his writings he led a revolution, becoming a true revolutionary whose words awakened society. His translated works are written in a manner easily accessible even to those with only a few years of reading experience.

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## CONCLUSION

Mahakavi Subramania Bharathiyar stands as one of the foremost pioneers in modern Tamil translation studies. His bilingual proficiency enabled him to approach translation not merely as a linguistic exercise but as a cultural, philosophical, and poetic mediation between Tamil and non-Tamil traditions. A comparative study of Tamil and English with reference to Bharathi's translation practice reveals several distinctive features.

Bharathiyar translated some of his own poems into English. These English translations were also published in several foreign journals. Many have identified Bharathiyar primarily as a poet, but this study clearly reveals him as an outstanding translator as well. He addressed numerous themes such as the welfare of Tamil and Tamils, India's freedom struggle, women's liberation, and the rejection of caste discrimination. With his mastery over language, he sought solutions to these concerns through poetry, essays, stories, verse dramas, and plays and indeed, he found solutions. Let us read his works, spread them across the world, and take delight in them!

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