

Inspiring Songs on Women Empowerment by Mahakavi Subramania Bharati

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Abstract:-In early India, in the name of tradition, men had for long suppressed women and had deprived them of their rightful place in society. Even in the mid-nineteenth century, women had absolutely negligible rights in Indian society and had to be subjugated to their husbands and others in society. Literacy among women was not given any importance in Indian society as a woman's role as a male caretaker, wife or mother only took precedence. Even today, in many remote villages and very conservative households, women are supposed to cover their heads with the 'pallu' (one portion) of their saris (the traditional attire of women in India) in the presence of elders and are not allowed to voice their opinions freely or even express their desires freely in their household. This great Indian freedom fighter and poet Mahakavi Subramania Bharati brought to light the oppression against women in the male-dominated Indian society through his awe-inspiring songs on women empowerment wherein he envisaged a new strong woman of the future, who he termed as a 'new-age woman'. He envisaged the new-age woman as one who breaks free from all the chains that bind her to customs, traditions and age-old beliefs, as one who marches ahead confidently to find an identity of her own, one who walks hand in hand with her male counterpart, equal to him in all walks of life

Keywords: *Women, male-domination, Mahakavi Subramania Bharati, new-age woman, empowerment*

I. INTRODUCTION

Mahakavi Subramania Bharati was a pioneer of modern Tamil poetry (Tamil being the regional language spoken in South-India), besides being an Independence activist and social reformer, who sought to bring out changes in Indian society through his inspirational poems and songs that ranged from the fiercely patriotic to the deeply romantic, from the modestly intense devotion to the severe criticism of the social evils like caste system and oppression of women in society. His songs were popular amongst both the learned and the lay man for their simplicity and lyricism. He received a lot of inspiration from Sister Nivedita, a disciple of Swami Vivekananda, who worked for the upliftment of women and women's education. Her words on how one half of the society cannot expect to win freedom when it continues to enslave the other half had a profound impact on Bharati. He began to think of India as his own mother or Bharathmata, a sorrowful mother who was bound in chains and had to be freed by breaking the chains. To date, this great poet and song-writer's songs on Womanhood are celebrated in many parts of India on Women Empowerment Day. His songs are composed in his mother-tongue Tamil but have been translated into many other languages due to their popularity.

II. STATUS OF WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL INDIAN SOCIETY

A woman was not supposed to go out of the threshold of her house when her husband went out to work. She was supposed to blindly obey her husband and follow in his footsteps, and listen with respect to whatever the husband and other elders in the household wanted her to do. She was not supposed to go to school and get educated. She had to walk a few steps behind her husband. She was bound in child marriage and often gave birth to kids at a very young age soon after maturity. She was not supposed to have a mind of her own, nor voice any of her thoughts or views in public or even within her household. Many a times, she had to quietly bare ill treatment from her husband and other family members without being able to utter a word against them, as that was not expected of women in society. Even in the mid-19th century, woman had absolutely no rights in society and had to be subjugated to their husbands and others in society. At such a time, Bharati's thoughts and views aired through his songs and poems came as a clarion call to wake up and respect the women-folk in the society, as he felt that a country can grow only when its women are empowered

III. WHAT OUR VEDAS SAY ABOUT WOMEN

Bharati reminded everybody of what our ancient scriptures called the Vedas had declared centuries ago, that 'If we deny liberty to our women, there will be no life in this world'. He said that according our ancient Vedas, 'Every place where women are treated with respect, there God Himself dwells'.

Working for women's causes through inspiring poems and songs

He worked for the cause of women like shunning child marriages, supporting widow remarriage, right to women's education, equal treatment to women as meted out to men in society, right of women to enter politics, right of women to rise to high offices just as the men in society etc. He penned many songs and poems for the uplift of women in society like 'Penngal Vidudhalai', celebration of women's emancipation, and 'Pudumai Penn', in which he conceptualized the contemporary new-age women of tomorrow. He glorifies womanhood in his poetry and also followed what he preached in his real life. He encouraged his wife Chellamma and his two daughters to emerge from the recess of their inner courtyard and proudly stepped out of his house with his wife walking beside him hand in hand which was something unheard of as the women were supposed to walk a few steps behind their husbands in traditional Indian society. His hard-hitting songs, and powerful verses combined classical and contemporary elements and expressed a progressive and reformist zeal and ideal that endeared him to many. He employed novel artistry in weaving and communicating his ideas through his songs.

Bharati's song 'Endha neramum nin maiyyal'

In this song, Bharati talks of women's liberation and speaks about the status that the society needs to give to women, be it women belonging to one's house or outside.

Bharati's song 'Puthumai Penn' meaning the 'New-Age Woman' or the woman of future India

Lyrics:

Kolu bommaizhaai irundavalai
Gopuraththil etriya darkku samayal arayil davamai irundavalai)
Saadhanaigal pala seibavalai matriyadarkku
Veetu koodil adai pattu kidandavalai
Randu irrakkai katti parakka seidadarkku
Prasavaaspathriyaikutthaihaiedutthavalai
Piravi payan petravalai maatriyadarkku
Pala thuraiyil avalin munnetrathin kaatchi
Padli therchi vihidame Saakshi
Anbaal ulagai thirumbi parka seidha penn
Aadharavu atrorukku adaikalam thanda penn
Aaanukku adimaiyal kidandha penn
Avanukku nigarai valarum penn...

A description of Women in traditional Indian society

In the very first few lines, Bharati was referring to the women in traditional India, who have been just as good as dolls kept during the Navarathri festival in South-India. He continues with describing the women of his times, who have been from time immemorial adorning the kitchens in the households cooking different delicious meals for different members of her family. He addresses her who keeps doing so much selfless work and favours for the abandoned people in her family and relatives, without expecting any favours in return, and who always lived within the four walls of her home bound to her duties without stepping outside for a breath of fresh air or change of place. He deplores the state of the woman, who instead of flying high with the wings of freedom with her two hands, was instead doomed to give birth to so many offsprings one after the other, almost as if taking a maternity home on rent for repeated pregnancies, and be continuously dominated by the men folk. In his times, women had no access to education, no freedom of speech or movement; they lived in darkness in a corner of their homes, they adhered and followed the so-called 'endearing' qualities of fear (achcham) and shame (naanam), which foolish men had established as 'virtues' for women.

"Aanum Pennum Nigar Enakkollvathaal
Arivil O'ngi Ivvaiyagam Thazhaikkumaam"
This world will achieve excellence in knowledge
and wisdom by holding men and women equal.

Bharati-the crusader

Bharati was a crusader who defended commanding rights for women in society and strongly appealed for gender equality, and spoke up for women's freedom and equal rights in society. He demanded liberation for the women of India and imagined a new strong and smart Indian woman at the predecessor of society whom he termed as 'new-age woman' or 'pudumai penn'. He declared that the world will prosper in intelligence and ability only if both genders are treated equally

Bharati's Future Woman of India

Bharati looks ahead positively and cheerfully to the 'new-age woman' of tomorrow or the future India, who he envisaged will be equal to man in each and every field, and one who has surpassed herself and cut asunder all the bondages and chains that have bound her from so many years. He greeted the future woman of India as an emanation of 'Shiva', as a 'redeemer of mankind'; as one who would learn many new sciences and conquer even space; as one who would travel all around the world and bring all the new discoveries and learnings to India and work to make the country great; as one who would fearlessly destroy all the old rules, and superstitious beliefs that controlled her. She would walk hand in hand with her male counterpart, holding her head high, with an upright heart and undying spirit, with a steadfast look and strong ideas in the light of wisdom without faltering a step. The modern Indian woman would reach the pinnacles of learning and take to high levels of education and texts and show the path for scientific inventions that smooth the advance of human life. He also says that looking at the woman of future India, all those who underestimated a woman's capabilities, thinking them to only be fit to be locked in the confines of their homes and do their duties, would hang their heads in shame for their hypocritical assumptions. Bharati spoke up for the cause of women at a time when India was crying for reforms and Indian women were barely acknowledged for their existence. Bharati's words and lyrics through the medium of his songs came as a clarion call to wake up and respect women folk as he felt strongly that a country could grow only if and when its women were emancipated and empowered. His songs inspired the women to come out of their shackles and be brave and confident to speak up for their rights to equal treatment in society. His main theme was to free women who suffered inequality in the hands of men. Today, when we look back at Bharati's song on the 'new-age woman', what strikes us is that what Bharati had envisaged about the future woman of India years ago, has almost become a prophesy. Something that he clearly saw so long back has today become a reality, as today in India, women have come out of the shackles that have limited them and have risen far above with equal freedom as man in society. Today Indian women like Kalpana Chawla and Sunita Williams have gone to space and conducted scientific research in space, throwing light on so many new discoveries and learnings, for the betterment of society. Today we have women pilots, women army officers, women fighter-jet pilots, police women, top Indian women entrepreneurs, women scientists, engineers who are doing India proud from both, within India and abroad.

Bharati's 'Panchali Sapatham' translated into English as 'Panchali's Pledge'

In Bharathiyyar's Panchali Sapatham, Bharati reimages the pivotal Game of Dice incident in the grand epic of India, 'The Mahabharata', where Yudhishthira, the eldest of the Pandavas is coerced into playing a treacherous game of dice by Duryodhana, his envious cousin and Shakuni his cunning uncle, and loses his kingdom, his wealth, his brothers, and finally his and his brothers' wife Panchali or Draupadi, leading to her disrobing by his evil cousins and the divine intervention of Lord Krishna, who came and saved her from humiliation and injustice. Enraged at the quiet indifference of those present in the assembly at her plight, Panchali finally takes a pledge to avenge her ignominy with the blood of the Kauravas, the evil cousins of the Pandavas, by waging a war against them and defeating them. Bharati compares Panchali (Draupadi) with Bharata matha, the Paandavas with the Indians, the Kauravas with the British and the Kurukshetrwar of Mahabharat to that of the Indian freedom struggle. He visualised Draupadi to India and Indian women, who were held by slavery and social clutches of the society. The first part of 'Panchali Sapatham' was published in 1912 and the second part came after twelve years. Bharati's depiction of Panchali or Draupadi in the Indian epic Mahabharata, was akin to the depiction of Mother India who was like a mother to the scores of her children, and who was torn apart because of the social evils that differentiated them and the gender inequalities that existed in India. In other words, the figure of Draupadi or Panchali is symbolic of Mother India who is deprived of her freedom and also of the Indian woman who suffers indignity and oppression in the name of tradition. Panchali is also the manifestation of the Mother Goddess Shakti, who has come down to earth to vanquish evil and uphold goodness and truth. By invoking Goddess Shakti, the good triumphs over the evil and all the crises get resolved. Just as the Pandava queen Panchali wins freedom for herself and her husbands, the Pandavas after winning the war of righteousness, the citizens of India, Bharati says, will unite despite their differences and win freedom for their country, their Mother India and women will break free from the shackles imposed by patriarchy and liberate themselves, and find their rightful place in the male-dominated Indian society.

Justice for women in Bharati's Panchali Sapatham and how Panchali suffered at the indifference to her suffering(the background story):

By relating this story, Bharati wanted to convey to all how, many a times, woman in ancient India had to suffer injustices at the hands of men, without being able to fight it out herself, and how even people and kings of great repute and honour could never speak up a word to keep up her honour in the front of a large group of people, when her honour was being violated and the proper code of conduct was broken.

The five Pandava brothers were married to one queen Draupadi or Panchali, the undisputed beauty and daughter of the famous King Drupada. The envious cousins of the Pandavas, called the Kauravas, whose eldest was Duryodhana was envious of all the glory, popularity and valour of the Pandavas and enticed them to a treacherous Game of Dice, along with his uncle Shakuni, to strip the Pandavas of all their honour and glory.

When the Pandava King lost the Game of Dice, he had to stake his kingdom, lands, and many honours after which he was forced to stake his own queen Panchali. The honourable queen Panchali, who was an embodiment of beauty and grace, was reduced to a mere stake in the Game of Dice, and Duryodhana insulted the Pandavas and Panchali by summoning to his charioteer that she be brought to him in front of the entire assembly.

The Queen's fight for justice and the agonising words of a woman wronged.

Panchali refused to come to the Assembly saying that the King Yudhisthira had surrendered the right to pledge her as he had already lost his kingdom and had staked and lost himself in the vile and inappropriate Game of Dice. She reiterated that she was the daughter of the esteemed King Drupada, and stated that as Yudhisthira had lost his Crown and position as a King, he could no longer call her his queen to stake her in the game. When the charioteer was summoned to bring Panchali to the Assembly, she cried out in agony asking if there was not even a single person present in the large assembly of learned and renowned Kings and Teachers who would raise his voice against this wrong code of conduct and violation of a queen's honour. She reminded them that the Kings were supposed to protect the honour of their people and their happiness should be their prime concern. She questioned those Elders and Teachers in the Assembly who were famous for their Grace, Mercy, Kindness and Penance, asking them if they too would be a quiet spectacle to the great injustice taking place before their very eyes. The charioteer repeated Panchali's words verbatim to Duryodhana, but still there was a complete silence in the Assembly, and not a single person spoke up for the gorgeous queen whose dignity was at stake. Next Duryodhana summoned his evil brother Duhshasana, to bring Panchali to the Assembly. When Panchali tried to talk sense to him by reminding him that it was not befitting for a King to possess his brother's wife, or summon her in such an indignified manner before the entire assembly, and outrage her honour, Duhshasana, true to his devilish nature, dragged Panchali ruthlessly by her long tresses to the Assembly. She fell into a swoon with a scream of terror, but Duhshasana continued dragging her in this manner upto the Assembly in absolute disgrace. The people on the way only exclaimed that it was a torturous sight indeed but none did anything to stop this act. At the Assembly, the queen Panchali cried in anguish, asking her husbands if this was the fate that she, the honourable daughter of Drupada was destined to after they conquered her hand in marriage and married her before the sacred fire following the rites. She wailed asking if none in the Assembly had the courage to stop this shameful act and bitterly implored and requested for justice to be shown to a queen. When Vikara spoke up for Panchali saying that this was a heinous crime by Duryodhana and it will result only in his own downfall and defeat in war, Duhshasana shamefully began peeling off the sari in which Panchali was draped. The entire assembly witnessed this injustice without uttering a word in her favour. Panchali, a pious and devout woman that she was, cried out to Lord Krishna for her help and for protecting her honour, and lo and behold the sari became an unending stream of cloth and Duhshasana fell down exhausted in a heap of cloth. Everybody knew that Lord Krishna had saved Panchali's honour and cried out aloud with folded hands uttering Om Shakti, Om Shakti! , witnessing this miraculous spectacle! Panchali pledged to avenge this heinous act by declaring that she would tie up her tresses only after the blood of Duhshasana and Duryodhana was mixed with it, when they were vanquished and killed by the Pandavas in the war at kurukshetra.

IV. CONCLUSION

Bharati's magnum opus poem Panchali Sapatham was an architecturally perfect poem that had the intensity of a tragic drama depicting how Mother India (Panchali) rose to fight against all the limitations and hurdles that tore her apart and won freedom for herself. It was also a poem with an epic sweep likening it to many instances in the Mahabharatha. This long poem consists of five cantos and is written using simple phrases, simple style, easily understandable rhythm and prosody, which marks a clear shift in sensibility and craft typical of the classical tradition. He talks of the injured and insulted queen Panchali, fighting to find her due place in the world of men, intended as a political allegory to the ongoing freedom movement and as an affirmation of the latent power in women. Similarly, Bharati wrote many poems and songs about Women Empowerment and threw a light on how the status of women was in traditional Indian society. To name a few more songs and poems, Penmai Vaazhgvendru, Viduthalaikku Magalir, Nenjukku Neethiyum, Thaga thaga vendru, Innum Oru murai

solven, Om Shakti Shakti,Thunbamilla nilayae etc were amongst Bharati's inspiring songs that helped empower the women of India and change her image as a strong, confident, and brave person that she is today.

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