

Theological Basis For Religious Harmony In India According To Subramania Bharati

The human community in all its levels: family, village, state, nation or world, has its right to live in harmony and in the spirit of fellowship. But this right is very often being violated. Here one should ask why and how it is so? Mostly this violation of harmony occurs due to religious fanaticism and exploitation of religion for vested political interest. It arises because of the fundamentalistic and communalistic attitude of a particular individual, group, organisation or political party against the other people of the same human community. It is expressed through suspicion, accusation, tension, fight, destruction, war, killings, etc. For example, the destruction of a mosque of the early Mughal period at Ayodhya on 6 December 1992 and the riots and killings following that event, and the communal tension that India experiences every year on that day do testify the above reasoning.¹

Should the people be divided in the name of God? Should there be strife, fight, war and killings in the name of religion? If so, what sort of God we believe in? What sort of religion we belong to? Or what is our idea of God and religion? These are the fundamental questions which emerge in today's context. Where are we going to look for an answer? How are we going to get a right understanding of God and religion which in turn can serve us as the theological basis for religious harmony in India? Though there are various answers given by different religions and thinkers in the history of the humankind, the answer of Subramania

1. For a detailed account of communal violence in India in 1995, see Asghar Ali Engineer, "Communal Violence in 1995 - I & II," in Hindu, Dec. 25 & 26, 1995, pp. 12 & 12.

Bharati (1882-1921), a Tamil poet-*bhakta*, stands out original and oriental in its nature. Bharati's answer is out of his authentic God experience and his sincere understanding of God and religion. We shall substantiate this from his writings and underline how this can serve even today as a valid theological basis for religious and communal harmony in India as well as in the world.

1. Bharati's Concept of God

Our poet-*bhakta* Bharati expresses his understanding of God as "One Only", *Paramporul onru*. This means "the Ultimate Being is One Only". He also uses other terms to refer to the only one God, namely, *Katavul, Iraivan, Iraivi, Tevan, Tevi, Teyvam, Icaan, Paran*, etc. According to him it is only one God who is sought after and named differently by various religions of the world. This idea is vivified in his invocation of God in the song *Putiya Attisuti* (The New Alphabetical List of maxims for beginners).² As he invokes and praises the one *Paramporul*, he says that Hindus speak of that one God as one who is in the mystic silence wearing the crescent moon and *atti*,³ and as one who is of dark colour reclining on the ocean of milk; Muslims speak of that one God as one who inspired Prophet Mohammed; and Christians speak of that one God as one who is the Father of Jesus Christ. The contention of Bharati is that yet the only one God is not fully realized by any one religion :

Though felt in symbols, yet unrealized,
In many forms and ways the religions seek,

The Supreme Being is One Only (*Putiya Attisuti: 1*).

2. See C. Subramania Bharati, "Putiya Attisuti", *Bharatiyar Kavitaikal, Vanathi Pathippagam, Madras, 1994, p. 194*. The collection of Bharati's poems has been published by the Government of Tamil Nadu as well as by different publishers. For a standard English translation of the same, see T. N. Ramachandran, ed., *Bharati Patalkal, Tamil University, Thanjavur, 1989*.

3. *Atti* is a flower-tree called *Bauhinia tomentosa* which is sacred to God Siva. Siva is so called as wearing a garland of flowers from the *atti* tree.

Bharati's faith in only one God and his understanding of that God in whom all opposites coincide (*coincidentia oppositorum*) is further authenticated in his definition of Sakti. In his article, "Rasa - The Key-Word of Indian Culture" which appeared in *Commonweal*, he writes:

For God is two-fold - Being and Energy, Masculine and Feminine, Absolute and Relative, Purusha and Shakti. In the unity of the these two aspects Existence becomes. And in the manifestations of Shakti, Existence moves and acts. It is eternal, this play, Leela, of Shiva, the Being and Shakti, His Energy.⁴

Bharati's vision of the Divine as both masculine and feminine challenges the male chauvinists and encourages everyone to have a wholistic idea of God. Hence, Siva and Sakti are not two different entities or Beings, but two aspects of one and the same God. Siva is the Being and Sakti is Siva's energy. For him, God of Hinduism is One Only. All the 'male deities' of Hinduism are nothing but different manifestations of Siva, and all the 'female deities' are nothing but different manifestations of Sakti. Both Siva and Sakti together make the God of Hinduism.⁵

Thus Bharati expressed his faith in only one God and at the same time accepted various manifestations of that one God in different names and forms both in Hinduism as well as in other religions. Further, his faith in only one God helped him to have a better understanding of other religions and call for unity among different religions, paving the way for religious harmony.

4. C. Subramania Bharati, "Rasa - The Key-Word of Indian Culture," in *Agni and Other Poems and Translations & Essays and Other Prose Fragments*, N. Natarajan, Madras, 1980, p. 69. The date of appearance of this article in *Commonweal* is not available.
5. For details, see Joseph Sebastian: *God as Feminine: Hindu and Christian Visions - A Dialogue*, St. Paul's Seminary Publications, Trichy, 1995, pp. 58-64; 89-109.

2. Bharati's Understanding of Religion :

Bharati did not give a definition of religion; but he spoke of everything connected with religion: God, human beings and the world. As a true patriot he equated patriotism with religion. In his article, "Patriotism and Religious Differences" published in *New India* on May 18, 1915, he writes: "It is commonplace that to the true patriot, his patriotism is part of his religion."⁶ He considered the nation as the Mother Goddess. Hence, all should unite under the umbrella of one religion to serve the Motherland:

Ofcourse, we must have our religious disputes. Religion is the one thing where conformity is more dangerous than in any other. But, in the service of the Motherland, we are all of one creed and one religion, one caste and one colour, one aim and one ideal. In the temple of the Mother whoever enters is holy.⁷

If this be the understanding of the relationship between the religions and the country, is it possible to exploit religion for vested political interests and create communal disharmony in the name of religion?

Bharati was a prophet who denounced all evils, such as superstition⁸ and caste system,⁹ practiced in the name of religion in order to purify it. Above all he was a poet -

6. C. Subramania Bharati, "Patriotism and Religious Differences", in *Agni and Other poems and Translations & Essays and Other Prose Fragments*, p. 88.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

8. See C. Subramania Bharati, 'Muta Bhakti', in *Bharatiyar Katturaikal*, Vanathi Pathippagam, Madras, 1986, p. 12.

9. See C. Subramania Bharati, 'Narkulam', 'Paraiyar', 'Pancamar', 'Jathikkulappam', 'Jathipeta Vinotankal' and 'Brahmanan Yar' in *Bharatiyar Katturaikal*, pp. 390-404; see also 'The Crime of Caste' (October 6, 1916 'Commonweal'), in *Agni and Other Poems and Translations & Essays and Other Prose Fragments*, pp. 76-79.

bhakta who lived out his religion by surrendering himself totally to God. Though he was a Hindu, he never despised other religions and thus challenges every fundamentalist who creates communal disharmony in the name of religion today. He sang of Jesus Christ and Allah; he praised Guru Gobinda Singh, the last *Guru* of Sikhism;¹⁰ and he also spoke about Buddhism and Jainism on many occasions. We analyse here briefly his sincere understanding of the world's three major religions: Hinduism, Christianity and Islam, and spell out how his broadminded understanding of other religions challenges every religious fundamentalist today.

2.1. *Hinduism* :

Only those who do not rightly understand and sincerely belong to their own religion, will have hatred towards other religions. Bharati had a right knowledge of Hinduism to which he sincerely belonged. In his introduction to his translation of Bhagavad-Gita into Tamil his understanding of Hinduism is made very clear.¹¹ According to him Hinduism is basically a way of life. Following Sankara, he groups Hinduism into six religions on the basis of the acceptance of the Vedas, in his article "Sakti Dharmam".¹²

His understanding of Hinduism is further explained in his laudatory verses on *Hindu Matabimana Cankattar* [The Members of the Hindu Religion-centered Organisation]¹³ at

10. See C. Subramania Bharati, 'Guru Gobindar', Bharatiyar Kavitaikal, Vanathi Pathipagam, Madras, 1994, p. 69.

11. See C. Subramania Bharati, Bhagavath Geethai: Dissertation in simple Tamil, Narmaddha Pathippagam, Madras, 1988, pp. 6-48. For the English translation of the same, see K. S. S., tr., 'A Preface to the Bhagavad-Gita,' in Subramania Bharati: Chosen Poems and Prose, ed. K. Swaminathan, All India Subramania Bharati Celebration Committee, New Delhi, 1984, pp. 326-349.

12. For details, see C. Subramania Bharati, 'Sakti Dharmam,' in Bharatiyar Katturaikal, pp. 12-18.

13. See C. Subramania Bharati, 'Hindu Matabimana Cankattar' Bharatiyar Katturaikal, p. 234.

Karaikudi, Tamilnadu, on 9—11—1919. Hinduism, according to him, is a great religion which believes in the truth that is explicated by the Vedas and *Sastras*. The truth is that the one *Paramporul* lives in all beings and things, and is the power behind every action in them. God is the luminous light of wisdom in human hearts. We are indeed divine and all our actions and thoughts are from God. We should resolve firmly in our mind that we are one with God and not separate from God; God shines within us; therefore, with our sword of wisdom we should cut ourselves away from all demons like falsehood, baseness, wrath, indolence, worry, confusion, empty wish, anguish, fear, doubt, etc. We must live always in the light of everlasting bliss, do good to living beings and attain immortal life here on earth.

Bharati further affirms that Hinduism is the rarest of all rare things and it is a goodly aid to those loving persons who seek that which grants glorious life. If people fail to comprehend it and do not follow its true and wise words, then they will fall into the hell known as worry and will suffer without end, and die.¹⁴ Thus he understood Hinduism as a way of life leading people to earthly happiness and heavenly bliss.

2.2. Christianity

As Bharati was a sincere believer and practising Hindu, he was also an admirer of other religions. He praised Jesus Christ and discussed Christian ideals in his writings.¹⁵ He accepted Jesus Christ as God. Further, his understanding of Christian doctrine is well expressed in his song *Iyecu Kiristu* [Jesus Christ].¹⁶ In this song he expresses the life

14. Ibid.

15. See JORA, Bharati, *um Kristavamum*, Prem Pathippagam, Madras, 1990, p. 13-14.

16. See C. Subramania Bharati, 'Iyecu Kiristu', *Bharati, ar Kavitaikal*, p. 174.

and mission of Jesus Christ in a nut shell: (Jesus came into the world, died on the cross in fulfilment of the will of God and rose from the dead on the third day :

The Lord came and died upon the cross

And rose up from the dead on the third day

(*Iyacu Kiristu* : 1).¹⁷

Bharati further refers to Mary Magdalene's witness to the resurrection of Jesus which is reported in all the Gospels. From this message he instructs his countrymen that one should shed the pride of self so that one can experience God's protection and gain victory over all evils.¹⁸ He illustrates the encounter of the risen Lord Jesus with Mary Magdalene in a telling way: by seeing the glorious and radiant face of the risen Lord Jesus in the form of the Spirit, Mary Magdalene experienced the greatest and most ecstatic bliss.¹⁹

Bharati also speaks of the theology of the cross and resurrection: If one ties one's senses fast to the cross called truth and hammers them down with the nails of austere penance, one will be able to win over the sinful influences and attain Jesus Christ who is the eternal virtue to be cherished and revered, and obtain the glorious life in

17. See the corresponding reference in Phil 2:6-8, where it is said: "Jesus Christ, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross". In another context, when St. Paul writes to the Corinthians, he authentically states that the resurrection of Jesus is the basis of Christian faith, saying: "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain" (1 Cor 15:14).

18. See C. Subramania Bharati, *Iyacu Kiristu*, 'Bharatiyar Kavithaikal', p. 174; see also Mt 28:1-8; Mk 16:1-8; Lk 24:1-9; Jn 20:1-2.

19. Ibid.; see also Jn 20:11-18.

heaven; if one sheds all forms of evil, one will be also rewarded by Jesus with a resurrected life.²⁰

In his essay titled *Kamathenu*, Bharati deals with the importance of hope in human life. In that same article under the sub-title *Ciluvai* [The Cross],²¹ he narrates the reasons why, how and by whom Jesus was crucified. He further writes that Jesus Christ proclaimed liberation with the faith in the God who sent him. By crucifying Jesus his enemies thought that they had put an end to Christianity. But on the contrary, it has now spread all over the world.

There are also other instances where Bharati refers to Jesus Christ or Christianity. In his article *Iyecuvin Varttai* [The Word of Jesus],²² he comments on Gandhiji's sermon quoting an instance from the life of Jesus (see Mt 19:16-30; Mk 10:17-30; Lk 18:18-31) where a man came and asked Jesus what should he do to inherit eternal life. As Jesus replied by saying that through the observance of the commandments of God one can inherit the kingdom of God, the man responded mentioning he had kept all the commandments of God since the days of his youth. Then Jesus pointed out that he should sell all his property and give it to the poor and then follow him. Since he was rich, he became sad. Looking at him Jesus remarked 'it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich human person to enter the kingdom of God'.²³ Looking at his disciples, Jesus praised and promised them that 'every one who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and inherit eternal life'.²⁴ Finally, Bharati

20. Ibid.; see also Acts 2:38-40.

21. See C. Subramania Bharati, 'Kamathenu Ciluvai' in *Bharatiyar Katturaikal*, p. 30-31.

22. See C. Subramania Bharati, 'Iyecuvin Varttai', in *Bharatiyar Katturaikal*, pp. 62-65; also see JORA, *Bharatiyum Kiristavan.um*, pp. 24-27.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.; see also Mt 19:16-30; Mk 10:17-30; Lk 18:18-31.

concludes what Jesus meant was that by attaining the grace of God, one receives all other riches of this world.²⁵ Thus we find that Bharati had a good knowledge of Christianity.

7.3. Islam

Bharati's idea of Islam can be traced from his poem *Allah*²⁶ and from his talk on *Islam Markkattin Makimai* [The Glory of of Islam].²⁷ In both he highlights the basic tenets of Islam and its doctrines.

In his song *Allah*,²⁸ Bharati speaks of Allah as the Light beyond human expression and comprehension. It is due to his command that the whole universe keeps moving together with all the planets in the space:

The millions and millions of planets
In all directions in the infinite space
Ceaselessly roll due to your command, Lord!
You are great Light! (*Allah:1*)
Beyond all human words and thinking.

He further brings out the characteristics of Allah. Allah is so merciful that everyone may approach him and worship him. The merit of the person does not matter because even the ignorant, the untruthful, the evil-doers, the profligate and the unjust can kneel before him and receive his favours. Allah removes the terror of death from his believers.²⁹

Bharati continues to illustrate the benefits that believers in Allah may enjoy in their life. Those who praise the

25. See C. Subramania Bharati, 'Iyecuvin Varttai', in *Bharatiyar Katturaikal* p. 65.

26. This song was sung by Bharati when he delivered a talk on *Islam Markkattin Makimai* [The Glory of Islam.] to a Muslim audience on 20-6-1920 at Pottai Pudur in Tamil Nadu, South India.

27. See C. Subramania Bharati, 'Islam Markkattin Makimai' in *Bharatiyar Katturaikal*, pp. 65-74.

28. See C. Subramania Bharati, 'Allah', *Bharatiyar Kavitaikal*, p. 174.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

name of Allah are freed from fear and always enjoy happiness in life. Allah is the father of the rich and the poor. He is also a unique *guru*:

Peerless father to the rich and the poor,
 Unique *guru* who removes the wants of timid and
 heroic;
 Live for ever immersed in joy and free from fear.
 Praising His name, Allah, Allah, Allah!³⁰

In *Islam Markkattin Makimai*, Bharati summarizes in a nutshell the life and call of the Prophet Mohammed, his basic teachings and the birth and glory of Islam.³¹ Islam, according to him, is defined in the words of Prophet Mohammed as *bhakti*. It is the real, continuous, deep and unwavering *bhakti* to Allah which is Islam. Those who remain in Islam will attain eternal life called *mukti*.³² The Koran contains not the words of the Prophet Mohammed but the word of Allah given to him through an Angel. Prophet Mohammed was only an instrument of Allah to announce His message to the world. Prophet Mohammed accepted the original part of the Old Testament which is common to the Jews and the

30. This third stanza of the song which we are citing here is not found in the general collections of Bharati's poems which we are using. This is found in RAMACHANDRAN, T. N. ed., Bharati Pataikal, pp. 314-315. There is a note given as follows: 'The third stanza of this poem was recently discovered. Its translation is by R. E. Asher. The Tamil original was sung by Bharati before a Muslim gathering in Pottal Pudur on 20-6-1920. The song was also published in a monthly called Katha Ratnagaram in its issue of July 1920.'

31. See C. Subramania Bharati, 'Islam Markkattin Makimai,' in Bharatiyar Katturaikal, p. 72.

32. It is interesting to note how Bharati is able to apply certain Hindu vocabularies like *guru*, *bhakti*, *mukti* to explain Islam and its theology. The same integral approach is also seen when he calls Hinduism 'Hindu Church' and its message 'gospel of expansion and illumination.' See C. Subramania Bharati, 'The Service of God: The Two Ideals,' in Agni and Other Poems and Translations & Essays and Other Prose Fragments, pp. 57-59.

Christians as the basis for Koran. Bharati also gives a summary of the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed: 'there is no other Allah except Allah; and Mohammed is the only Prophet of Islam'. When he refers to the flight of the Prophet Mohammed from Mecca to Medina, he praises the courage and confidence that Mohammed had in Allah who had called him for this mission.³³

3. Bharati's Call for Religious Harmony in India :

To the extent Bharati stood for national integration as a patriot, to the same extent he also propagated religious harmony by calling for unity among different religions in India. He never confined himself within the boundaries of Hinduism and even less within the limits of any particular sect. Born in a Saivite family, he sang so much on Lord *Kannan/Krishna* and was a worshipper of Sakti. His aim was to bring the whole of humanity to the feet of the only one God. His commitment to religious harmony made him proclaim that he was a Hindu, as well as a Christian, a Muslim and a Jew.³⁴

3.1. Call for Unity within Hinduism

First of all, Bharati calls for unity within Hinduism. In his article *Yaraittoluvatu?* [Whom to worship?],³⁵ he writes that Hinduism aims at worshipping only one God even though it accepts various manifestations of that one God. Worship of only one God gives not only a proper orientation to an individual but also serves him/her as a better way to *bhakti*. He points out that an orthodox Saivite or an orthodox Vaishnavite can worship Siva or Vishnu accordingly; but, if one accuses the other because he/she worships God in an-

33. Ibid.

34. See AKKUR ANANDACARI, *Kaviccakkaravarti Subranania Bharati Caritam*, Kittappa Malar Putthakalayam, Senkottai, 1936, p. 61.

35. See C. Subramania Bharati, 'Yaraittoluvatu' in *Bharatiyar Katturaikal*, pp. 1-5.

how can we act or do anything against our own brother or sister and create communal disharmony in the name of God? Secondly, each religion is unique and whole in itself. In comparison with other religions, one religion may have differences in some way or other. Therefore, we cannot and should not look for uniformity among religions, rather only unity. Also, no religion can claim superiority over the other religion and be the cause of disharmony in the community. Thirdly, all citizens of India are the children of Mother India. Though we belong to different religions, we have only one aim and one ideal, that is to serve our Mother India and her children. If we are divided among ourselves, then who will serve and save her and her children? Let me conclude with the words of Bharati:

In the service of the Motherland, we are all of one creed, one religion, one caste and one colour, one aim and one ideal. In the temple of the Mother whoever enters is holy.⁴²

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42. See C. Subramania Bharati, 'Patriotism and Religious Differences,' in *Agni and Other Poems and Translations & Essays and Other Prose Fragments*, p. 88.