



Bharati (extreme right) in 1917 with wife Chellammal, daughter Sakunthala (seated) and (standing) daughter Thangammal, friends Ramu and Vijayaraghavan | Photo Credit: [The Hindu Archives](#)

**Tomorrow is Tamil poet Bharati's birth anniversary. In a year that celebrates not only his death centenary but also his friend VOC's sesquicentennial, a look at how their two lives merged and diverged**

V.O. Chidambaram Pillai (VOC) took great pride that Ottapidaram, his home village, was right next to the valiant Kattabomman's Panchalankurichi. Subramania Bharati hailed from the zamindari of Ettayapuram, infamous for betraying Kattabomman, a story about which Bharati never wrote a word. Ottapidaram and Ettayapuram are barely 30 km apart and, although family

friends, VOC and Bharati never met in their hometowns.

Instead, their first meeting was in Chennai. One day, in late 1906, as he was walking past Popham's Broadway, VOC saw the office of *India*, the weekly edited by Bharati. He stepped in and met the poet, beginning a friendship marked not only by mutual admiration but sharp disagreements as well. At 34, VOC was a full 10 years older than Bharati, but that did not come in the way of his recognising the poet's genius. Decades later, VOC would generously credit Bharati for fanning the flicker of patriotism in his heart into a raging fire.

When the two first met, few would have predicted what the near future had in store for them. The times were extraordinary, and the freedom struggle was at the cusp of its first phase of mass mobilisation. VOC was soon to launch a spectacular swadeshi venture – a shipping company. The year following their meeting was consumed by intense touring, as VOC strained every nerve to raise capital for his shipping line. Not only did Bharati share the platform with VOC many times, he chronicled VOC's venture in his journals, often giving idealistic, if impractical, advice.

In December 1907, a stormy Congress session was held in Surat, providing an occasion for the two to bond further. Politically, the two were in the same camp, led by Lokmanya Tilak. After meeting Tilak, Aurobindo and other leaders for the first time, VOC and Bharati returned home with redoubled energy.

In the months following the Surat split, the Swadeshi movement peaked. It seemed as though patriotic propaganda and not steam propelled VOC's ships. Their spirit was spurred with Subramania Siva joining VOC, creating what the historian of Tamil public speaking, Bernard Bate, calls 'oratorical incandescence'. VOC and Siva forged Tamil as the medium of political communication. Tuticorin and Tirunelveli were afire with daily public meetings attended by thousands. As the British India Steam Navigation Company was given a run for its money, VOC opened another front. He led a strike in the British-owned Coral Mills, clinching all the workers' demands.

### **Charged with sedition**

Now, the British swung into action. When district collector L.M. Wynch summoned VOC and threatened him, VOC stood his ground – a dramatic confrontation captured brilliantly by Bharati in two poems ('What Collector Wynch Told Chidambaram Pillai' and 'Chidambaram Pillai's Reply to Collector Wynch'). On 12 March 1908, VOC was arrested along with Siva, and the next day Tirunelveli and Tuticorin erupted in violence as patriotic mobs torched government property, in what became known as the 'Tirunelveli Riots'.

VOC was charged with sedition. Bharati travelled to Tirunelveli and after meeting VOC in prison, penned a memorable report on it. Alluding to Kamban's Ramayana, he said that VOC resembled Rama: 'his face a lotus in full bloom unchanged whether it was the news of coronation or exile'. While the outcome of the prosecution was a foregone conclusion, the actual sentence beggared belief. VOC was – in Bharati's words – "sentenced to transportation for life, twice, so to say, or as the people accustomed to the Indian transmigration theory jokingly said, 'for two lives!'"

The draconian sentence was a clear message to the freedom fighters; taking the cue, Bharati took refuge in French-ruled Pondicherry. But his campaign for VOC's political project continued. Bharati raised two funds – one for VOC's defence and another to save VOC's sinking shipping venture.



V.O. Chidambaram | Photo Credit: RAJESH N

VOC's travails continued in prison. A vindictive government put him to work on the oil mill, provoking Bharati to write the memorable poem, 'Thanneer vittu valarthom...' To true patriots, he added, the jail where VOC was lodged was a site of nationalist pilgrimage.

The double-life imprisonment being judicially unsustainable, VOC's sentence was reduced on appeal, and he was released in December 1912. But it would be 18 months before VOC visited Pondicherry to meet his friend. It could not but have been an

emotional reunion. A police report indicates that during the three days that VOC stayed at Bharati's home, the two were 'busily engaged in reading and writing'.

Anti-colonialism was not the only politics of the age. There were other contentious ideological issues to reckon with. A burning issue was the politics of identity centred on language and caste. In mid-1915, VOC and Bharati were involved in a bitter polemical exchange in the pages of *Jnanabhanu*, the monthly edited by their common friend Siva. Drawing attention to the lack of aspirates in the Tamil alphabet, Bharati proposed a reform of the Tamil script so that foreign words could be more accurately rendered.

The proposal was well meant but Bharati's tone and his reference to Aurobindo's ridicule of the peculiarities of the Tamil alphabet stung many a Tamil enthusiast. VOC's response was sharp. Asserting that the Tamil script was meant to write Tamil, not other languages, he argued that script reform does violence to languages. In a sharp barb, he further wondered why calls for Tamil language reform always emanated from partisans of Sanskrit. Bharati was hurt: in his brief response, he held that change was inevitable if language was to progress. But their bond ran too deep to be ruptured by ideological disagreements.

The defeat of the Swadeshi movement had taken its toll. As VOC struggled to earn a living while still fighting for freedom, an emotionally broken Bharati ended his claustrophobic exile to spend his last days in Chennai.



Meanwhile, a political fissure too was brewing. Gandhi's rise left Tilak's followers disoriented. While Tilak's Maharashtrian followers swerved towards the Hindu Mahasabha, his Tamil followers turned to Gandhi, with Bharati unreservedly calling him the Mahatma. VOC remained a diehard Tilak-ite. What effect this may have had on their friendship is a moot question.

In 1920, with the shipping magnate of 1908 moving to Coimbatore to take up a low-paid clerical job, opportunities to meet ceased. In September 1921, Bharati died, a news that VOC read only in the papers.

In 1933, three years before his death, VOC penned a short memoir on his friend. Published posthumously, it remains exemplary for its truthfulness and honesty. With great self-effacement, VOC pays tribute to the genius of Bharati.

It is customary for ardent Saivites to listen to Thiruvachakam in their last moments. VOC chose Bharati's songs instead. A more fitting tribute can scarcely be scripted.

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