As a rationalist of the Dravidian Movement led by Periyār E.V. Ramasamy, Bharatidasan had no faith in God, distrusted religion and attacked all the Purāṇas, legends, myths and rituals associated with Hinduism, while as a Romanticist he stressed the potential power and good in human nature. A relentless attack on the personal God, institutionalized religion, superstitions and a glorification of the human being as the very centre of all life and all experience characterize his poems, dramas, and short stories. The Vedas and the Upanishads, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were anathema to him as he firmly believed that they came into being to promote the interests of the Aryans and to denigrate the Dravidians. The Ramayana, especially, came under heavy fire since Kamban’s work was gaining, during his time, increasing attention as a repository of the Hindu faith. The leaders of the Self-Respect Movement conceded its greatness as a work of art but severely condemned it on the ground that it perpetrated the myth of Brahmin superiority presenting the Aryan Rama as a great hero and the Dravidian Ravana as a despicable villain.
Bharatidasan never missed an opportunity to assail the Ramayana. "Cañjīvi Parvatattin Čāral" is a full-length satiric attack on one of the episodes in the epic which eulogizes Hanumān's physical strength displayed in his carrying the Cañjīvi hill over a long distance to help Rama save the lives of his companions including Lakshmana. It is an exquisite narrative poem ridiculing the Tamils' blind faith in the tale and its import and lampooning the Kathakālakshēpadam exponents, who, in order to earn their livelihood, wax eloquent over the story proclaiming its veracity. The setting enables the poet to include a few broadsides on all the Purānas and religious works:

Mighty tomes of Purānas to perpetuate splits!  
Fitting Ithihasas that favour caste-quarrels!

What can these fables feigned do?  
Can they shake a single sesame seed?

Now only do I know there is on earth  
A tale enervating called Ramayana;  
Now only do I realise there exist  
Selfish historians selling stories false  
Causing the country's fall.

The poet used the Ramayana episode to drive home the message that the country won't prosper if its teeming millions are going to cherish so many of their superstitions. Towards the end of the poem, Kuppan becomes the poet's mouthpiece when he asks:
Of what avail is the large population of thirty-three crores in this big nation which can boast of the great Himalayas, the perennial Ganges, the grand Potiyai in the sweet Tamilnadu, paddy fields, sugarcane plantations and plenty of fruit-bearing trees? Of what use are its natural resources? When will its stupid, endless sleep vanish? When will it prosper?

The reader of the poem would do well to remember what Aldous Huxley wrote in 1926 on what happened in Varanasi on the occasion of the solar eclipse of which he was an eye-witness:

To save the sun (which might, one feels, very safely be left to look after itself) a million of Hindus will assemble on the banks of the Ganges. How many, I wonder, would assemble to save India? An immense energy which, if it could be turned into political channels, might liberate and transform the country, is wasted in the name of imbecile superstitions. Religion is a luxury which India, in its present condition, cannot possibly afford. India will never be free until the Hindus and the Moslems are as tepidly enthusiastic about their religion as we are about the Church of England. If I were an Indian millionaire, I would leave all my money for the endowment of an Atheist Mission.

In two of his short poems, Bharatidasan projects the image of Ravana as a great Tamil hero. In "Virattamilan" (The Heroic Tamil), he defends the deeds of Ravana and condemns Vibhishana as a traitor:

I see the south; words fail me utterly.
My heart and shoulders swell with soaring pride!
The warrior-Tamil, once lord of Lanka!
Famed in all the ten directions of his faces!
With shoulders that lift hills and hands that give,
Most dreaded god of death to fox-like foes!
My Tamil ancestor! My Tamil leader!
Ravana the great! This world knows his name!

If Ravana was ashamed of anything, it was of being the elder brother of Vibhishana, who, in the poet's view, was a disgrace to the entire Tamil community. A fair fighter never resorting to foul strategies even while facing death, Ravana is a great musician, whose tongue utters the four Tamil Vedas. All genuine Tamils have to praise him; those who forget to do it are rogues. In the final stanza of the poem, Bharatidasan exhorts the Tamils not only to awake, arise and do heroic deeds to spread Tamil but to be vengeful and fight fiercely against all forces symbolising conspiracy, villainy and jealousy. And one of their prime tasks should, of course, be to sing the glory of Ravana's name.

"Uṉṇai Virkāte" (Don't sell yourself), besides being a tribute to Ravana, mounts a scathing attack on the cowards who pay only lip service to the country but are frightened of fighting for its freedom. He avers: "I shall sing the glory of Ravana of Lanka of the South and of Duriya deemed a devil though others may utter bitter words against them. Even if Duryodhanas are legion in this land of inaction, I shall rise to slay the Yama if he tries to kill them". And again he says,
It is not mean to translate one’s thoughts into deeds; it is the glory of the race of heroes! The warrior’s prime virtue is not to surrender at the feet of the foe. Duriya and Ravana were not cowards to suffer others ruling our land cherished with infinite love in our hearts. This is the virtue demanded from the descendants of Bharath.

In this poem written before Bharatidasan lost his faith in the oneness of India as a nation, he praises Ravana and Duryodhana for having been true to their hearts. The poet’s romantic leanings are evident in his glorification of their steadfast love for liberty and of their rejection of thoughts of surrender at the cost of their own lives. Here one would be reminded of Shelley’s view of Milton’s Satan:

Nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan as expressed in *Paradise Lost*. It is a mistake to suppose that he could ever have been intended for the popular personification of evil... Milton’s devil as a moral being is as far superior to his God, as one who perseveres in some purpose which he has conceived to be excellent in spite of adversity and torture, is to one who in the cold security of undoubted triumph inflicts the most horrible revenge upon his enemy... Milton has so far violated the popular creed (if this shall be judged to be a violation) as to have alleged no superiority of moral virtue to his God over his devil.

Shelley and Bharatidasan praise Milton’s Satan and Kamaban’s Ravana respectively for their courage, majesty and determined opposition to the omnipotent force.
Ignoring the popular view again, they accord a higher place to two other rebels. The great English romantic poet views Prometheus as "the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends". He prefers Prometheus to Satan because "the former is susceptible of being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement, which, in the hero of Paradise Lost, interfere with the interest". The Tamil poet, on the other hand, honours Hiranya by making him the hero of a great prose drama. Bharatidasan's Iranian Allatu Inaiyarrā Vīran presenting a rebel of the Hindu mythology as a benefactor of the Tamils deserves to be compared with Shelley's Prometheus Unbound portraying a rebel of the Greek mythology as a benefactor of the entire human race.

In "Ode to Liberty", a poem composed in 1820 and published with Prometheus Unbound, in the same year, Shelley writes,

Oh, that the free would stamp the impious name
Of king into the dust! or write it there,
So that this blot upon the page of fame
Were as a serpent's path, which the light air
Erases, and the flat sands close behind!

* * * *

Oh, that the wise from their bright minds would
In *Prometheus Unbound* itself, he paints a luxurious picture of the felicities which would succeed the destruction of the corrupt social, religious and political order. During this happy period

"Thrones were Kingless, and men walked
One with the other, even as spirits do...."

When thrones, altars, judgement-seats and prisons are all destroyed, men shall

In triumph o'er the palaces and tombs
Of those who were their conquerors, mouldering around.
Religion, which he calls "a dark yet mighty faith, a power
as wide as is the world it wasted..."

would then have vanished. At this joyous period,

"The loathsome mask has fallen; the man remains
Sceptreless, free, uncircumscrib'd but man
Equal, unclass'd, tribeless, and nationless,
Exempt from awe, worship - the King over himself".

"And women too, frank, beautiful, and kind,
As the free heaven, which rains fresh light and dew
On the wide earth;--A gentle radiant form,
From custom's evil taint, exempt and pure."

As is well-known, monarchy, religion, and superstition are
the major targets of Bharatidasan's attack also and woman's emancipation is a subject dear to his heart. In poem after poem, these themes are dealt with in a vast variety of settings and poetic forms.

Shelley knew that *Prometheus Unbound*, the lost drama by Aeschylus, dramatised the reconciliation of Jupiter with his victim Prometheus as the price of the revelation of the danger to his empire by the consummation of his marriage with Thetis. But Shelley was not interested in framing his story on this model as he hated the feeble catastrophe of reconciling the champion of mankind with its oppressor. He felt that "the moral interest of the fable, which is so powerfully sustained by the sufferings and endurance of Prometheus would be annihilated if we could conceive of him as unsaying his high language and quailing before his successful and perfidious adversary". There is, therefore, a reworking of the myth by Shelley in whose version Prometheus is presented as a relentless fighter bringing about the downfall of the tyrant Jupiter with the help of Demogorgon.

In Kamban's *Ramayana*, the story of Iranian... is a marvellous episode as it epitomizes the story of Ravana himself. It is told by Vibhishana who is pictured by Kamban as the most enlightened of the three brothers and as
an uncompromising champion of truth. He wants his mighty brother to learn a valuable lesson from the life of Iranian, who fell because of his arrogant refusal to accept the supremacy of Lord Vishnu. That Kamban can be as rapid as he can be slow is evident in the one hundred and seventy-five stanzas narrating breathtakingly the absorbing tale of the conflict between the pious Pirahalata and his atheist father. All the great boons conferred on the mighty giant do not come to his rescue when he loses his fight against his own child at whose prayer Lord Vishnu makes his appearance as Narasimha and tears the haughty king to pieces. Bharatidasan sees in the episode an ideal conflict between religion and atheism, between superstition and rationalism, between the cunning Aryas and the brave but innocent Tamils. In this story he finds the epitome of the epic battle between the Aryas and the more civilized Dravidians who finally had to succumb to the cowardly but unscrupulous aliens.

Iranian, as portrayed by Bharatidasan, very much like Prometheus, is the very personification of magnanimity. He is absolutely fearless though surrounded by a large group of wily Aryans who are successfully poisoning the minds of his Tamil subjects. A kind husband, a loving father and a generous leader, he listens
to the pleadings of his wife, waits for the reformation of his son, forgives the Aryan lady who is caught red-handed while attempting to kill him and allows his commander-in-chief to go scot-free even though the latter tells him a lie crediting the Aryans with supernatural powers. Iranian is all the time worried about the sea of blind faith which is threatening to engulf the Tamil country and about the possible wiping out of Tamil culture, Tamil tradition and Tamil literature by the Aryan machinations. His cup of sorrow is full when his own son falls a prey to them and turns against him. He makes a few moving speeches exhorting the Tamils not to be foolishly misled by the Aryans:

Iranian: (To his courtiers) Respected elders! I hope that no Tamil with the Tamil blood running in his veins will be ensnared by the wicked Aryans. We know how the Aryans creating conflicts and confusion have brought many kingdoms in this country under their control. Wherever they are influential, they have been attempting to destroy and tamper with the ancient Tamil writings and to black out the Tamil civilization.

I do not mind all of them coming together along with Nārāyaṇa and the other Devas they speak of. But as they happen to be cunning foxes and timid hermaphrodites, they may capture this world by hook or by crook; they may rule the world casting a spell over the entire human race. However, the fact that they hit at the backs of the Tamils will be remembered till the world lasts.

(The courtiers clap their hands)
Not only this. These Aryans may kill me by foul means. But I will say that the world won’t forget the heroism of the Tamil hero called Iranian. Later, the Aryans may tarnish my image and that of the Tamil heroes by their fables giving false accounts. But I hope the future generations of rationalist Tamils will find out the truth. None can put an end to the daily increase in the number of rationlists among the Tamils.

This is the message of Iranian as well as of the author of the drama. But Bharatidasan’s propagandist zeal does not in any way mar the prose drama as a work of art. Consisting of fifteen brief scenes, it never loses its grip over the attention of the reader. Besides Iranian, who wins our sympathy and love very early in the play, there are a few successful portraits. The army chief who is first blinded by his desire to win the hand of an Aryan lady and his ambition to become the ruler of the Tamil country redeems himself finally by killing her and sacrificing his own tainted life. Citrabānu, a pawn in the hands of her Aryan kith and kin, is able to deceive the gullible Pirahalātan effortlessly but what makes her memorable is her readiness to do anything for her community leading to her own death. These characters leave lasting impressions upon the reader’s mind and it should be said to the credit of Bharatidasan’s skill in characterization that they became the archetypes on whom the characters in many
later novels and dramas of the writers belonging to the Dravidian Movement were modelled.

If we are to look for an edifying and illuminating parallel to Bhartidasan’s portrayal of Irānian in the writings of Western romanticists, we may find it in Shelley’s presentation of Prometheus, though the two dramas are more unlike than like each other. Bharatidasan’s Irānian, free from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge and a desire for personal aggrandisement is closer to Shelley’s Prometheus than to Milton’s Satan or to Byron’s Cain. The play by Shelley, considered “a vast wilderness of beauty”, witnesses to Shelley’s lyrical rather than to his dramatic genius. Shelley himself calls it a lyrical drama. Its dramatis personae include the phantasm of Jupiter, the spirit of the earth, the spirit of the moon, spirits, echoes, fauns and furies. Prometheus is perhaps the only ‘character’ in the full sense of the term; others are abstractions. The fourth Act is but a sustained lyric praising the brave new world. Shelley’s revolutionary idealism finds its most eloquent expression here. His chief aim is to forecast that man alone can improve his status, becoming happier and wiser if he develops the virtues of love and forgiveness:
To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
To defy power, which seems omnipotent;
To love and bear, to hope till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;
This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire and Victory.

Though *Prometheus Unbound* is feeble as a drama, Shelley's achievement as a spontaneous myth-maker is evident in his use of the Prometheus myth presenting the great Titan as a great representative of mankind. He wages a selfless war against Jupiter, the guiding power behind evil institutions, the essence of orthodoxy and reaction, the chief enemy of man's aspirations. His willingness to forgive even Jupiter whom he once cursed, "a necessary prelude to liberation", reveals his greatness;

Disdain! Ah no! I pity thee. What ruin
Will hunt thee undefended through wide Heaven!
How will thy soul, cloven to its depth with terror,
Gape like a hell within! I speak in grief,
Not exultation, for I hate no more,
As then ere misery made me wise. The curse
Once breathed on thee I would recall.

His union with Asia indicates that man will have to combine wisdom, tolerance and endurance with love and creative power and live in harmony with Nature.

It is claimed by the admirers of Shelley that in *Prometheus Unbound* he succeeds in working his moral,
political and philosophical ideals into a well-knit poetic theme. He also successfully fuses the two sides of his nature, the rational and the emotional, which had inspired Queen Mab and Alaster. Bharatidasan also succeeds to a large extent in giving an artistic expression to his principles and contentions in Iranian Allatu Inaiyarra Viran. Maurice Bowra observes that in Prometheus Unbound, the old quarrel of poetry and philosophy is healed and the pallid abstractions of analytical thought take on the glow and the glory of visible things. But Shelley's success in this direction is not total. There are passages in which philosophy remains as philosophy and does not become poetry. And the charge of obscurity has also been justly levelled against a few passages.

Bharatidasan's poems and prose writings are characterized by a simple and clear language and his favourite themes do not warrant any complex metaphysical discussions. Nor is he interested in any abstract analysis for its own sake. Even when he rejects the belief in God and expresses his contempt for Hinduism, he does not care to build up his arguments in a subtle manner. He prefers hammer blows and slaps in the face to ambivalent statements and undercutting ironies. Yeats felt that Shelley's drama has a certain place among the sacred books of the world,
and to Herbert Read it is the greatest expression ever given to humanity's desire for intellectual light and spiritual liberty. Though Bharatidasan's drama may not win such recognition, it is as successful as Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* in its use of an ancient myth investing it with contemporary significance in as much as it became the progenitor of a host of novels, poems and dramas in Tamil dramatizing the confrontation between the Aryans and the Dravidians through similar characters and situations.

NOTES AND REFERENCES


All quotations from Bharatidasan's poetry are from this text and the translation is mine.

2 Bharatidasan, "Caṇḍīvi Parvatattin Cāral", p.15. The translation into English prose is mine.

3 Bharatidasan *Kavitaikal*, p.141.

4 Ibid., p.149.


7 Ibid., p. 252.

8 *Iranian Allatu Inaiyarra Viran* was first staged by Bharatidasan on 9-9-1935 and got into print in 1939. The text used for this essay was published by Pūmpukār Publishers, Madras in 1978. The English rendering of the passage quoted is mine.

9 Shelley, *Poetic Works*.

10 Ibid., pp. 208-09.