Abstract of the Talk

In this talk, I will draw from my current work on the Tamil poet Subramania Bharati’s poetics of embodiment. If Bharati’s overtly nationalist poems posit Bharat Mata/Mother India as an allegory of the people, it is an allegory that is shot through with anxiety and fragmentation that suggests Bharat Mata is only a fictional symbol of unity. But his major works “Kannan Pattu” (Songs to Kannan) and “Kuyir Pattu” (Songs to Cuckoo) that were composed during the height of his short writing career are ecstatic and dialectical engagements with otherness. These poems are couched in an *advaitic* idiom that captures the dialectical relationship between the *atman* and *brahman*; the *jivatma* and *paramatma* or the worldly self of the speaker/poet and a transcendental, immutable and universal Self that is both the subject that speaks through the poet/speaker and the object of the poem. The transcendental other in these poems, the cuckoo and Kannan/Krishna respectively, manifest themselves in manifold and often dualistic appearances (that are often the function of the poet/speaker’s own delusions) while at the same time transcending these appearances and oppositions to emerge as a symbol of an inclusive and open-ended self. I argue that in both these sets of songs, the transcendental and universal self is for Bharati an allegory for an authentic self that transcends all forms of human ignorance, anger, desire and fear to emerge as an empathetic ideal that sees itself in the other.