This paper explores the relationship between linguistic and political modernity in a discussion of the first flush of vernacular political oratory in India over the first two decades of the twentieth century. Specifically, it focuses on the political verbal art of Tamil's greatest modern poet, Subramania Bharati (1882-1921). Bharati's poetry eschewed the high forms of cultural production available only to a small literary elite and embraced folk language, song, and meter. In this way his language perfectly modeled some of the odd contradictions of and intimate connections between linguistic and political modernity: they are new but built with old forms that index cultural continuity through time; they involve signs that are transparent, intelligible to vast numbers of people and are thus fit for universal interpellation; they are produced by elite agents who articulate them as elements of the folk. And perhaps most importantly, his art was meant to link the masses to a large-scale modern social imaginary of a unified Tamil people stretching back in time to a vivid past and forward to a future of independence and freedom. As nation states so characteristically do. Overall the paper interrogates the relationship between poetic language, oratory, and the emergence of the mass political in a consideration of Bharati's verbal art.

About the Speaker: Bernard Bate explores the theory, ethnography, and history of political oratory and rhetoric in the Tamil worlds of South Asia. His first book, Tamil Oratory and the Dravidian Aesthetic, (Columbia, 2009/Oxford India, 2011), describes the production of political and literary oratory from the beginning of the dravidian movement through the early 1990s in Madurai where he conducted ethnographic fieldwork. A member of the inaugural faculty of Yale-NUS College, National University of Singapore, he is currently an External Faculty Fellow at the Stanford Humanities Center where he is completing a book on the genealogy of Tamil political oratory.