

A Citizen of The World

The death of the Rev. X. S. Thani Nayagam is a great loss, not only to his relatives and friends, but to Tamil Culture and the scholarly world in general. I first met him some twenty or twenty five years ago, and I last saw him in March 1980, when he was clearly ailing, although I did not realize—and nor, I think, did he—that the end was so near. I always made a point of seeing him during his visits to England, and several times, I had the pleasure of his presence in my home. I also stayed with him at Kuala Lumpur for a week or ten days in 1968, before he left Malaysia for Sri Lanka. His conversation was always a joy. Stimulating, witty and enlightening, but never malicious or prejudiced. He was in the best sense a “citizen of the world”, widely travelled in four continents and on seven seas. He was always alert and receptive to new ideas, people and places; but he was never deflected by them from his vocation as a Roman Catholic priest. His tolerant and irenic outlook was a deeprooted conviction with him, long before it became as fashionable in certain circles as it now is.

Other contributors to this volume can write with authority about his outstanding services to Tamil culture in general and to Tamil literature, in particular. Unfortunately, I do not know Tamil, but even an ignoramus in this respect like myself could not fail to be impressed by his achievements in this field, which can be glimpsed through his translations of Tamil Texts, in whole or in part. In the last letter which I received from him (dated 29th May, 1980) he wrote:

“My physical health is not of the best, but I like to be mentally active and am looking forward to the period after the operation for cataract. At present, I am able to work on Tamil Texts, which are printed in large type, but can hardly work with manuscripts and historical records”.

Alas, his wish was not destined to be realized. But although his premature death at the height of his intellectual powers, has deprived Tamil scholarship of one of its outstanding exponents, his extant work will remain his best monument and an inspiration for present and future workers in Tamil studies. As early as 1969, he had traced and catalogued about 120 booklets and books from the *Cartilha* printed at Lisbon in 1554 to the Tamil—English Dictionary of 1779, describing some of them for the first time. And this was only the “top of the iceberg” of his massively documented study

of Tamil printing from the mid 16th century to the late 18th. None of us who knew him well, irrespective of our individual race, class and creed, will ever forget him. We can say in the concluding lines of William Cory's poem *Heraclitus*:

**Still are thy pleasant voices,
Thy nightingales awake,
For Death he taketh all away,
But them he cannot take**

— C. R. Boxer