

A Foremost Sri Lankan Scholar

I like to speak about the life and work of the Rev. Prof. Thani Nayagam, a foremost Sri Lankan scholar of Tamil language and literature. The sad news of his passing in Sri Lanka a week ago, at the age of 67 has just reached us. Some Sri Lankans here may remember him as an old boy of St. Patrick's College or as a member of the Roman Catholic clergy in Colombo, or as a lecturer in Education at the University. I came to know him personally just over 25 years ago, when he joined the staff of the University of Ceylon. Later on he became Professor of Tamil at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, where I was Professor of Mathematics. The years we worked together at these two universities, and particularly the years in Kuala Lumpur, had brought us together a good deal, and our acquaintance grew into close friendship. After returning to Ceylon about 10 years ago, though living partly in retirement, he had continued to work as a Catholic Secular priest and remained active in matters concerning the Tamil language, literature and culture, which had been a main concern through most of his life.

Thani Nayagam had his early education in Ceylon, but went for specialised studies in Tamil at Annamalai University. His training for the Roman Catholic priesthood took him to Rome where he lived many years. His natural flair for languages enabled him while in Rome to study and master several languages. He could read and speak fluently some dozen languages, including French, German, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. He had also spent some years at the Institute of Education in London and obtained Ph. D. for a thesis on Education. His degree from Rome included D.D. or Doctor of Divinity.

With this broad background of training and influence, Fr Thani Nayagam was able to bring a modern outlook to problems of research into Tamil language, literature and culture. He used modern critical techniques of linguistic research into an area of study where long tradition had been the uncritical acceptance of points of view of distinguished predecessors. He inaugurated an International Journal, called *Tamil Culture*. Scholars from different parts of the world reported in this journal their research findings on matters concerning Tamil language, literature, history and culture.

As world-wide interest in Tamil studies grew, he raised with some of the leading scholars the possibility of an International Association of Tamil Research. The idea received warm support, and the association known as I.A.T.R.(International Association of Tamil Research) was inaugurated. Professor Filliozat of Paris was President.

The Vice-Presidents were Professors Burrow of Oxford, Emeneau of the U.S.A., Kuiper of the Hague, Meenakshisundaram of Madurai, and Varatharajan of Madras, all giants in the field of Tamil Studies. Thani Nayagam was appointed Secretary-General. The first in the series of Research Conferences was held in 1966 in Kuala Lumpur. The University and Government of Malaysia gave warm support, as Tamil is one of the four official languages of Malaysia, the others being Malay, Chinese and English. Fr Thani Nayagam did the hard work of organising the Conference. Both my wife and myself were members of a representative Organising Committee, and the Conference, opened by the Prime Minister Tunku Rahman, proved an enormous success, with all well-known scholars attending and with representatives from about 25 countries. The proceedings were later published in two expansive volumes. Subsequent conferences have been held approximately every three years; the second was in Madras, the third in Paris, the fourth in Jaffna, and the fifth in Madurai.

Besides the two particular contributions which Fr Thani Nayagam had made to International Tamil Studies, namely the Journal and the I.A.T.R., I should also refer to the number of scholarly books he has published, and to the number of students who have come under his influence and who may be expected to continue to work for the objectives which Fr Thani Nayagam had set himself. Sri Lanka has lost a distinguished son and the International Community of Tamil Scholars have lost their good friend.

Before I end this short personal tribute, I quote from a comment he made comparing certain languages:

“If Latin is the language of law, French the language of diplomacy, German the language of science, and English the language of Commerce, then Tamil is the language of Bhakthi.”

Bhakthi may be translated as ‘Devotion to the Sacred and the Holy.’ Coming from one who knew so many languages and who himself was a Roman Catholic priest, I regard that comment as very significant.

— C. J. Eliezer