

Xavier S. Thani Nayagam: His Malaysian Years (1961—1970)

Father, as we all loved to call him was appointed to the Foundation Chair in Indian Studies in the University of Malaya in 1961. When he took up this Chair and the direction of the growth and development of Indian Studies in that University, the position relating to the academic study of India, its civilization, language and literature, was far from satisfactory. The Department of Indian Studies had just been moved from Singapore and, though it had produced some very bright and able graduates, it lacked an overall and balanced growth as between the various approaches that have to be integrated in an understanding of that great civilization. This was Father's task and the sum total of his achievement.

The 1960's in the University of Malaya were a decade of growth. The University expanded during these years into exciting areas of academic achievement. The Government supported it with ample funds. Very able and highly motivated students enrolled in the University, the best products of an excellent secondary school system. All the Departments of the University expanded their staff, their course offering and their research contributions. The Department of Indian Studies was in the forefront of this growth, Professor Thani Nayagam was one of the University's outstanding stars, an adornment to its counsels and a respected voice in its deliberations. From being a small, inward-looking Department, it had grown in the 10 years that Fr Thani Nayagam headed it, to an active centre of teaching and research, with a large staff, huge student enrolments, much postgraduate work, greatly respected within the University and with a growing international reputation.

Father's strategy for the growth of the Department was carefully planned and skilfully executed. It grew out of a philosophy of Indian culture and its Dravidian, and specifically Tamil, component that he had held for many years and now had a chance to expound in planning the curriculum and activities of the Department. He perceived that the teaching of Indian civilization in a Malaysian context required specific approaches and ought to perform specific functions. In the first place, it had to reflect the needs and concerns of the immigrant Indian population of Malaysia and Singapore. It had to provide for them an opportunity to study academically the roots of their traditions and culture, their languages and literatures. As the great majority of these Indians were Tamil speakers, and as Tamil was a living language recognized in education and usage in the country, any University studies had to provide high level training in this language and its literatures. He therefore made it the

central concern of the Department. In this he was working on his own field of strength and in his own area of the greatest academic contribution. His love of Tamil literature was easily imprinted on his colleagues and others and soon he collected round him an enthusiastic band of Tamil academics teaching various branches of Tamil literature and equally enthusiastic groups of students studying Tamil at various levels. To this was added Tamil grammar, creative writing, linguistics and other tools necessary for an understanding of the Tamil language. To serve the needs of instruction in Tamil language and literature was to be the first concern of the Department.

The second function of a Department of this sort in Malaysia was to impart instruction on all aspects of Indian civilization in a multi-racial society and to establish Indian Studies as an academic discipline on par with other University subjects. Towards this end, it was necessary to plan courses suitable to a Malaysian criteria and bringing in the main University disciplines in the humanities. In doing this, Father had the advantage of his background and training as an educationist, in the theories and practice of education. He attracted to his Department, Historians, Archaeologists and Sanskritists who developed courses in their specialities, designed to present Indian civilization in its variegated aspects

Within a short time, under his leadership, the Department had built up a structure of courses on Tamil literature and language, Sanskrit literature and language, linguistics, Indian history, art and architecture, philosophy and religion. These courses were integrated into a programme leading to an honours degree in Indian Studies and a general degree in that subject combined with one other subject in the Faculty of Arts. In addition, basic language courses were offered in Tamil and Sanskrit which attracted large numbers of students of widely diverse ethnic backgrounds: Tamils, Telugus, Malayalees, Sikhs, Malays, Chinese, Eurasians. Courses in the history and culture of India, its art, thought and society evoked great interest and students from several other Departments enrolled in them to broaden their studies. Graduates from the University were thus trained at two levels. There were the few who pursued the study of Tamil language and literature through the original sources and became proficient in many aspects of Tamil studies. These graduates secured employment in teaching, mass media organizations and the bureaucracy where their special skills were of great value. Then there were many others who graduated with a knowledge of various aspects of Indian culture and tradition and some knowledge of one of the two languages Tamil and Sanskrit. These graduates also found employment in the civil service, teaching and a wide variety of private sector jobs.

All these developments were pursued with great attention to the maintenance of the highest standards of scholarship. Father Thani Nayagam was a patron of excellence and he was keen that the Department of Indian Studies should be noted for its pursuit of excellence. To maintain standards in parity with other well-known institutions where these subjects were taught, he invited famous scholars of Tamil language and literature as external examiners. They were drawn from Universities such as

Madras, Annamalai and London and included such noted scholars as Professors M. Varadarajan, T. P. Meenakshisundaram and R. E. Asher. What this meant was that the Department received international recognition in respect of the quality of its degrees and its graduates had no difficulty in securing post-graduate enrolment in Universities in other parts of the world.

Father Thani Nayagam was not only keen on fostering under-graduate studies; he also emphasised the importance of post-graduate studies and research undertaken by members of the staff. His attractive personality and generosity brought together a group of able young students to undertake postgraduate research in the Department. Within a few years a number had completed Master's theses under his supervision and that of his senior colleagues and some of them went to work on their Ph. D's. Some of the best scholars were appointed to staff positions. Father promoted research by his example and inspiration. He was constantly researching and writing himself, attending conferences and, of course, continuing to edit the journal **Tamil Culture** from Kuala Lumpur. His work was an example to his colleagues who also started to publish.

To promote and assist the publication of scholarly work by his colleagues he started a Department of Indian Studies Monograph Series. A number of works were published in this series, mainly of the younger scholars whom he had encouraged and supported. These works ranged from studies of Tamil society, literature and culture to linguistics, dialect studies and Malaysian Indian society, as well as bibliographies on Tamil studies. These publications more than anything else, put the Department on the map of international Tamil Studies scholarship.

By far the greatest achievement and one that decisively broadened the vision of the Malaysian Indian intelligentsia was the organization of the First International Conference of Tamil Studies in the University of Malaya in 1966. Father Thani Nayagam was the sole initiator of the idea and the constant driving force behind its implementation. He successfully brought together disparate groups of interests and individuals consisting of the Malaysian Government, ministers of state, including the Prime Minister, the University of Malaya, prominent Indian groups and individuals, business and funding bodies, U.N.E.S.C.O., apart from similar support in India and Sri Lanka. He welded these people together into a team, working at various aspects of policy and organization. The eventual result was an international gathering that brought together for a week nearly 200 participants from a number of countries spread over all continents. The meetings took place in a number of panels, organized around themes of wide-ranging scope, providing not merely an interchange among scholars but also the vital role of exposing the Malaysian Indian public to lectures and discussions from some of the best Tamil scholars from India and other parts of the world. It was a memorable experience to all participants, but particularly so to those in the Department of Indian Studies and to Malaysian Indians generally. The papers presented were later published under his general editorship in two volumes and remains today a solid tribute to Father's magnificent conception of these years.

He was one of the University's outstanding academics, with a recognized international standing and consequently widely respected by his colleagues. He enjoyed the respect of the University authorities for as long as excellence was valued by the authorities of the University. He was elected to various bodies and served a term of office as a popular Dean of the Faculty of Arts. The then Vice-Chancellor introducing him to the audience before he delivered his Inaugural Lecture in 1962, referred in glowing terms to his scholarship and his rare proficiency in a number of languages. In his lecture he lived up to this expectation by delivering a very learned discourse on *Indian Thought and Roman Stoicism* which would rank among his most penetrating contributions.

It is not solely by his contributions to academic learning that he will be remembered in Malaysia. In fact, Father has always been much more than an academic—he has held that learning must seep down to the people and that the scholar's findings on Tamil culture and Tamil literature must be disseminated to the ordinary man. He had already done much towards this end in India and Sri Lanka. Now he took the opportunity of his residence in Malaysia to perform these functions in that country. Even before he took up residence in Malaysia, he was known in that country as a great expositor of Tamil culture both in English and Tamil. In fact, it was he who had inaugurated the **Tamilar Vizha** (Tamils Festival) in 1952 when a representative group of Tamils invited him to be the chief speaker on this occasion. This then became an annual festival celebrated throughout peninsular Malaya and Singapore and he was invited to speak on many occasions. He captivated Malaysian Tamil audiences with his excellent oratorical abilities. This function he was now able to perform more intensively while living in Malaysia. He gave unlimited support to Tamil teachers' groups, Tamil writers' bodies and other cultural organizations. He brought those bodies within the orbit of the Department of Indian Studies by organizing seminars, lectures and study groups for them and patronizing their activities in every way. His contribution in these fields has left a far greater emotional attachment to him on the part of such groups who today remember him with affection.

Any assessment of Father Thani Nayagam's contribution during his years of residence in Kuala Lumpur should take note of both what he did within the University as well as outside it. Within the University he gave to the Department of Indian Studies a coherent philosophy and shape, an aim and ambition to which his successors could aspire. He stamped on it his personality, his love of scholarship, his pursuit of excellence and, above all, his concern for the aspiring student. The University community found the Department an intellectually and socially attractive place and derived great satisfaction from its curricular and extracurricular activities, its academic and cultural contributions. The Tamil Language Society, to which he extended his patronage and his guiding counsel, provided much enjoyment in the University through its activities.

There is further his impact on the University at large. Here he moved with ease among his fellow-academics of many other disciplines. His social graces and his generous hospitality attracted to him the friendship and respect of the senior academics

of the University. These 1960's were in many respects the greatest years of the University of Malaya. As one by one the intellectual giants of those years left Kuala Lumpur, Father became increasingly lonely and finally he himself decided to leave in 1970. But by that time much of what he came to do had been accomplished.

In the country at large, and among the Indian/Ceylonese community in particular he left behind a love and affection that was more emotional and more overtly displayed. Many who had heard him speak in public platforms or talk informally at social occasions gave their hearts to him. It was such people whom he returned frequently to see after he had left Kuala Lumpur to live in Jaffna.

Thus he leaves behind in Malaysia a twin legacy: of intellectual accomplishment and of emotional attachment. People who came into contact with him drew on one or the other of these legacies and many had the satisfaction of enjoying both.

— S. Arasaratnam.