

Father Thani Nayagam and his Work: The Creation of the IATR

I met Rev. Fr Thani Nayagam for the first time in 1955 at Colombo. I was already aware of his reputation as a man and as a scholar. I was struck at first by his humanistic or rather universal culture. Differing from both the European and Asian scholars, ordinarily specialized in their regional culture only, he was fully acquainted with the Latin, French, Italian, English languages and their countries, as well as with Tamil and with his motherland.

His proficiency in languages was not merely colloquial but based on a deep and refined knowledge of literatures. So he was a gifted international scholar.

I was not surprised when, some years later, Thani Nayagam proposed together with Professor Kamil Zvelebil, his European fellow in universal culture, the creation of the International Association of Tamil Research (IATR). It was in January 1964 at New Delhi, during the International Congress of Orientalists.

At that time Thani Nayagam was Professor at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. So only he organised there the first International Conference Seminar of Tamil Studies, in April 1966. I got then the opportunity and honour to work close to him and to enjoy his friendship. The Conference in Kuala Lumpur must be recognised as a landmark on the way of the Tamil studies.

In the past, Tamil and Dravidian studies had been confined to Tamilians and to foreign lovers of Tamil. They were left aside in the development of the general Indology. The Kuala Lumpur Conference gave the occasion to gather also eminent sanskritists and to claim internationally the necessity to integrate Tamil literature, culture and arts among the major sources of the history of India and Southeast Asian countries which have been in close and continuous relations with India during centuries.

The second Tamil Conference, at Madras, in January 1968, has been an enthusiastic mass gathering but also was managed in a scientific way with the help of Thani Nayagam. The third one, at Paris, in July 1970, was under my responsibility, in my office in the College de France, but was largely prepared by him. He was at that time associate professor to the College de France and I had the honour and fortune to work once more with him.

In the following years he was unfortunately attacked by an insidious disease depriving us of his activity and guidance in the International working.

Now we have lost his dear presence but we are sure his scientific spirit must be kept in the mind of the Tamil scholars.

His spirit, as we have said, was universal. His work remains a permanent testimony of his enlightened love for Tamil poetry so much inspired by Nature. He rightly insisted on this aspect of the literature in *Nature in Ancient Tamil Poetry* (1953) and in *Landscape and Poetry: A study of Nature in Classical Tamil Poetry* (1965).

His work is also a model for paying true justice to the Tamil civilization.

In our time, some indologists still keep the prejudice of the insignificance of Tamil literature, considered as purely depending on the Sanskrit one.

Other peoples are systematically against Sanskrit and all foreign influences on the genuine Tamil tradition, but without knowing what may be actually genuine.

Thani Nayagam was an impartial scholar thanks to his wide horizon. He was anxious to respect the opinions of others. That is why he has prepared one book, *Tamil Culture and Civilization* (1970), by selections of readings by various authors. He was fully aware of the duty for science to inquire and discuss the facts and data and to prove rather than to plead. With this attitude he has personally done much in the international scientific circles for our dear Tamil.

— Jean Filliozat