

The Spiritual Father of the IATR

The year 1980 has bereft the world of Tamil scholarship, and me personally, of two great savants and dear friends: Mayilai. Sini Venkataswamy and Father X. S. Thani Nayagam.

Mayilai. Sini Venkataswamy died on May 8, 1980, after a long illness. I am still under the obligation of my promise to him to review and eventually translate into English his last book, an outstanding study of the Kalabhras in Tamil Nadu.

Father Thani Nayagam passed away on the first day of September, 1980.

I have not seen him in a long time. He will always remain in my memory as a man of strength, a source of energy, a fire of inspiration. I can never forget the handsome head with the broad forehead, the penetrating eyes, the proud mien, the firm mouth, all characteristic of a sharp intelligence, an enormous will, deep knowledge and broad education, a sense of definite purpose.

I have known him for a number of years before I first met him in person. When *TAMIL CULTURE* was still a young journal, and while I was still a young, beginning Dravidianist and Tamilologue, we exchanged long letters, and not only on matters of scholarship, but also on much more intimate problems of life, faith, philosophy and religion. While I would address him "Carissime et reverendissime Pater", he would respond with the warm and intimate "Carissime Camille". When he published his outstanding book on nature in classical Tamil poetry, I reviewed it eagerly and indeed very positively on the pages of *Archiv Orientalni*, a journal published by the Oriental Institute in Prague where I was then active. And thus, in these years of our first contacts by correspondence, the germ of the idea was born among the three of us—Father Thani Nayagam, Prof. V. I. Subramoniam and myself—to organize an international association of scholars devoted to Tamil studies. The IATR was first conceived of between 1958 and 1962.

Unfortunately, I do not possess any of the pertinent correspondence. It was left behind in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and by now it may be destroyed or scattered beyond recovery.

I first met Prof. Thani Nayagam in Delhi in 1964, when I was a delegate at the International Orientalist Congress. By then it was decided, among Thani Nayagam, V. I. Subramoniam and myself, and I am certain, among a number of other scholars in the field with whom Thani Nayagam must have been in lively contact either by person

or correspondence, that we shall lay the foundation stones to the IATR then and there. I remember well the discussions we had about the orientation and character of the IATR: long before it was actually founded, and from its very beginning, we agreed on three guiding principles for the Association: it must be truly **international**, truly **scholarly**, and truly **critical**. Though there might have been some slight differences among us concerning other matters, these three principles were never questioned. They were accepted by others, too, who participated in the first sessions and activities of the Association: Jean Filliozat, M. Varadarajan, F. B. J. Kuiper, R. E. Asher and others. The one true spiritus movens behind the activities of the IATR, and its spiritual father was, indeed, Thani Nayagam. His sound judgement and his great international vision were coupled with his honest, warm and genuine Tamil nationalism.

For me, though, January 1964 in New Delhi was a very remarkable time for more personal reasons. I learned to know Father Thani Nayagam from a very close, intimate perspective. I remember in detail our first meeting in the Hotel Ashoka; his warm hospitality, his fatherly concern about my health, his sense of humour. I remember well one beautiful clear and cold morning when I first participated in the Mass said by Thani Nayagam at the residence of the Archbishop of Delhi and then had private breakfast with the Father and the Archbishop. These were unforgettable moments, particularly for someone coming from Czechoslovakia!

There is one detail which—though it may sound somewhat irreverent—characterizes well Father Thani Nayagam's sense of humour and his hospitable and attentive nature. When I arrived in my room at the Ashoka Hotel in Delhi and opened the cupboard the first thing I saw was a bottle of superb French cognac with two glasses, all ready to drink. And only then the door of the room opened, and Thani Nayagam sailed in majestically in his long white cassock, immaculate, dignified, almost imperial but with a slightly ironic, and yet very warm and friendly smile on his handsome face. We drank to the success of launching the IATR.

To this day I am blissfully unaware who it was that financed my stay in the hotel; perhaps the archdiocese of Delhi, perhaps some incognito Maecenas of Tamil studies, perhaps Father Thani Nayagam himself. I never found out.

Whenever I subsequently met Thani Nayagam—in Madras, in Paris, in Madras again—he always had words of encouragement for my work and of friendship for me personally. I always regarded him as a great man, with mixed feelings of admiration, awe and affection. His love of Tamil was fierce but critical, for he had supreme regard for truth.

— Kamil V. Zvelebil