

A Light of Guidance to Minority Groups

In an article of appreciation of a distinguished scholar and outstanding personality personal reminiscences cannot be withheld. It may thus not be taken as unwarrantable to mention a brief interview in Kuala Lumpur in 1966 after the International Conference-Seminar of Tamil Studies as my first contact with Professor Rev. X. S. Thani Nayagam. The interview gave an impulse to consider in a wider context the problem of language and cultural identity which I as representing the Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church in India had to face in Malaysia and Burma. The well established Tamil speaking congregations in those countries maintained their language and cultural and social traditions, but as small minorities in different cultural surroundings spontaneous growth in their spiritual, hereditary culture needed constant fresh impulses from the "Motherland". Signs of a growing adaptation to the surrounding cultural majority complicated the issue. Professor Thani Nayagam as Head of the Department of Indian Studies at the University of Malaya proved to be a light of guidance in respect to the problems we faced on many practical issues. Meeting him again in Sri Lanka in 1974 underlined the gravity of issues of that kind, and when turning to the literary production of Professor Thani Nayagam the attitude of his becomes a sign of dawn, the approach of a time of new respect for hereditary, cultural traditions of minorities. Even a limited contact with his writings brings home to the reader not only his deep concern for the Tamil language but also for its preservation and importance in common people's communicative ways. He speaks at one time of a need for 10,000 Tamilians in Sri Lanka to devote their sincere interest and attention to the Tamil language, and already in 1952 an editorial in *Tamil Culture* by his hand deals with the problem under the heading "*The Survival of Tamil Culture*".

Admiration and veneration is due to Thani Nayagam for his successful enterprise in starting and editing that quarterly Review dedicated to the study of "Tamiliana". *Tamil Culture*, began in 1952 and appeared regularly with four issues per year till 1966, later followed by *Journal of Tamil Studies*. It is especially noteworthy that Thani Nayagam carried a heavy burden as editor for three years and continued contributing articles all through the years. Of the greatest value for an understanding of the vitality of Tamil is the volume *Tamil Culture and Civilization* printed in 1970.

To meet the problem of Tamil minorities in other countries the author of "*The Survival of Tamil Culture*" emphasizes as an indispensable need for Tamilians to study their past culture with its literary monuments. He is in no doubt about the interest and enthusiasm such study can produce. He adds, however, a remark of importance not in the least for concern about maintaining the connection between congregations

of Tamil Christians as touched upon at our first meeting. A study of past Tamil literature can create lasting result only if nurtured by the cultural elements in the family. Again the broadminded, popular implantation comes to the fore. The spirit of the past must become alive if the culture shall survive. In a way of significant contrast, or better as a proof of the necessity of it, an article followed called "*The Tamils turn Sinhalese*" by Swami G. Prakasar, which illustrates the change into a new culture throughout.

Along the line of his study and concern for Tamil culture abroad among Indian minorities the elaborate report and investigation of "*Tamil Emigration to the Martinique*", published in 1969, occupies an eminent place. It is thorough and very well documented giving exact information about the migration of Indian labourers to the French colony in the Carribean Sea. A majority came from Tamil Nadu, and relevant to our special point of approach are such pieces of information as the reduction of the use of Tamil among people of the second generation but also the fact that from 1858 four days' holiday was granted to enable the immigrants to celebrate Pongal. A Tamil word that became common was the term "Coolie" which the Indians were said to use of themselves "without any shade of semantic stigma" (Op. cit. p.91) In the 20th century full political rights were enjoyed and the young people grew less conscious of their origin. Nevertheless ceremonies like Karumantiram, on the 13th day after death, were observed, and names of several well known gods from Tamil Nadu were registered with their shrines such as Mathurai Veeran, Mariamman and Kaali. As a special feature is mentioned the cult of Nagoor Mira, a Muslim saint whose grave is a well known place of pilgrimage in South India. To what extent preservation not to speak of growth of Tamil culture in the West Indies can be expected remains to be seen but even in those distant areas the revival of language and culture in Tamil Nadu may have its effect.

Very rightly Thani Nayagam stresses the importance of work 'at home' in his survey "*Tamil Studies during two Decades*" printed as opening article in the *Journal of Tamil Studies* 1, 1, 1969. After providing a detailed survey of the many steps taken in other parts of the world to give justice to the importance for the world at large of the Tamil language and its cultural aspects, which he is anxious to emphasize in respect of Anthropology, Literature and Music, he expresses anxiety to see it grow more and more in Tamil Nadu itself. Tamil culture must not be of antiquarian interest only. This is also rightly motivated with the insufficiency in foreigners' approach and study however serious and well motivated they may be. Writing as a foreigner with 26 years of life in Tamil Nadu I feel it is appropriate to end up my personal deep respect and gratitude for the personality and lifework of Professor Rev. Thani Nayagam by wishing for an effective and progressive unity among students of Tamil language and culture from all countries.

— Rt Rev. Carl Gustav Diehl