

Father Thani Nayagam—My Impressions

I had heard about Rev. Fr X. S. Thani Nayagam long before I met him. Some had told me that he was an eloquent and fluent speaker both in English and in Tamil; some had told me that he was an extremely erudite scholar; others had spoken of him as being versatile and dexterous in his command and use of languages; and many others merely said that he was a humane and good priest—a man of God. Having had such varied versions of Thani Nayagam given by various people naturally I was diffident about meeting such a formidable personality—nay I was afraid. However, in 1958, I had the good fortune of quite unexpectedly meeting Fr Thani Nayagam at the University of Ceylon at Peradeniya. Immediately, he put me at ease. He was genial, affable, and an interesting conversationalist. Although I was a Junior teacher of History and he a Senior member of the Department of Education, at the University, we found that there were between us more than a few matters of common academic interest. He would speak of History and Historical research with competence and enviable learning. Conversations with him always left me a better informed and wiser person. It was so remarkable that learning sat so lightly on him. Father was not an isolated hermit scholar or an arrogantly opinionated intimidating intellectual. He was modest in spite of profound knowledge and very helpful to younger University colleagues, but in no patronising manner. Warm-hearted, soft spoken, generous and hospitable, Fr. Thani Nayagam drew around him quite a few young teachers of the University; he was a Socratic mentor.

My own association with him grew closer over the years and when his untimely demise occurred I was left a shattered and shocked individual. His passing away created a void and left me much diminished. It is with the death of Thani Nayagam that I realized that I had lost a dear friend, a counsellor and guide; someone dependable and so lovable.

He moved to the University of Malaysia for a few years. I vividly remember the few days I had spent at that time at the First International Conference Seminar of Tamil Research. From the beginning, Father figured as the architect of such a stupendous construction which brought together at one venue so many scholars of so many lands and such a spectrum of disciplines. Learning and research in Tamil studies were pooled together for the first time and the monumental volumes published afterwards bear ample testimony to the richness and variety of Tamil Studies. Thani Nayagam had the vision, the intelligence and industry to set in motion the machinery for fostering and stimulating research and investigation into Tamil Studies at an international level.

The International Conference—Seminar last held at Madurai, in January 1981, shows that the work begun by Father in the field of Tamil learning has indeed endured the test of time, and waxed strong. When he was alive, whether Father Thani Nayagam was the primary office holder or only a mere member of the organisation, he was undoubtedly a veritable colossus at the International Conference—Seminars. His singular eminence as a scholar of Tamil was acknowledged by one and all. His range of scholarly friends was wide and many are those who still avidly read the results of his research. His learned contributions were eagerly awaited and enthusiastically accepted for they doubtlessly enlarged the frontiers of knowledge in Tamil and Tamil Studies. To the study of Tamil he gave scientific and analytical content.

After Father had relinquished an active working life in institutions of higher education, he laboured in retirement at Jaffna over what had become his obsession in life—the sedulous pursuit of verities in the area of Tamil Studies. He now engaged himself in study and research in a relaxed and restful atmosphere, and, being versatile at time, he would move away from Tamil Studies into new fields. I remember listening to him delving deep into abstruse academic other worldly concepts at Trimmer Hall in Jaffna speaking in deep metaphysical vein on Religion and Culture, and Religion and Society. These meetings of a dedicated few were rather quiet and pleasant occasions. One returned after hearing him in a pensive and inquiring frame of mind, enlightened and enriched.

To listen to Fr Thani Nayagam speak was always an elevating experience. His diction was clear, his enunciation explicit, his choice of phrase and word was polished and his delivery mellifluously moving whether the language of speech was English or Tamil. Father never spoke anything purely rhetorical. His talk was always esoteric and profound. Even as a conversationalist, although he was convivial in company, his talk would invariably turn to something serious and learned. He had no time for flippancy, although tolerant and modest he could suffer the company of mediocrity too. That was a sign of sure scholarship.

Finally I would like to remember Father Thani Nayagam the host. He was generous in his hospitality, selective in taste and literally considerate towards guests, but his own habits and tastes were rather abstemiously spartan even though he would strain his resources to keep others well supplied so that they never left without being satiated. His conversation, whenever he entertained, was charming and he had an easy manner of conveying what was arcane in an intelligible and didactic way; but differences in views were never frowned upon.

In a brief review it is difficult to sum up all that one could remember about Father. My association with him had been over a number of years and quite close. Father Thani Nayagam had left such an indelible impression on all those who had known him. Like everyone of them, I shall also continue to feel poorer because of his absence for years to come; our loss is indeed great.

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought, I summon up the remembrance of things past the reminiscences of the years with Father Thani Nayagam would certainly loom large among my memories.

— Bertram Bastiampillai