

As I Remember Him

“Where there is end there is the beginning”

— Chuang-tzu

Though I never had the opportunity to work with Father Thani Nayagam during his stay in Kuala Lumpur, I felt a sense of closeness of spirit with him. I always pictured him with my own teacher Swami Vipulananda. In any gathering where Father spoke I felt the presence of two great scholars addressing the gathering, one in the saffron robes of a Hindu **sannyasi** and the other wearing the robes of a minister of the Catholic Order. The unity that I saw in these two great scholars was their singular devotion to Tamilian studies and culture. It is difficult for me to say exactly when I first met him, but my last link with him was when I wrote to him to Valalai in Jaffna asking him for details of a carefully preserved copy of *Arichandra Nataham* which he had seen at the home of one Ponnen at Martinique. He replied that he had lost all his notes about his visit to Martinique, and as far as he could remember, it was a larger and a far different Tamil text than that used by Sir Muttu Coomaraswamy for his English translation of *Arichandra* in 1863. He was highly pleased that I printed Sir Muttu's translations into English of *Tayumanavar* and Ananda Coomaraswamy's *A University course in Indian Art*, both published for the first time. Once in a conversation, he cited the case of perishable manuscript material being lost, destroyed or sold and added that there is no law to protect this loss.

I would be like a squirrel attempting to define a mountain if I am to write on matters pertaining to Tamiliana. Except for some meetings of a very casual nature, my contacts with him at the University Campus have been meagre. I have seen him at his best at socials, weddings, lecture meetings and concert recitals. The time of the year was the **Navaratri Pooja** celebrations at the Sangeetha Sabha in our City. The dances and songs were on. But here was Father, telling quietly to some of us who were seated near him, about the music of the ancient Tamils. At the close of the recitals, when asked to speak, he stressed the importance of musical training for our children. To the merriment of the kids seated around, he mentioned the seven notes of the octave in contemporary Western music notation, Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So, La, Ti and that in modern Indian music whether Karnatic or Hindusthani, these seven notes are represented by Sa, Ri, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, and Ni.

I remember the date exactly—12, May 1969, the evening before the alarming incidents in the city on the following day. We members of the Gandhi Centennial Celebrations Committee were at the Selangor Club to finalise the programme. A few seconds before we started the meeting, in came Father, jogging—jogging from

the University Campus to the Club **padang**—dressed in shorts, T/shirt and shoes—all white. He held my hand and said "I am not late!" There was that smile on that scholarly face, a smile of beauty which I cannot forget.

Two other cameos remain strongly etched in my mind. A University student comes climbing up the steps in haste, puts in his answer script into the pigeon-hole at the entrance of his office and turns around to face Father. Confused at seeing Father unexpectedly, afraid lest his unwarranted delay should evoke Father's wrath, the student blurts out a hardly coherent apology. Father's reply was an unperturbed smile. That smile was the divine spark in him. Mornings saw him at the University library browsing over books from shelf to shelf. The other picture is that of the conversation with him as the Head of the Department of Indian Studies—sitting in the booklined room of his office. Our centre of conversation was supposed to be Ananda Coomaraswamy and his writings. But his passion for books could not be confined. He kept on saying "Have you read this book? And this one and this one". The answer was obvious. The books were on Tamil poetry and I had to confess, "All the Tamil I knew in my childhood was the Tamil my mother taught me when we were living at Kampung Atap. "Yes Kampung Atap. You are known for place-names. How did this place in the heart of the City get its name?" he asked. I explained and added that very few people are aware that the earlier name for Kuala Lumpur was Kampung Atap—village of **atap** huts. Long before the tin trading settlement came into existence **atap** huts stood side by side on the banks of the Klang river. He was slightly amused when I explained to him further that Brickfields was known to Tamils as Pathinjang—kaddai, fifteenth mile from Klang. And the conversation went on with my telling him that the government owned brick kilns at this place (the present Y.M.C.A. grounds) for building houses for the employees. He had his lighter side as well. Taking another book from one of the shelves, Norman Douglas, *How about Europe* (A reply to Miss Mayo's *Mother India*) and thumbing through its pages read a passage which was something like the following:

Here is a case for the S.P.S.G. A man complaining to a London Magistrate because a woman persistently blew kisses at him. Soon an association was founded in 1940, named S.P.S.G.—Society for the Protection of Sensitive Gentlemen, and the Society supplied each member with the escort of one of its discreet but efficient policewomen.

We ended our half-hour with hilarious laughter. There are one or more instances when he showed his spirit of sturdy independence. On these matters I need not dwell. Memory brings to mind several other scenes to make them live again.

It is with the deepest of sorrow and the strongest conviction of having known a great human being and scholar that I join the hundreds of graduates, male and female, Hindu and Christian, Muslim and Buddhist in laying my wreath of these flowers at the feet of Father Thani Nayagam.

—S. Durai Raja Singham