

Sage and Scholar, Venerable and Profound...

It was a warm afternoon in 1958. From my room at Arunachalam Hall (Peradeniya) I went with a friend of mine to meet Fr Thani Nayagam at his bungalow at Mahakande to invite him to address the Annual Tamil Arts Festival of the University Tamil Society. I was a little nervous, as that was the first occasion on which I was going to meet Father, whose admirer I had become ever since I had read his inspiring article on Tamil manuscripts in European Libraries (a cutting of which I still treasure) and about whom I had heard so much. My friend knocked at the door, and I heard a sonorous voice answer, 'Just a minute, please'. In a few minutes, the immaculate and poised figure of Fr Thani Nayagam appeared, as the large front door opened. He greeted us with his characteristic pose and invited us in. I was instantly attracted by his towering appearance, the sparkle and gaiety of his conversation and his deliberate delivery of precise and well-chosen words. One of the marks of a great man, it is said, is the power of making lasting impressions upon the people he meets. Fr Thani Nayagam made a lasting impression on me on that occasion, as, I am sure, he did on everyone who met him.

I did not meet him again until after I joined the staff of the University at Peradeniya in 1960. Father left our University soon afterwards to adorn the Chair of Indian Studies at the University of Malaya and it was only after he returned to Sri Lanka on his retirement that I had many occasions to meet him.

Father had returned to the Island as a hero, a sage and scholar, venerable and profound, having in the preceding decade lighted a beacon-fire for all Tamilologists—a fire that is still burning bright. This man who gave new dimensions to Tamil Studies was not just another Tamil scholar. In the nineteenth century, the American missionaries Daniel Poor, Hoisington and Samuel Green and their associates gave Tamil a new status, lifting it up from its traditional place to be a subject of study in a modern institution of higher learning and a vehicle for the communication of modern scientific ideas. More than a century later, it was left to Fr Thani Nayagam to elevate Tamil Studies to international levels—as a subject of critical study in leading universities outside South Asia, especially in the West. And he also helped to found an international forum for all scholars interested in Tamil Studies. It was also left to him to create both an international Tamil consciousness and an interest in the study of what may be termed the Tamil Diaspora—the migration and settlement of Tamils in foreign lands. As a strong actuator of the Tamil Studies movement in the fifties and sixties, the impetus he gave to Tamil Studies throughout the world of scholarship is a deep score on the page of the history of the Tamils.

When a university campus was established in his native Jaffna in 1974, those of us who were engaged in building up this institution in its early years, brought him into the Faculty of Humanities as an elected member to enable the infant university to benefit from his immense knowledge and vast experience. It was in these years that I moved close to him and had the privilege of learning many things at his feet.

In his final months, he was sad and in some ways elusive. The Tamil question cut jaggedly across the political scene in Sri Lanka. It seems to have worried him very much. No one knew all his thoughts on this subject.

My closing picture is the night I had dinner with him at the Retreat House at Pandateruppu in March 1980. The guest of honour was his dear friend Prof. C. R. Boxer, and there were besides me Prof. S. Vithiananthan, Prof. T. B. H. Abeysinghe, Dr James T. Rutnam and Mr Silan Kadirgamer. For a brief moment Father was his former self—warm, youthful and ebullient, and made an unforgettable impression.

In his final days, unaware of the impending disaster, Dr. Rutnam and I were planning a volume of articles by him, to be presented to him on his seventieth birthday. He wrote to me on this subject just a few days before his death—possibly his last letter to anyone outside his family. I was planning to meet him and discuss details with him but before I could do that—alas, he was gone.

— K. Indrapala