

Appreciation of a many-faceted Man

It is an honour, but one which I wish might never have arisen, to be invited to prepare an appreciation of the late Reverend Dr Xavier S. Thani Nayagam, whom I first met at the University of Malaya just eighteen years ago.

I had been given a grant to serve as Visiting Professor of Linguistics at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, or Petaling Jaya, and Father Thani Nayagam was one of the chief members of the language departments there as Professor of Indian Studies, which included Tamil and Sanskrit; I was attached to the Department of English in order to help implement a recently created program in Linguistics. There was some lack of sympathy for the study of Linguistics at the University of Malaya then, particularly from the Professors of History and of Chinese Studies. But Professor Thani Nayagam not only encouraged me to speak to interested students in Indian Studies on linguistics, but one day early in my stay at the University, mounted the stairs to my non-air-conditioned office, to convey to me his warm greeting. He had an interest in Romance languages, particularly in Italian, and expressed this to me. I was pleased and touched by this special welcome, which I appreciate more in retrospect than I did at the time. It probably would have been more in keeping for me as the younger visitor, of less rank (though I was a visiting Professor, I was merely an Associate Professor at my home university, the University of Hawaii). Other professors like Professor Rauf in Islamic Studies and Professor Rollvink in Malay Studies, were kind and considerate, but Professor Thani Nayagam really went beyond the call of duty to make me feel at home in the University of Malaya.

I recall events of a social and academic nature like the delightful inaugural lecture given by Professor Thani Nayagam, after which there was a delicious sort of banquet which my mother and I attended with great pleasure. Perhaps the shrimp was tastier than it should have been, because subsequently my mother was stricken with indigestion; I recall our jesting about it as if it might have been the lecture rather than the shrimp that caused the indigestion; the jest was possible because, and only because of the confident good nature—there were no complexes or indications of pettiness in Father Thani Nayagam—and keen good humour that such liberties could be taken with someone whose status as priest, and scholar, and professor could.

During my seventeen months at the University of Malaya I became acquainted with a variety of subjects, several of linguistic interest; one of the most rewarding of these was the chance to see before the publication as a reprint the Tamil-Portuguese dictionary of Father Proenca. Father Thani Nayagam encouraged me to look at it from the Portuguese point of view, and this resulted in two articles of great stimula-

tion to my interest in the history of the Portuguese language, in which I found in the Portuguese definitions of Tamil items exoticisms which must have been, in some measure at least, used in Indo-Portuguese or in the Portuguese of Asia. Through him, I was able to meet for the first time the distinguished Professor of Portuguese at the University of London at the time, Charles R. Boxer, beyond the help in having my articles on the Proenca dictionary published in *Tamil Culture* and elsewhere.

Certainly Professor Thani Nayagam was a man who was loyal to the values of Tamil culture, language, and literature; what made this so impressive to a Westerner was that this love and appreciation were accompanied by a scholar's appreciation and knowledge of the European literary, cultural, and linguistic tradition. I am very grateful that he permitted me to help him—he needed no help—in the translation of the linguistic introduction, written in Portuguese, to Father Proenca's dictionary. It was a gracious example of co-authorship in which the senior author did all the work!

In 1966 he was certainly the pillar of the International Conference of Tamil Studies at the University of Malaya; he arranged for me in Lisbon to meet with Father Silva Rego in connection with an early Tamil *cartilha* and for me to participate in the conference, so magnificently hosted. I remember many acts of graciousness; I almost felt that I had been Visiting Professor of Indian Studies in 1962-1964 instead of Visiting Professor of Linguistics attached to the Department of English, such was the warmth with which my mother and I were received by the Department of Indian Studies under Professor Thani Nayagam.

On a subsequent visit to Malaysia, Professor Thani Nayagam permitted me to stay for a time in his home; I remember the cordiality with which he and his servant received me, the sense of ease and graciousness with which he arranged for my meals, my transportation to town, and the like. This was probably in 1968.

Perhaps somewhat before or after this, my mother and I had the privilege of greeting him in Honolulu; he had been permitted to stay at one of the dormitories of the East-West Centre. Once again, the meetings with him here were full of pleasure. We saw him off at the airport, and were expecting the plane to take off, when suddenly Father Thani Nayagam appeared at the door of the plane to signal to us that he had forgotten his coat. It was possible to enlist the help of the airlines (I believe Pan-American) in order to have the coat sent to him at a later stop, I think in Fiji. The most impressive part of this tiny incident was the calm, natural, somewhat wry expression of the problem, and the ability to make something that might have seemed trivial or irritating or a nuisance one more opportunity to express a certain reciprocity of feelings—Father Thani Nayagam made a person want to be his friend, to live up to his expectations, and his example. But there was a feeling, too, that even if a friend didn't live up to expectations that the warm sympathy and friendship and confidence would not be withdrawn.

Another aspect of Father Thani Nayagam's personality which struck me forcibly was his respect and admiration for his former mentor, Professor Meenakshisundaram

who visited the University of Malaya during the period of my teaching there; (I well recall the vivid way in which he got me to reproduce the cerebral r of Tamil), and later was present at the 1966 University of Malaya International Conference-Seminar of Tamil Studies. I do not recall the details now after these fourteen years; I do think that there were certain tensions or problems, whether these were connected with the non-Tamilian vs. the Tamilian members, those from Sri Lanka vs. those from the Madras area, those from Malaysia vs. those not from Malaysia, and that some of these were at the behind the scenes level, and occasioned some concern on the part of Professor Thani Nayagam. But I know how cheerfully and philosophically he accepted the less pleasant with the pleasant, and recall most positively the Conference not only because of the tangible result in the published volumes that resulted, but also because of its success in human, sociable terms.

Some months ago we heard from Father Thani Nayagam in Sri Lanka; his message was brief and not very specific, but suggested that he did not expect to travel again. I remember writing to him in terms that I hoped would encourage him to look forward to travel and to seeing my mother and me again; until hearing from Rajan Philipupillai, his nephew, of the passing of Father Xavier on 1 September 1980, I still nurtured the hope that we might indeed meet again.

— Edgar C. Knowlton, Jr