

Like a Seer of Old, Yet Different

The mid-fifties were a time of great anxiety for the Tamils of Sri Lanka. Going back on the promises of the forties, the Tamils of Indian origin had been disfranchised, and it was reported that the Sinhalese members of the Commission on Higher Education in the National Languages were contemplating a weighted quota system of admissions to the University. The gloom was deepened by the dark cloud of a "Sinhala Only" proposal looming large on the political horizon.

When, however, in the Town Hall of Colombo an audience filled to over-flowing heard on 2 August 1955 that the ideal they had inherited was enshrined in a Tamil poet's utterance of 20 centuries ago, "Every country is my country and every man is my kinsman", they seemed to regain confidence in their future. The speaker was the Rev. Father Thani Nayagam of whom they had heard before, but now many saw him for the first time. His personality and the confident manner of his speaking appealed to them. No less, the theme which he so well expounded : "Tamil Culture, its past, its present, its future, with special reference to Ceylon".

Said they, here once again is a Tamil seer as of old. Yet, so different. He could expound his theme in flawless English as well as in his native Tamil. And they learnt that he could expound it in several modern languages and that he was actually striding the continents from time to time carrying the Tamil flag and drawing many savants into its service. They learnt later that his scholarship extended to many other fields; he was able to compare Indian Thought with Roman Stoicism, trace the history and philosophies of education and discuss the solutions to political problems in other countries. They learnt too that this versatile scholar and thinker had brought to the fore several other dimensions relating to Tamil linguistics, art, social history and its cultural spread across the seas.

Meanwhile, on the initiative of Father Thani Nayagam, The International Association of Tamil Research formed in New Delhi in 1964, held its first International Conference Seminar of Tamil Studies in Kuala Lumpur in April 1966. It turned out to be a historic event, with national delegations from several countries participating and with the support of many governments and foundations. Madras and Paris were the venue of the second and third gatherings, while the fourth gathering took place in Jaffna in 1974 under the chairmanship of the founder. Some of the World's eminent Oriental Scholars came to study the living culture of our language as it had developed here as well as to greet the one who had set them in this momentous adventure.

Well-read Scholar, possessed of a historical sense, saintly and without any bitterness towards other groups, Father Thani Nayagam was none the less an ardent patriot. We were drawn towards each other when we worked together in the University's Department of Education and in the Tamil Culture Society of which he was the principal founder. But, it was when he returned from his Malayan sojourn and settled down first at Bishop's House, Valalai, and later in Retreat House, Pandateruppu that he called on me regularly and we began to share a common outlook on many public matters. I believe he appreciated any point of view that committed as we are to the self-determination and territorial identity of the Tamils, the manner of historical change cannot be predicted with precision before the moment arrives and that we should for the start consider any settlement which assured us the substance of our demand. It would be in the realm of wisdom to take a leaf from Ghandiji's Resolution adopted at the Nagpur Congress, "the goal of Swaraj within the British Empire if possible and without if necessary". It has turned out that India is a sovereign Republic, but within a Commonwealth, which has replaced the Empire!

Be that as it may, early in December 1979, almost as he arrived on his weekly visit he told me that his health had improved and he must find a door of utterance about the ordeal the Tamil people were passing through under the Emergency. That is how a Jaffna Town Hall audience was able to hear him, after a long pause, on Martyrs' Commemoration Day, the 10th January, 1980. He was again invited to release the 'Homage to the Thanthai' at the opening of the Chelvanayakam Monument on the 26th April, 1980 and delivered the Memorial Lecture on the two following days.

The Leader of the Opposition, Mr. A. Amirthalingam M.P., proposed the vote of thanks for the first lecture, in Tamil, on "Characteristics of Tamil Culture", while Vice-Chancellor Vithiananthan presided. I took the chair at the second lecture on 'Tamil Studies: Retrospect and Prospect', in English for which the President of the TULF, Mr. M. Sivasithamparam M.P., proposed the vote of thanks. While proposing the vote of thanks Mr. Amirthalingam echoed the feeling of the spell-bound gathering that there was hardly any other, here or elsewhere, who could have spoken with greater authority on these subjects and perhaps hardly anyone likely to do so for years. His task accomplished, the Saintly Scholar—patriot passed to the beyond on 1 September 1980.

Surely, it has been our privilege to live in the Chelvanayakam—Thani Nayagam era of the history of the Tamils of Sri Lanka, a great historical epoch. While Thanthai Chelva led his people in their 30-year march to the gates of Liberty, Father Thani it was who built in them their political and cultural personality. God sends to a people the right leaders at the hour of need.

— K. Nesiah