

Soft-spoken Apostle of Humanism

It is over twenty years since Father Thani Nayagam stepped into my house in Colombo one morning in the company of my cousin the late S. Ratnanathar and my dear friends K. C. Thangarajah and the late M. Tiruchelvam.

They were not in any sense young men, but they all had the spirited enthusiasm and the *elan vital* of the young. They found in me, I suppose, a responsive comrade.

They came with an idea. They told me that we must have a Tamil University in our native land. On the face of it, it was not only a good idea, but also a much needed and not so difficult a project, if the people and the Government were to support it. But somehow, it was found, the instant initiative and support from the obvious quarters were not forthcoming. Politics, the bane of a divided nation, was undoubtedly the chief cause then.

Nothing daunted, these determined men, along with many other like-minded colleagues, had pursued the idea, some in course of time increasing their efforts, others falling back, but all united in single purpose. Today a Tamil University at Jaffna is an accomplished reality, thanks also to the sensible and valuable co-operation of many high-souled men among all communities in the land.

But I digress. The good Father Thani Nayagam's visit that day was to commandeer my help to establish a library for our distant University. They had already taken a house in Wellawatte and were for a start busy teaching a few Tamil students for External University Examinations. They wanted now to begin collecting books for a library, the very first desideratum for a university, great or small. I parted with a few books—valuable as all of them are to me—with a heavy heart, but with a satisfaction that I had made a little sacrifice for a great cause.

Since that occasion Father Thani Nayagam, if I be permitted to say so, and I know he himself would have readily admitted, had become a close and dear friend of mine.

We had talked and talked on many occasions. We had day-dreamed together. We discussed so many subjects, ever pitting my comparatively little knowledge against his amazing wisdom. On some occasions we too had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.

I was present with him in his hour of achievement in 1966 when in the great hall of the University of Malaysia learned scholars of Tamil, in fellowship with not so learned, but no less devoted, lovers of Tamil, had gathered together from all climes

and counties at a dazzling banquet, spread with the riches of the table to toast the common cause of Tamil scholarship; and at the same time to express our gratitude to the inspirer and founder of this movement.

It was a proud moment for Father Thani Nayagam—a dream fulfilled. I feel good to be able to say that I was present at the Creation.

In the succeeding years I had watched with growing admiration the career of this soft-spoken apostle of humanism, who had restored to us the words and the meaning of the lines in *Purananuru*, which sum up the true philosophy of Tamil—

Yatum Ure

Yavarum Kelir

I had followed him from Malaysia to the Tamil Conferences in Madras and Paris, and have also personally witnessed the ecstasy and the agony of the Conference in Jaffna in 1974. That was the last phase. It would appear that finally Father Thani Nayagam had come home, the eternal sweetheart of the race. May his bones, as did his life, enrich our blessed land.

— James T. Rutnam