

He Leaves a Void that Cannot be Filled

Father Xavier Thani Nayagam was born in Jaffna in a conservative family which has done yeoman service not only to Jaffna but to the rest of Sri Lanka. After a brilliant academic career he obtained the degrees Master of Arts, Master of Literature at the Annamalai University, specialising in Tamil, his mother tongue. He also obtained the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of London and Doctor of Divinity at the University of Rome. Thereafter he was lecturer in the Department of Education at the University of Sri Lanka and became Professor of Indian Studies at the University of Malaysia.

He was master of seven languages which he could read, write and speak fluently. His talent for languages, research and eloquence was unique. Having mastered seven languages he was able to delve deeply into the culture and literature of both ancient and modern nations. Although he lisped in his own mother tongue, Tamil, to which he devoted his whole life time, he was fluent in English, Italian, Spanish, German, and also in the ancient languages such as Latin, Greek and Sanskrit.

He made valuable contributions to the Tamil Language and literature. His many articles and books are not only inspiring but have opened new vistas in the field of research of Tamil, the only ancient language which has survived up to modern times. He has travelled throughout the world and has stimulated the study of Tamil in Oriental faculties at the Western as well as the Eastern universities.

His greatest achievement was the founding of the "International Association of Tamil Research" (IATR) which attracted scholars from various parts of the world who have contributed to the study of the language, history, culture, and fine arts of the Tamils. This Association met four times. First in Malaysia, and then in India, and thereafter in Paris and Jaffna. The fifth Session was held in Madurai in January 1981. If not for Father Thani Nayagam and his efforts and enthusiasm this body would never have come into existence.

His fine personality and genius had attracted many scholars who were engaged in Oriental Studies, to come together and exchange their views on the origin, history, literature, and fine arts of the Tamils using modern techniques. IATR received the blessings of the UNESCO. A number of scholars from various parts of the world had come together for these conferences from distant countries at the expense of their universities and the UNESCO.

Father Thani Nayagam had a genial nature which enabled him to attract a number of friends who bemoan his untimely loss. Father Thani Nayagam loved both

Western and Eastern music which he enjoyed and he stimulated the study of Oriental music. Although he was a pious and devout monk he respected all religions including Hinduism. Once he remarked that if not for the Hindu Saints, poets, and poetesses the Tamil Language would have been lost a long time ago.

His death is not only a loss to Tamils all over the world but also to scholars both Western and Eastern, who were greatly benefited by his efforts. He has left a void that cannot be filled. He had personally been associated with me for many years and his death is a personal loss to me. It was at my house that Father Thani Nayagam and his friends came and laid the foundations of the IATR in Sri Lanka. He asked me to lead the delegation of Sri Lanka to the first Conference in Malaysia and the second Conference in India for which I am very grateful to him.

His memory will never fade in our minds. May his soul rest in peace.

— H.W. Tambiah