

The Dedicated Patriotism of Father Thani Nayagam

Few people know about the dedicated patriotism of Father Thani Nayagam other than those who were quite intimate with him. I was one of those few, having come to know him first when my wife and I met him in Morton Hotel around Russell Square in London. From then on I became his friend from 1955 to the time of his death. In 1955 and early 1956, Father (as we affectionately used to call him) was busy examining the parallels in regard to bilingualism in Belgium. He wanted me to look at examples in Canada, as between French and English, when I was working in the library of the Commonwealth Relations Office in London. In the meanwhile, with his wealth of foreign languages, he was examining situations elsewhere. On the basis of these researches was published his classic for all time, *Language and Liberty in Ceylon*.

Before he left London in early 1956, he told me that he was more than ever convinced that there was a case for bilingualism in Sri Lanka. But he was caught in the aftermath of the 1956 general election right at the peak of the Sinhala Only Movement. He sought and obtained an interview with the newly elected Prime Minister, S.W. R.D. Bandaranaike. He tried to persuade the prime minister that two official languages, Sinhala and Tamil, were a viable proposition, only to receive the stunning reply from Bandaranaike: "Father, I would rather have this decided by the sword." Father realised more than ever the forces of Sinhala nationalism he had to contend with.

His life now in the university at Peradeniya was quite inconsequential. Despite friends, a nice house in Mahakande, an arrangement with the dons living in Mahakande to have "salon discussions" at regular intervals and a certain amount of nationalist activity both in Sri Lanka and Tamil Nad, I think that within him there was growing the conviction that something more tangible had to be done for the Tamil cause. He tried to impress on Professor Chatterjee who was heading a Universities' Commission around this time about the need for a university for the Tamils. He lobbied prominent persons in the Tamil community in Colombo but that was not where the roots of Tamil nationalism were to be found. He made frequent visits to Tamil Nad where he had a good friend and contact in a minister in the government of Tamil Nad. But he was looked on with suspicion by the security agents in Tamil Nad and was being watched by the Inspector-General of Police in Madras, in the same way, as he once was being followed by a detective of the Sri Lanka government in London. His work in Tamil Nad bore fruit, the details of which need not be gone into here.

The twin career of teacher and patriot went hand in hand. In Tamil Nad, he had established a tremendous reputation. His *Tamil Culture* was being widely acclaimed. He was offered a prestigious chair in one of the major universities there but he declined it because he loved Sri Lanka and his friend and relatives.

Then he decided, rather reluctantly, to take the plunge and accept the Chair of Indian Studies in the then University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. He built a good department and became sufficiently popular to be elected Dean of the Faculty of Arts. But he was also anxiously working on the promotion of the Tamil cause. He raised funds and I know for a fact that he financed a trip to the International Commission of Jurists in 1961 the result of which was an article in their bulletin exposing the hopelessness of the Tamil problem in Sri Lanka. Soon after, he came to Sri Lanka on a brief sojourn, at the height of the satyagraha campaigns launched by the Tamil Federal Party against Mrs. Bandaranaike's 1960-1965 government. He visited the grounds of the Jaffna Kachcheri where hundreds of satyagrahis were massed and gave them much moral support. He then along with me visited the satyagrahis in Batticaloa and Kalmunai, again trying to minister to them and to indicate to them that they must stand firm behind their leadership.

In his retirement, Father kept up his interests in the Tamil cause and in his reading of Tamil literature. He was a visiting lecturer at Jaffna College for some time. He was appointed to the Council of the University of Jaffna where he contributed the wisdom of his experience.

When the Presidential Commission on Development Councils was appointed (the title is a misnomer, invented by a group of people in it—it should have read "the Presidential Commission for the Decentralisation of the Administration and the Devolution of Subordinate Law-making Powers"—I protested against the "deceptive" first title but found myself in a minority), Father wrote to me that he was so glad that Neelan Tiruchelvam and I were serving on it. When I gave my prize day speech at Jaffna Central College in October last year, at the height of the State of Emergency, Father said, in a card to me, that the Tamil People "were greatly comforted" by what I had to say. I mention all this because Father was from first to last the single minded Tamil patriot. He was priest, teacher, research scholar, the grand organiser, the loving friend. But above all he was one of the frontline leaders. Had his health not dogged him he could well have developed into the style of an Archbishop Makarios (to whom he was once likened) of the Tamil Movement in Sri Lanka.

—A. J. Wilson