

A Veteran Scholar

Rev. Fr. X. S. Thani Nayagam was the first person to give international status to the age-old message that "Every country is my country; Every man is my kinsman" as found in *Purananuru* of the Sangam Age. He wanted to implement the content of this message. He visualised one way to achieve this lofty aim.

The opportunity was provided at New Delhi, India, where Oriental Luminaries met for an Orientalists' Conference. He made use of this opportunity to lay the foundation for the setting up of the International Association of Tamil Research (IATR).

In selecting the venue of the First Conference there was no difficulty as he was the Professor of Indian Studies at the University of Malaysia at that time. The First International Conference of Tamil Research was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in 1966 with pomp and pageantry. He was able to get the patronage of the Malaysian Government for the Conference and it was inaugurated by Tunku Abdul Rahman, the then Prime Minister of Malaysia, uttering the famous phrase: "யாநூம் ஊரே யாவரும் கேளிர்" Tamil Scholars from various parts of the world, from the East as well as from the West, attended the Conference. The entire burden of organising the Conference in Malaysia was on his shoulders not only as the Secretary-General of the IATR but also as the Professor working in the University in the hosting country.

He was again the live wire in the organisation of the Second Conference of the IATR in Madras in Tamil Nadu in 1968 where the newly elected popular Government of Anna was only too willing to host the Conference. The international status of Rev. Thani Nayagam enabled him to bear the brunt of collecting funds for the successful conduct of the conferences. His untiring efforts made the holding of the Third Conference possible in Paris, France.

The Fourth Conference held in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, was crowned with success with his unstinted co-operation made available to the organisers headed by Prof. Dr. S. Vithiananthan presently the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. But, alas he was no more with us for the Fifth Conference held in Madurai from 4 to 10 January 1981.

The University of Ceylon in 1952 in recognising his talents appointed him a Lecturer in the Faculty of Education. Later he became the Professor of Indian Studies at the University of Malaysia where he excelled in his academic pursuits.

The first time I came to know him was when he was the Editor of the Quarterly Journal, *Tamil Culture*, issued from Tamil Nadu. At that time I contributed an article, Muslim Tamil Poetry, for this Journal. Not only did he publish it in his Journal but also sent me several off-prints of the article.

In 1956 when the late Mr. S.W. R. D. Bandaranaike became the Prime Minister of Ceylon he constituted a separate Ministry for Cultural Affairs. Under the auspices of this Ministry a Literary Academy known as Sahitya Mandalaya was created. Then I had the privilege of becoming one of its members along with the versatile scholars of the calibre of Dr. K. Kanapathipillai and Rev. Fr. X. S. Thani Nayagam. We were representing the minority communities in Ceylon. Later the three of us were elected to the Executive Committee of the Sahitya Mandalaya.

This practice was repeated later on when the National Book Trust was set up. It was customary in the good old days to make awards for the best literary works produced during the previous year. In this respect Sinhala and Tamil were treated at par.

On one occasion Rev. Thani Nayagam, as a member of the Sahitya Mandalaya did express his disapproval for not selecting a particular book for that year's award. He found this out when he returned to the country after a trip abroad. He maintained that this particular book should have been selected for the award. The book was on the subject of Educational Psychology written in Tamil by the late Mr. I. L. M. Mashoor at the time Principal of Attalaichenai Teachers' Training College in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka. Rev. Thani Nayagam had to censure the scrutiniser, a former Professor for not recommending this book for the much-coveted national award.

Rev. Fr. Thani Nayagam was a great scholar. He knew many languages. His reputation spread far and wide as an author who introduced to the West the sublime themes latent in the masterpieces of Tamil Literature.

He never isolated himself. But moved with one and all. At the IATR Conferences he used to have a word with every one of the delegates and familiarised himself with all.

The passing away of Rev. Fr. Thani Nayagam has indeed created a void in the field of the study of Tamilology which is difficult to fill.

—M. M. Uwise