

## IN MEMORIAM

### Karthigesu Sivathamby : A Tribute

**Romila Thapar**

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After the Jawaharlal Nehru University was founded in 1970, one of the first persons whom we, at the Centre for Historical Studies, invited to come on a Visiting Fellowship, was Professor Karthigesu Sivathamby. Some of us had met him briefly but most of us knew his studies on Tamil culture, which we greatly admired. His presence was catalytic, in terms of expanding our awareness of Tamil history and culture, and more so in the area of Tamil drama with which we were largely unfamiliar. His lectures and seminar discussions, helped to bring drama into focus as a form of social articulation which in many ways was an innovation in the understanding of South Asian culture. And above all he had a great presence that involved everyone in his discussions, his knowledge and also his laughter.

His interest in theatre was not just academic for he was a keen follower of theatre movements in various places, in towns and villages, and by a variety of performing groups – all of whom he was able to integrate into his way of giving drama a major cultural space.

His analyses of Tamil literature were enriched by his readings in Sociology and Marxism. This led to insightful questions that had not been asked before. It also enabled those of us who were not in Tamil studies to understand and appreciate his approach. It was important to correlate details of authorship with those of its audience and to enquire into the intention of the work in terms of the social and historical concerns of the time when it was written. This kind of analytical understanding was initially limited to scholars such as him and Kailasapathy who worked on heroic poetry. But it made an impact on those of us who were working on the Sanskrit epics and drama.

What was so heartening was that he did not see the culture of a society as uniform and monolithic. He understood the plurality and porosity of all cultures and the fact that they



evolved through close interaction with other cultures. He was concerned that the respect and accommodation of plurality that was given to cultures of South Asia in the past, should also continue into the present. It is a concern that many of us share.

### Karthigesu Sivathamby: A Tribute

**R. Champakalakshmi**

**Former Professor of History, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.**

Professor Karthigesu Sivathamby's sudden demise is an irreparable loss to the scholarly world of Tamil and to the social values and humanitarian principles that he stood for. As a scholar of Tamil, his contribution is not easy to assess as he was not merely a master of the Tamil language and literature but transcended his academic discipline to enrich other areas like history, literary history in particular, and socio-economic history of the Tamils. His work on the Sangam anthologies and the importance of the Tinai (eco-zone) concept has been a seminal contribution to the study of the socio-economic organization of the early Tamils, underlining the importance of man-nature relationship and ecological and environmental factors determining the nature of the economic activities. It has inspired many historians including me to examine the Tamil Sangam texts, which his work established as historical sources of great relevance for understanding early social formations and the changes which occurred over the centuries of the post-Sangam and early medieval times. It has indeed provided a new vision of the Sangam age (early historical period) with fresh insights questioning the theory of a linear development of economy from a predominant hunting-gathering to a food-producing agricultural economy with corresponding changes in society. In fact his emphasis on the eco-zonal variations and the uneven nature of economy

as reflected in the Tinai concept opened up many interesting avenues of research into the socio-economic organization of the early historical and early medieval periods. The changing historical contexts were for the first time clearly understood and related to the nature of the tribal and kin-based society of the Sangam Tamils, which gradually gave place to a socio-political organization based on the spread of the Brahmanical tradition as a package, composed of the Vedic, Itihasa-Puranic and Dharmasastric forms, introducing monarchy as the chief institutional force and the Varna-based social order dominated by the Brahmana-Ksatriya alliance in establishing regional polities, with Brahmanical institutions like the bahmadeya and the temple becoming the integrative forces in the new social formation of the early medieval period. Sivathamby's works on literary history significantly add to these fresh insights by placing the composition of the Sangam poems, their collection into anthologies and the commentaries on these anthologies at various points in chronology i.e., in the changing historical contexts and have influenced the historian's approach to the study of the Sangam corpus as historical sources and to explain how they reflect in many ways the processes of historical change in Tamil society and economy in the two major periods, the early historical and early medieval. That the Sangam texts were practically lost or became irrelevant in medieval times and came to be rediscovered in the 19th century AD as a major resource, which influenced the highly significant 19th century ideological changes, are a major contribution of Sivathamby to literary history. This rediscovery was particularly significant in the emergence and progress of the Dravidian movements and to this day the Sangam texts have been of central importance in the political sphere for the Dravidian movements, apart from their literary value and academic interest as the classical language which produced the oldest literature of the Dravidian languages.

As a historian, my focus has been on Sivathamby's works on the Sangam works and the literary history of Tamil, though his concern for the social welfare and human rights of the Tamils in Sri Lanka and elsewhere is equally significant and has shown that his involvement as a committed social activist was characterized by a rare moderation and peaceful approach to the problems of the Tamils. He has been undoubtedly influenced by the Marxist ideology and yet his was not straight-jacket Marxism, but a sober and conscious stand with a legitimate application of the Marxist principles and methods to his study of society and literature and to the achievement of a free Tamil society.

The scholarly world will forever miss Professor Sivathamby both for his rare scholarship and humanitarian ideals.

## **Professor Sivathamby: The Man and His Vision**

**Chelva Kanaganayakam**  
**University of Toronto, Canada**

For the world of Tamil Studies, the passing away of Professor Sivathamby marks the end of an era. If one were to survey the intellectual history of that last one hundred years and pick out a handful of scholars who have shaped the way we think about literature, literary history, and cultural studies, Professor Sivathamby would be among them. His thirty or more monographs and his large number of essays are a testament to his encyclopedic vision, his depth of knowledge, and his academic rigor. He gently but insistently deconstructed a number of mythologies that we had created about literature and culture in order to project a clear genealogy of ideas and replaced them with thoughts that were entirely original in conception.

For me, he was more than a scholar. In the last four decades, from the time I was an undergraduate in his class, through the years that we taught as colleagues, until the time of his death, he was both a mentor and a guide, constantly reminding me of areas that I needed to explore, tasks I needed to accomplish, and gently showing me the way to achieve them. Beneath his self-deprecating manner was a wealth of knowledge that he was only too happy to share. Whatever little I learned about Tamil studies was entirely due to his guidance.

Four years ago, the University of Madras and the Centre for South Asian Studies, University of Toronto, jointly organized a seminar in Chennai to both appraise and celebrate the work of Professor Sivathamby. I remember this occasion in particular because the hall in which the conference took place was packed to capacity and scholar after scholar spoke at length about the ways in which Professor Sivathamby's scholarship shaped the way they thought about literature and culture. Scholars from many disciplines spoke with genuine admiration and I realized that we, as Tamils from Sri Lanka, were blessed to have him in our midst.

Professor Sivathamby was also my father's student. My memory of that time is vague, but I now realize that even then he must have been very different from many of his

peers. At a time when ideological positions were common and allegiances to one side or another were almost inevitable, Professor Sivathamby was willing to rise above petty rivalries and see the best in everyone. In fact, if not for Professor Sivathamby, I would not have understood my father's contribution to literary studies. It was he who established an award in my father's name and ensured that the award was given to scholars of the highest caliber.

Many of my visits to Sri Lanka in the last decade were specifically undertaken to learn from Professor Sivathamby. He was always generous with his time, unassuming in the way he expressed his ideas, and breathtaking in his depth of knowledge. He showed me by example that being a scholar in the best sense of the term meant much more than claiming a profession. It meant commitment to a vocation. The difference was difficult at first to understand, but over the years it became increasingly clear that is how he lived his life. His scholarship and his kindness were two sides of the same coin. There was a deep humanity that framed his scholarship. From his perspective, there was no contradiction in being a Marxist scholar and a deeply religious person. His objectivity in his work and in his life never got in the way of his compassion and empathy.

Professor Sivathamby always treated me like a member of his own family, and for that I was always grateful. It was an honor and a privilege to have known him as a teacher and a close friend. He would remind me whenever I spoke to him on the phone that he could not hope to live much longer. And yet when the end came, it was a tremendous shock. I take some consolation in the fact that like his life, his death too was gentle. He passed away peacefully, surrounded by a loving family.

## **A Titan in Tamil Studies**

**George Hart**

**Professor of Tamil Language, University of California, Berkeley**

I was fortunate enough to spend considerable time with Siva when he visited Berkeley for a month or so years ago. He was an extraordinary person, with a presence and charisma that anyone who knew him can never forget. He was larger than life, literally and in every other way. I still remember his private reading of a paper he had written about the different words in Sangam Tamil for 'king,' trying to discover exactly

how they differed. His only audience was me and Rich Freeman, and we both felt were in the presence of an extraordinary mind. When he left Berkeley, the war in Sri Lanka was becoming quite intense, and I was concerned he might become a target, as he was not only a scholar but a politician as well. The next time I saw Siva was at the Classical Tamil Conference, when we both were visiting the CM in his hotel room. Siva hadn't changed. He started talking and said many things that must have displeased the CM—though they needed to be said. I still remember that Siva's dominating presence as he spoke to the CM. His death is a great loss to Tamil and to Ilankai.

Professor Sivathamby was, quite simply, a titan in Tamil studies. He approached the subject not from a chauvinist or sentimental viewpoint, but rather as a scholar of leftist leanings who wished to clear the mists of politics and sentiment from the study of the language. This enabled him to see Tamil and its various disciplines from genuinely new and productive perspectives that will guide and inspire students for generations to come. As a person, Siva had a presence and a warmth that none of his friends can forget. He was a remarkable scholar and a remarkable man. We are all poorer for his passing.

## **Prof. Sivathamby's Contribution to the Study of Early Historic Tamil Nadu**

**K. Indrapala**

**Formerly Professor of History, University of Jaffna and later Professor of Southeast Asian Studies, Tamil University, Thanjavur**

Much has been said and written about Prof. Sivathamby's contributions to Tamil literary studies. Perhaps it is not well known in the world of Tamil scholarship that he had also made valuable contributions in the field of ancient history. The study of ancient history in South Asia is largely dependent on literary sources. As a result, the historian is indebted to the literary scholar for the proper interpretation of the literary sources while the literary scholar is in need of assistance from the historian for a critical analysis and proper understanding of the literary texts, in particular their context. Traditional scholars of Tamil have generally tended to ignore the modern historian. And the modern critical historians have in turn ignored them. In the last fifty years, two Tamil scholars from Sri Lanka had made very valuable contributions to the study of the ancient history of Tamil Nadu through their critical analysis of the early Tamil texts. Prof. K. Kailasapathy and

Prof. K. Sivathamby are the two scholars and serious note of their contributions has been taken by the leading historians of south India.

Prof. Sivathamby was as keen a student of history as he was of Tamil and politics. In fact, he studied history along with Tamil literature for his first degree in the University of Ceylon and went on to write a thesis for his Ph.D. on a historical topic based on ancient Tamil texts. The topic was 'Drama in Ancient Tamil Society'. It was a study of the origins and development of Tamil drama in the Early Historic Period of Tamil Nadu. He was guided in this study by an eminent scholar of Classical Greek, Prof. George Thomson, who himself had written copiously about ancient Greek society. After obtaining his doctorate, Prof. Sivathamby continued his interest in history, writing on such topics as 'Cankam Literature and Archaeology' and 'Development of Aristocracy in Ancient Tamil Nadu'. But his most important contribution came in the form of his lengthy essay on the Tinai concept.

As is well known to students of ancient Tamil literature, the ancient Tamil texts divide the Tamil country into five major physiographic divisions or tinai. Historians of Tamil Nadu had for a long time followed the interpretations of medieval commentators for an understanding of this concept. As Prof. Rajan Gurukkal has summarized, "Commentators writing on the compositions after many centuries, certainly had serious lexical problems with a large number of terms and expressions, apart from their real context. They could view things only through a grammarian's eye, searching for the rules and principles of poetics. What are socially symbolic in the poetics were beyond their comprehension. Without caring for these limitations of the commentators, historians often followed the interpretations given by them and lost sight of historical reality. The fivefold physiographic division, which was a mere poetic concept to the commentators, therefore, hardly made any realistic sense to the historians even though they sought to make it historical." (Gurukkal, *Social Formations of Early South India*, OUP 2010: 27)

Refusing to accept the interpretation of the commentators, Prof. Sivathamby made a deep study of the Tamil poems and came up with an insightful interpretation of the Tinai concept. His first contribution on this subject was made at the First Conference of the International Association for Tamil Research in Kuala Lumpur in 1966 ('An Analysis of the Anthropological Significance of the Economic Activities and Conduct Code Ascribed to the Mullai Tinai'). But his major

contribution came in the form of a long essay in the *Social Scientist* (New Delhi) in 1974. This led to a realistic interpretation of the Tinai concept and leading historians of south India, including Professors Rajan Gurukkal, Kesavan Veluthat, R. Champakalakshmi and Sudharshan Seneviratne, have followed it with further elaboration of the economic activities of ancient Tamil Nadu. That these historians have quoted Prof. Sivathamby, discussed his views and given credit to his interpretation is a measure of the contribution he made to the study of Early Historic Tamil Nadu 110

## A Long Time Friend

**Santasilan Kadirgamar**

**Former Department of History, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka**

Sivathamby was a long-time friend, contemporary and later colleague in the university. We first met in the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya when I entered the University in June 1955. That was the golden age, as we the alumni of that time claim, in the history of university education in this country. It was a fully residential campus in which Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, Burghers and students from other communities lived, studied, fraternized and formed friendships that lasted a life time.

Ramanathan Hall, then a men's hall, had 280 students, each having the luxury of a single room, with three spacious common rooms and a huge dining hall in which we had lunch and dinner together with our lecturers resident in the hall seated at the high table. Here we interacted, exchanged views, shared our thoughts and aspirations about life, even as the clouds of conflict with the passage of the Sinhala Only Act of 1956 and the consequent 1958 anti-Tamil violence that changed the course of history in this country took place.

Contemporaries at Ramanathan Hall included in addition to Sivathamby (Tamil), Kailasapathy (Tamil), Balakrishnan (Economics), Sivasamy (Sanskrit) A.J. Canagaratna (English) Ramakrishnan (Philosophy) and self (History). Indrapala (History) was resident at Arunachalam Hall. There were several others (I refer here to my Tamil contemporaries) who entered the Civil Service, Foreign Service, Journalism, the Legal profession, the police and the teaching profession – a list too long to mention here. The names I have mentioned above I have done so for a special reason. Having gone our different ways we re-grouped after some two decades when

the University of Jaffna was established. All mentioned above volunteered to 'return' to Jaffna where we were rooted and had our early education. The first eight years of the University of Jaffna (1975 to 1983) were years of great hope and aspirations when the foundations were laid for excellence in education. If the war had not intervened this university would have blossomed to be one of the best in the country and perhaps in Asia – in the then three major faculties of arts, science and medicine as eminent lecturers and professors returned from abroad.

Sivathamby continued to teach in the Jaffna University until his retirement, facing the challenges imposed by the war having to tactfully perform his duties as an academic under a dual government – an unenviable task. With the early passing away of Kailasapathy, his distinguished colleague, with whom he shared common concerns both academic and social. As it turned out Sivathamby apparently filled the void in Tamil studies. I am not fully conversant and knowledgeable about this major part of his remarkable contribution, Others have commented on this aspect of his academic life – a matter that has been covered abundantly both before and after his passing away.

I remember him as an academic who was socially engaged. He was a member of the Jaffna Citizens Committee and a key member of the then Tamil Refugee Organisation in the 1980s. I happened to be associated with both in the initial stages. He was also closely involved with the Colombo-based Social Scientists' Association – a meeting point for academics island-wide taking a stand for justice on the National Question and perceiving world issues from the standpoint of the left. From Zahira College to Peradeniya, and then as an interpreter in parliament and from there to Vidyodaya University (now Sri Jayewardenapura), he developed a wide range of contacts which stood him well in later life. From Jaffna he was able to reach out to a range of Sinhalese and Muslim academics, writers, artists in drama and the theatre, and political and social activists. He was a key member of the Progressive Writers. This was his unique role, especially taking into account that his first and primary discipline was Tamil Literature. He was a humanist who reached out far and wide. I heard him once address a huge gathering in Toronto as the main guest speaker. When he visited Tokyo I witnessed his discussions with Japanese scholars in Tamil Studies.

It was always a pleasure to engage him in conversations over a wide range of issues, and specifically in my case on

modern history, contemporary issues and very much so the unresolved national question in this country for over five decades. He could be agitated and did not hesitate to express his views in the strongest of terms. But he would stop short of expressing anger and bitterness marked by harsh words. He did not attempt to impose his views on his peers. This was the hallmark of an educated person.

I must also acknowledge here the positive comments he has made on numerous occasions to the contributions made by Christian missionaries, the Morning Star and Christian educational institutions placing them in a historical perspective. Mrs. Sivathamby had her education at the Uduvil Girls College and since then had been a live wire and a very loyal old student, seen at every function associated with Uduvil. I wish Mrs. Sivathamby, her daughters and all the members of his family well as they face the irreplaceable void left by the departure of a much loved family man, a remarkable public figure and a good friend to so many of us.

## **Moments of Recollection**

**Selvy Thiruchandran**

**Director, Womens Education And Research Centre,  
Colombo**

Writing tributes to the late Prof. Sivathamby is indeed a difficult task, considering the multifaceted talents and scholarship he was endowed with. I have come to know and appreciate his multifaceted personality rather late in my life. I did not have the opportunity of studying under him and knew him only distantly as a close friend of my brother and the late Prof. Kailasapathy who was my teacher. My second interaction, again distant, was when he delivered the memorial lecture of my father in Jaffna when I was in the Netherlands. I came to know him closely and use his expertise and literary genius only when I was writing my Ph.D. thesis. With Prof. Kanapathypillai and Prof. Kailasapathy out of the scene of the mortal world, my next recourse was Prof. Sivathamby.

I had many problems with the various discourses that had come up in the Tamil literary field and the Tamil studies. The half truths chauvinistic interpretation, nationalistic hallucination that had come up as free flowing inadequacies in the field of epistemology have baffled me. Many a time I have to sift the chaff while reading the innumerable publications that I needed to read to make my conclusions but I got confounded. The more I read the less I became convinced of the stuff that

was presented as knowledge. It was at this time that I thought of approaching Prof. Sivathamby, it was a delightful diversion in terms of getting to know various opinions, ideas and points which needed to be sifted through. He injected a critical thinking in me with which I have grown from my childhood. His articulation was thoughtful with evidences and references. However, it was not a one way traffic. I still have reservations on a certain points and raised objections. He was a patient listener and magnanimous enough to tolerate my differing view points some of which he conceded later and said with a broad smile that I was educating him. This relationship continued for nearly two decades reaching out of him with my confusions, questions and sometimes my disagreements over what he had written or over the lectures he had delivered. Throughout this period I did not experience the arrogance of knowledge or the arrogance of power that comes out of it. Many times we left with unreconciled differences only to meet again. Many a time he has called me to clarify Derrida and Foucault and other relevant social science theories. It was a mutual exchange of knowledge and mutual experience of learning. It was moments of pride for me that I taught him feminist theories; since he was already open to them, I did not experience the male chauvinism that may other educated comrades displayed. There was no need for me to further convert him. To talk about his personality he impressed me with his simplicity, frankness and his deep desire to always part with his knowledge to whoever who approached him. There was no trace of vindictiveness in him. Even when people who criticized him vehemently went to him seeking his help he gave the necessary help. He has confessed to me with tears in eyes that a few who have learnt under him, had turned against him, attacking not his views but his person. His heart was as large as his body and forgiveness sprang out all the time.

The absence of Prof. Sivathamby from the Tamil World create a vacuum, since his place cannot be easily filled because he had many visions in him. He politicized knowledge and had political knowledge as well. Reading Marxism into Tamil text was something of an innovative exercise in which Sri Lanka played a prominent role along with scholars like Prof. Kailasapathy, Prof. Sivathamby and Prof. Nuhuman . He combined historiography with Tamil studies to comprehend the Tamil Social Formation and Tamil Literature, from the Sangam period to the twenty-first century. He saw interacting influences between them. He grew with the times and applied new epistemological theories that came from the Western world in Literary Studies, Film Studies and Theatre.

In summing up my contribution I want to plead with Tamil scholars to apply and impart intergenerationally the critical knowledge that they have learnt from the late. Prof. Sivathamby, so that we can fill the vacuum in the future.

## **Man of Insights**

### **Karthigesu Sivathamby Was One of the Great Progressive Thinkers and Versatile Scholars of Our Time**

*S. Dorairaj*

*Frontline, August 12, 2011*

It was a baritone voice that people across the globe heard with reverence, for they recognized it and considered the man who owned it, Karthigesu Sivathamby, as the voice of reason on many of the pressing social and cultural issues of their time. On July 6, that voice fell silent; Sivathamby, one of the great progressive thinkers of our time and versatile scholar, social historian and critic, passed away in his Colombo residence at the age of 79. His insightful and pioneering works, especially on Tamil literature and culture, will continue to guide scholars and writers for generations to come. Sivathamby's interests were varied, but it is the scientific and sociological perspective in his analysis of Tamil culture from the Sangam age to the modern era of the mass media that continues to amaze scholars today. His analyses on the origin and growth of the Dravidian Movement, the Pure Tamil Movement, and the impact of cinema on politics in Tamil Nadu have also stood the test of time and won critical acclaim.

Sivathamby authored more than 50 books and monographs. His doctoral thesis on "Drama in Ancient Tamil Society" traces the genesis of Tamil theatre from the earliest period of Sangam literature to the 5th century A.D. Some of his books are *Being a Tamil and Sri Lankan*, *The Tamil Film as a Medium of Political Communication*, *Literary History in Tamil – A Historiographical Analysis*, *Tamil Nationalism and Social Conflicts*, *The Origin and Development of Tamil Short Story, Novel and Life*, *Understanding the Dravidian Movement* and *Confronting the Prospects for Peace in Sri Lanka*. Among his 200-odd research papers are the following: "The Ritualistic Origin of Tamil Drama", "Early South Indian Society and Economy: The Tinai Concept", "Cankam Literature and Archaeology", "The Development of Aristocracy in Ancient Tamil Nadu", "Politicians as Players", "Religion: Cultural Integration for Human Development in Sri Lanka: A Socialist Viewpoint", "Tamil Novel Since the Fifties", "The Sri Lankan Tamil

Question: 1977-1983”, “Tamil Nationalism and Social Conflicts”, “American Influence on Sri Lanka’s Social Life”, “Muslim Tamil Relations and the Sri Lanka Ethnic Crisis” and “Vaiyapuripillai as a Literary Historian of Tamil: An Analysis of his Ideology and Methodology as Seen in His ‘History of Tamil Language and Literature’”. These works offer testimony to his industry, intellectual honesty, thoroughness and accuracy, scholars point out.

“His work is valuable, both for what it achieves and for what it will help others to achieve.” That was how George Thomson, Sivathamby’s guide at the University of Birmingham, described “Drama in Ancient Tamil Society”. Describing Sivathamby as an “original thinker well-versed in ancient and modern literature and art”, his contemporary and veteran Sri Lankan writer S. Ganesalingan, said: “His research works on Tamil literature and sociology will vouch for it. For him, art itself was universal, originating from rituals, and this was the bottom line of all his commitments towards art and literature. He always held Marxism and sociology as the basis for his approach to research. His rational thinking made him adopt this particular kind of approach.” He also said that Sivathamby treated Greek tragedy purely as an aesthetic form of expression, pertaining to perception by the senses and appreciation or criticism of the beautiful or of art. The veteran folklorist A. Sivasubramanian recalled Sivathamby’s long association with the Communist Party of Sri Lanka and said he never concealed his adherence to Marxism. For him the ideology was not a stagnant pool but a flowing perennial river. He had never been dogmatic. This became possible for him because he keenly followed developments and constantly updated his knowledge by absorbing the positive aspects of new trends in the progressive world, Sivasubramanian opined.

He pointed out that though the scholar adopted a sociological approach from a Marxist perspective for his research, he carefully avoided jargon and clichés. Readers, he said, always appreciated Sivathamby’s approach for being unbiased and straight. Sivathamby engaged himself actively in promoting Koothu, the native traditional theatre, in Sri Lanka in a big way. He also associated himself keenly with the New Theatre Movement, besides evincing interest in radio drama.

According to S. Thothathri, a functionary of the Tamil Nadu Kalai Ilakkiya Perumanram (Tamil Nadu Art and Literary Federation), at one stage Sivathamby was drawn to postmodernism. However, he accepted it with reservations, he said. V. Arasu, Professor and Head, Department of Tamil Literature, University of Madras, said South Indian literary history writing was Sivathamby’s most significant contribution

to Tamil society. When scholars from abroad and their counterparts in India failed to give due importance to South India, he took upon himself the task of recording, with the help of classical texts, many aspects of South Indian literary history. Breaking away from the traditional approach, he stressed the need to give the same level of importance to both classical and modern literature, Arasu said. Scholars point out that Sivathamby never failed to appreciate creative writing. A case in point is his assessment of the works of Jayakanthan, a Jnanpith Award winner: “One of the greatest contributions of Jayakanthan is the change he brought about in the process of thinking in the Tamil literary world.

“He [Jayakanthan] wrote about subjects not explored by others. His writings revolved around the lives of ordinary people, especially those who were on the margins of society. He identified the agon [a literary device in Greek tragedy indicating conflict] in the lives of the subaltern and popularised them.”

#### Research on cinema

Sivathamby gave importance to the media, both print and visual, while teaching 20th century social history, Arasu said. At a time when Tamil scholars treated films as anathema, he took up extensive research on cinema. According to P. Anandakumar, professor, Gandhigram Rural University, Sivathamby was of the view that the cinema hall was the first performance centre where all Tamils sat under the same roof.

Referring to Sivathamby’s book *The Tamil Film as a Medium of Political Communication*, Anandakumar said the scholar had pointed out that the motion picture was “from the beginning an entertainment, produced for the masses despite the indifference or disapproval of the cultivated minority”, while the tradition of music, drama and literature reached their first eminence as an exclusive possession of the educated aristocracy.

Rama Sundaram, former head of the Scientific Tamil Department, Thanjavur Tamil University, described Sivathamby’s research on *Tinai* in early South Indian society as a pioneering work. (*Tinai* represents the natural land divisions on the basis of which behaviour patterns are developed.) Though *Tinai* had been regarded only from a literary perspective for a long time, Sivathamby gave a Marxist interpretation to the socio-economic evolution of the fivefold division: Kurinji, Mullai, Marudam, Neithal and Paalai. He also stressed the fact that the *Tinai*s were a contemporary physical reality. Sivathamby and his contemporary, K.

Kailasapathy, who were a part of the progressive literary movement in Sri Lanka, had lively exchanges with their counterparts in India. Besides contributing to progressive literary magazines such as *Shanthi*, *Saraswathi* and *Thamarai*, they also visited Tamil Nadu to interact with literary personalities, including stalwarts such as P. Jeevanandam, T.M.C. Raghunathan and N. Vanamamalai, said Rama Sundaram.

One aspect that could not be ignored by the progressive world was that Sivathamby and Kailasapathy with their Marxist background were also professors in universities in Sri Lanka, and together they played a major role in evolving the curricula and syllabi for Tamil students, Arasu said. Impressed by Sivathamby's exemplary contributions to the institutions of higher learning in Sri Lanka and guidance of students in research, the University of Madras and certain other universities in Tamil Nadu invited him to be a visiting professor. It would be no exaggeration to say that Sivathamby the social historian made sincere attempts to fathom the political and cultural history of Tamil Nadu to ascertain the factors that contributed to the origin, growth and metamorphosis of the Dravidian Movement right from the days of the Pure Tamil Movement up to the successive splits suffered by the Dravidar Kazhagam and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, even as the Marxists in the State were involved in a similar exercise.

### On Dravidian Movement

A part from his research papers, including the one titled "Understanding the Dravidian Movement – Problems and Perspectives", he had shared his views on the subject in in-depth interviews to magazines. In one of his interviews to *Frontline* (April 29, 1988), he traced the origin of the movement thus: "The Dravidian Movement arose out of the real, as well as the imagined, grievances of certain non-Brahmin sections of the population of the old, composite Madras Presidency against the Brahmins....In securing government posts under the British, the Brahmins had a competitive edge over these land-holding, trade-oriented castes.

"But then with E.V. Ramaswami Naicker's entry in the 1930s, there was a turning point. The pro-British Justice Party got discredited, and the movement thereafter took on a particularly 'Tamil' flavour. EVR (Periyar) started an atheistic, rationalist movement, with Singaravelu Chettiar [who became the first communist from South India] supporting him at the start. After the Vaikom issue of temple entry for the untouchables, EVR left the Congress. His Self-Respect Movement (*Suya*

*Mariyaadai Iyakkam*) sought to unite all the non-Brahmins against the overwhelming traditional prestige of the Brahmins, and their pre-eminent position in the ritual hierarchy. And then there is the third stream – the *Tanittamil* or Pure Tamil Movement of Maraimalai Adigal, which is really much older, dating from 1916.

"By 1930 all these three streams – the grievances of the Justice Party, EVR's Self-Respect Movement, and the Pure Tamil Movement – had converged. Along with the Independence struggle grew this Dravidian Movement, and by 1949 it had become a socio-political reality." In another interview to *Frontline* (November 8, 2002), Sivathamby dwelt at length on issues relating to the crisis faced by the Dravidian Movement. "[T]he tragedy of Tamil Nadu is, as I look at it as a student of Tamil literature and as a Marxist, there has been a de-ideologisation of politics. As a Marxist, I would say that the basic problem was that the whole Dravidian ideology was not shaped in terms of economics," he opined. "[T]he socio-political grievances for which the Dravidian Movement gave expression were not cemented with a basic economic perspective.... Owing to its inability to forge a politico-economic outlook, the leadership took the path of populism [when the movement wielded political power]"

As his country was undergoing a turbulent period, with ethnic Tamils demanding a fair deal, Sivathamby did not choose to give sermons from an ivory tower. His stature did not allow him to be a ringside watcher either. According to M.D. Rajkumar, fellow, Central Institute of Classical Tamil, the scholar, without even minding about his personal safety, undertook a lot of fieldwork to end the hostilities, rehabilitate the internally displaced people and enable his Tamil brethren to live with dignity and honour. He played a remarkable role in this regard in his capacity as chairman, Coordinating Committee of Citizens of North and East of Sri Lanka (1984-1986); member, National Committee for the Monitoring of the Cessation of Hostilities (1985-1986); chairman, the Refugee Rehabilitation Organisation (1986-1998); and patron of the Colombo Tamil Sangam. Born in Karaveddi in Jaffna in 1932, Sivathamby studied B.A. (History, Economics and Tamil) and M.A. (Tamil) at the University of Ceylon and received his Ph.D. (Drama in Ancient Tamil Society) from the University of Birmingham in 1970. Awards and honours knocked on his doors in recognition of his contributions to Tamil society and humanity as a whole.

He had served as a simultaneous interpreter in the House of Representatives of Parliament of, Ceylon. He taught at Zahira



College, and Vidyodaya University of Jaffna, and Eastern University of Sri Lanka.

He was a visiting professor of Tamil at the University of Madras and the Institute of International Studies, Chennai. He was also a senior research fellow/visiting fellow at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, Tamil University, Thanjavur, and the University of Cambridge. “Unfortunately the renowned Tamil scholar was given a raw deal in Tamil Nadu on a couple of occasions: he was denied permission to present a paper at the fifth World Tamil Conference held in Madurai in 1981 and he was not even allowed to participate in the eighth meet in Thanjavur in 1995,” lamented a scholar. However, at the World Classical Tamil Conference held in Coimbatore last year, as chairman of the academic committee, Sivathamby called for greater coordination among universities to streamline postdoctoral research in Tamil at a global level. In an interview to *Frontline* (July 30, 2010) during the meet,

he allayed all apprehensions about the future of Tamil. “Unlike a tribal language, Tamil has a civilisation. When I say so, I mean Tamil’s antiquity and continuity. The language has been able to face challenges in every major historical phase.... In all these phases Tamil has changed and it is bound to change, but its identity remains,” he asserted. “Tamil has been a secular language: even religions that are competitive in their explanation of the world found it easy and approachable to express their ideas,” he pointed out. Stressing the need for efforts to eliminate the questions and situations that led to the “so-called separatist rights” in the post-civil war scenario in Sri Lanka, he also made an appeal to both communities, through that interview, for peaceful coexistence. “The Sinhalese should accept that we are Tamils and Sri Lankans, and we should accept that they are Sinhalese and Sri Lankans. This does not mean the country belongs to any one of the communities. It is ours....” ■

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