

REMINISCENCES OF ST JOHNS JAFFNA

A JOURNEY DOWN THE CORRIDORS OF TIME

By

Rev. A.J.C. SELVARATNAM

My association with St. John's goes back to my first visit to Jaffna from Colombo in 1925. My brother-in-law Samuel Gunaratnam Arulanandhan, along with his brothers the Rev. J. T. Arulanantham and D.C. Arulanantham were all on the staff of the College. With glowing terms, the education at St. John's College was referred to by them and the personal interest the teachers took. Teachers gladly gave of their time to help their pupils. There were no "private tuition fees" in those days!

My first experience of St. John's was joining in a Tamil Service conducted by the then Vicar of the Church, Dr. Isaac Tambyah - a great scholar, in English and Tamil Literature. His comparative study of Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism in *The Foregleams of God* as well as his book, *Psalms of a Saiva Saint (Tayumanavar)* was very useful in my research work later. Incidentally, he mentions in his introduction, information very valuable to Tamils about the raids of the Chola kings from South India.

The dates of the Tamil invasions of Ceylon are 257 B.C., 207 B.C., 103 B.C. In 50 B.C., a Tamil became the favourite of Queen Anula of Ceylon and was raised to the throne.¹

He also mentions that there was much commerce between the West and India and that the Greek words for pepper, rice, ginger, cinnamon, (peperi, oruza, zingiberis, karpeon) preserve the Tamil words.²

The pride of belonging to a great culture - the Dravidian, was sown in those early years. I went back, however, after my holiday, to Colombo and forgot all about Jaffna. But in 1929, my father died and an uncle, in 1930. My brother-in-law and sister, advised us to rent out the house in Colombo and take out residence in Nallur South. "Pleasant Cottage" as it was called by the Johns. Little did I know that we were moving to the intellectual heart of Jaffna, where men like S.J. Gunasegeram, J.C. Handy, K. Nesiah, J.C. Charles, the Arulanathans, Nathaniels and Hensmans lived.

The transition from Colombo to Jaffna was indeed a culture shock. Boys and girls went to school bare-footed. On the second day to school, I abandoned the lovely brown shoes my mother had bought, a few months earlier and tried to be one with my peers. K. Nesiah was a close friend of my brother-in-law and he as well as his sister, the mother of A.W. Rajasekaram, later Principal, St. John's College were very helpful. My close friends were Rajakulasingham and Arul Abraham with whom I went to school.

The morning Assembly in Robert William Hall was always a great occasion. The staff took their places on the platform at 8.45 a.m. The monitors and Prefects saw the orderly seating of the students. The Principal, Rev. Henry Peto, would walk up to the platform and we all would stand up for the morning Service. A hymn was sung; an address given by one of the members of the staff; prayers said and then we trooped out to our classes. Some of the hymns that were sung, old boys still remember. A hymn that made an indelible impression was the hymn "New every morning", especially the verse:

The trivial round, the common task,

Will furnish all we need to ask,

Room to deny ourselves, a road

To bring us daily nearer God.³

The spiritual influence of the College was very great. We had not only a dedicated Christian in Henry Peto, but a very lovable Chaplain in Rev. John Navaretam who befriended the young and later when he moved to Christ Church, Jaffna as Vicar drew us into his Youth Fellowship. It was he who inspired me to take Holy Orders and when our dear Princeps heard of it, he was overwhelmed with joy. During the Peto era not a few responded to the challenge of the Lord to serve in the Sacred Ministry -especially George Thambapillai and Alfred Thurairajah.

Love of Tamil culture was inculcated by K. Subramanian. He was both proficient in Latin and Tamil. He had gone to Jaffna College, but later realised that his future lay with the Johnnians! He was much respected by the staff and students. This led to the love of the subjects he taught - for in Colombo, Tamil and Sinhalese pupils rioted when the Tamil / Sinhalese teacher walked in. In 1932, K. Subramanian went on Study Leave to prepare for the B.A. London as an External student. His place was taken by the most impressive teacher I ever had, A. Kandasamy who later took to Law and became a District Judge. He made the study of Latin, very pleasant and I still remember one of the mnemonics I learnt:

He who panis, piscis spurneth

Soon to pulvis, cinis turneth.

To Johnnians who know their Latin and the College motto: "Lux in tenebris lucet" - Light shines in darkness, a translation is not necessary, but to others the translation is given in a footnote.⁴ One of the great Science teachers who taught us Chemistry and Physics for the Junior Cambridge was T.M. Matthai. He encouraged us to experiment and I remember making a cake of soap, sugar crystals etc. Albert Vethanayagam and I joined in paying a tribute to him, when he died in 1973. He was an inspiration to many students of Science.

In 1932, the Rev. Henry and Mary Peto left for England on furlough. The mantle of Princeps fell on A.M.K. Coomaraswamy, the Vice Principal. He was a brilliant Physicist and Maths graduate. In addition he was a fluent speaker in English and Tamil. He respected the individual and established a personal interest in his charges. He taught us Physics and Religion in the Cambridge Senior. Often we asked him questions on Theology and Metaphysics, Spiritualism and Reincarnation. When he was Acting Principal, some of the great leaders both in Church and State were invited -The Rev. Francis Kingsbury, Lecturer in Tamil at University College, Colombo; Sir Graeme Tyrell, the Finance Secretary and a great Churchman; K.P.S. and Mrs Menon, the High Commissioner for India in Ceylon, a distinguished product of Oxford University and a versatile man.

A.M.K. Coomaraswamy was invited often to speak at different social functions. One of his favourite topics was "Why do men laugh?" (he used "men" as a generic term). He had many anecdotes which he narrated. One is worth repeating:

A.G. Fraser, Principal, Trinity College Kandy, appointed A.M.K. to act as Principal (long before the latter moved on to be Secretary, Diocese of Colombo). He, however, asked him a question, before he handed over his duties. ~What will you do, if a boy slapped a teacher?" A.M.K. promptly replied "I will dismiss the teacher"!!

At College, I was chosen to edit the "Rash Trash". This was a Student Magazine which Bernard Nicholas had edited. When he left College, the mantle fell on my shoulders. P.I. Matthai was the master-in-charge. The magazine was well received. Geof. Cunanayagam acted as manager. Years later, I was surprised to find copies of it treasured by Albert Vethanayagam in his home at Kandy Road.

Teacher

From time to time, I was invited to teach on the Staff of St. John's College, while studying for the London Intermediate in Arts Examination. The transformation from pupil to teacher was very welcome. But this did not last long. In 1938, I left for Bishop's College, Calcutta with a Theological Scholarship offered by the Bishop of Colombo. In 1940, during the summer holidays, I visited Jaffna from India, when K.C. Thuraiaratnam requested me to act for him, while he was away for the B.A. London examination. I gladly agreed and was happy to join in the Staff Service at the beginning of May 1940, when the Rev. Henry Peto preached on the text: "Launch out into the deep". A few days later the Staff had a Felicitation Dinner on the occasion of the 20th Anniversary of his Principalship. He was very happy and relaxed. But that weekend while out swimming he was drowned. It was a tragic end to a great missionary. "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" said Jesus. He died in saving another. His cold body dressed in the white cassock, surplice and stole of a priest was brought to Robert William Hall. Hundreds of students, parents, teachers and citizens of Jaffna filed past to honour him. Bishop Cecil Douglas Horsley went from Colombo to Jaffna for the funeral. He was laid to rest in St. John's Cemetery. Many years later when I met Mrs. Peto, she expressed her thanks to the love and respect bestowed on her husband by the people of Jaffna.

Chaplain-cum-Teacher

In 1943, when I was ordained Priest by the Bishop, I was appointed Chaplain, St. John's College. The College had no funds to pay a Chaplain. C.M.S. too had no money to send. Hence I had to become a full-time teacher. English, Latin, Religious Knowledge I taught. I welcomed the opportunity to teach and share the high ideals I had imbibed from Peto, Gunasagaram, Nesiah, V.C. Canagaretnam and T.M. Matthai.

The Student Christian movement became an active organisation bringing young lads together on a Sunday morning after the 7 a.m. Holy Communion to seek a reason for their faith. Often we went to the Ashram and had a quiet morning. My namesake, Sevak Selvaratnam, with his fine sense of humour, welcomed us and made young people realise that christianity was a joyful walk with the man of Galilee on the dusty roads of Jaffna.

The Rev. J.T. Arulanantham, who was appointed Principal in succession to Peto tried to carry on the work that his predecessor had planned. The urgent need of a Science Laboratory to meet the needs of the University of Ceylon, resulted S.C. Samuel the manager of Samuel and Sons, an industrious and loyal Old boy to offer his assistance.

The old Evarts boarding House was demolished and a two storeyed Science block was erected. A new Dining Hall was built and Dr. Rajasingham gladly donated part of the money for the building of Thompson House. Chundikuli Girls' College had already moved out to its new premises on Colombogam Road, and the Girls' School Principal's Bungalow became the quarters of the Vice-Principal, the Chaplain and E.M. Ponnudurai, the House master in charge of the Junior Boarding House - Evarts House. My former class master V.C. Canagaretnam was Headmaster of the Lower School while Patrick Gaussen, the Vice-Principal was charge of the Secondary School - Other teachers on the Staff at that time were J.P. Balasingh, the Zoology Lecturer, P.T. Matthai, P.I. Matthai, T.M. Matthai, D.C. Arulanantham, Athisayam Arulanantham, Lorna van den Driesen, Raneer Handy, K.C. Thuraiaratnam, E.C.A. Navaretnarajah, K. Nesiah and C.H. Gunawardene.

The College morning and evening services at St Johns Church were conducted by the Principal and Chaplain. Occasionally we had visiting preachers. Dr D.T. Niles, the Rev. S.K. Bunker and the Rev. S. Selvaratnam were welcome preachers. The Choir was trained by Miss Edith Kelk,

the sister-in-law of Rev. Henry Peto, while Mrs. Dorothy Ferdinands presided at the Organ. Our Carol Service attracted many folk from distant parts of Jaffna. Handel's Hallelujah Chorus was often sung by the choir on these occasions.

In addition to my Chaplaincy duties, I became House master of Fleming House - the Senior Boarding House. Here were some of the future leaders of the country P.T. Sivapragasam, K.Nagamuttu, Victor Benjamin (later Dr.) were Senior Prefects. Other students at that time were R.C. Amirtharajah, P.C.A. Handy, S.C. Karunananthan, K.Jeyarajah, A. Abdul Cader, A. Kulugamana, G de Silva, and S. Elagupillai.

There were two innings as Chaplain, St. John's College - 1943-45 and 1948-50. In between I moved to St. Paul's, Kandy and Colombo, where I worked for the London B.A. as an External Student. The Rev. David Wilson, J.V.C. Nathaniel, who became a leading Advocate and I worked together for the examination and were successful. In 1948, St. John's was badly in need of a Chaplain and the Rev. J.T. Arulanantham and Archdeacon John Navarettnam wanted me to return North. It was during this Second Phase of my Chaplaincy that there was the violent clash between the supporters of St. Patrick's College and our lads in Soccer. The mob with poles wrenched from the grounds tried to attack our boys who had won the match. The football players ran into the dining hall and hid themselves. Many of us from the Staff moved into the grounds and the crowd, angry only with those who wore the red and black guernsey quietly moved out. Fr. Long, the Rector of St. Patrick's was keen that matches between our two schools be resumed the next year. But the Staff was against this. The matter was however happily resolved after a few years.

One of the highlights in the Second Phase was the production of the play "The Inspector General" by Gogol. To produce the play in addition to my other duties was not easy, but I had the support of many teachers - E.M. Ponnudurai, C.J. Eliathamby, and the Sinhalese Teacher, D. S. Navaratna who later moved on to Kingswood College, Kandy. The play was a great box office success on both nights - one for the schools; the other for the general public. C.E. Anandarajan, A.W. Yogarajah, Meena Thamotheram, Saraswathy Arulanandhan, and Sakuntala Rajendra were some of the actors.

While I was Chaplain at St. John's, I was elected Secretary of the Jaffna Y.M.C.A. The Y.M.C.A. was always very near to my heart and in 1948 I attended the all India, Burma, Ceylon Y.M.C.A. Conference in Allahabad. On my return I was anxious to make the Y.M.C.A. the centre of activity, where the youth of the town could join in activities and develop a "mens sana in corpore sano" - a healthy mind in a healthy body. With this in mind, we decided to shift the Y.M.C.A. from Second Cross Street, Jaffna to Chundikuli. R.O. Buell, the General Secretary, Y.M.C.A. was very encouraging. R.J. Hudson, the Government agent agreed to give us the Tennis Court that had been used earlier by the Ladies Club on the Kachcheri-Nallur Road. In 1949, the Tennis Court was opened and many of the officers from the Kachcheri and teachers from St. John's joined us. Later, my successor Reginald Thambapillai succeeded in selling the old premises and erecting the great building, which has been an hive of activity for the youth of Jaffna. God rest his soul.

Vicar-St.John's Church

In 1971, I was invited by the Wardens of St. John the Baptist Church to become its Vicar. Canon Victor Sathianadhan had left and the Rev. Lemuel Anulpragasam was both Chaplain and acting Priest in charge. He moved on later to Batticaloa.

Bishop Harold de Soysa felt that the Vicar should be in charge of the religious activities of the whole parish within which the two schools functioned. Principal Pooranampillai agreed to this - thus the dichotomy between Schools and Parish was abolished. I was responsible for the School Services on Wednesdays when the Girls School and Boys School would join in worship.

On Sundays the school children attended the parish services. This was a happy resolution of the conflict that had gone on for a long time.

Members on the Staff at that time were C.E. Anandarajan - a fine student of mine who later became Principal, T. Gunaseelan, another student of mine who succeeded him; and S. Thanapalan, the present Principal, A. Thambirajah, A.P. Perinpanayagam, R.J.Sethukavalar, Y. Edwin, J.T. Chelliah (the Vice Principal), A. Manuelpillai, Sulochana Selvaratnam were all on the Staff.

Education in 1960 was at the cross-roads. The Government decided to withdraw its grant to denominational schools and St. John's had to decide whether it would be a private non-fee levying school, paying its teachers from donations that parents and benefactors would give. J.C. Handy and M. Vairamuttu who managed the St. John's College Welfare Association together with the Old Boys from near and far will be remembered always as the "saviours" of St. John's. Their indefatigable zeal and dedication helped St. John's to survive.

¹ Tambyah, T.I., Psalms of Saiva Saint Luzac Co,London,1925, p. ii. footnote 3.

² Ibid,p.v.

³ J.Keble, New every morning is the love.Eng. Hymnal;II.Ox.Press

⁴ He who spurns bread and fish
Soon turns to dust and ashes

- a statement which the vegetarian K.S would have questioned.