Siva Pillai and Tamil Language education

A tribute from Jim Anderson

If heritage language communities continue to prosper and grow in the UK and elsewhere, it is in no small measure due to the deep and lasting commitment of remarkable individuals such as Siva Pillai. Still active into his eighties, he sadly passed away on the 24th November 2025 whilst he and his wife were attending the Kadaram Festival in Cambodia, an event celebrating the ancient Chola Kingdom's historical connection to Southeast Asia.

My work and friendship with Siva began in the mid 1990s when I took up a position in the Department of Educational Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London where Siva was Computer Officer, held in great affection and respect by students and colleagues alike. Before this he had worked in the Inner London Education Authority noted for its groundbreaking work on heritage languages, bilingualism and anti-racism. Amongst other things Siva was involved in the development of Allwrite, a multilingual word processor given to all schools in the authority as a tool to support multilingual learning.

His deep desire to see the Tamil language and culture maintained in the Tamil community led to the founding of the Tamil Academy of Language and Arts (TALA) in Lewisham of which Siva was a proud director. As he said to me more than once, he wanted Tamil youth, including his own children, to know who they are, to feel proud of their Tamil heritage and at the same time to develop harmonious bilingual British identities.

Aware that, to be successful, classes would need to be engaging for learners he encouraged more interactive, learner-centred approaches with a focus on culture and heritage. To further this aim he co-authored the Tamil Curriculum Guide, one of a series published by the Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research in 2007. A partnership between TALA and a local primary school led to exciting cross-curricular work linking Tamil language learning with South Indian dance (Bharatanatyam) through a focus on story. The collaboration was a great success culminating in a dazzling performance at a school assembly which I was fortunate to attend. A scheme of work created through this work featured in the prestigious government sponsored Our Languages Project (2007-2009).

A priority for Siva was to see achievements in Tamil language and culture learning properly recognised. This led to his becoming deeply involved in the Tamil strand of the Cambridge Asset Languages scheme (2005-2013). Alongside this Siva served as examiner for GCSE and Advanced level Tamil qualifications (Edexcel and Cambridge International). He was also Chief Examination Officer for the British Tamil Examination Board (BTEB).

In spite of his devotion to Tamil, Siva was a passionate advocate for heritage language education generally, sharing his great expertise at national and international language education conferences. He was a valued member of the Home, Heritage and Community Languages Advisory Group. His work has been rightly recognised through multiple awards.

Siva was blessed with a wonderful wife and family of whom he was very proud. He also drew great strength from his deep religious conviction as I discovered through travels with him and his wife in Tamil Nadu some years ago. There is so much that I shall miss about Siva: his enthusiasm, his true

friendship and warmth, his great caring and resilience, his sense of humour, his generosity of spirit … as well as our shared mad passion for languages.

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