

*Commonwealth Literature: An Uncommon Literary Inheritance*

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**Abstract:** In this piece Professor Nandan writes about his journey through Commonwealth Literature for the past fifty years and his remarkable voyages of literary discoveries.

**Keywords:** Commonwealth literature, Fiji, Indian diaspora

Geoff Davis had asked me of my memories of ACLALS for a book project he was contemplating writing. I sent him a version of this piece. He had replied: *I've just read your fascinating and moving ACLALS piece. Many thanks...I wonder how many of the rest of us have seen their lives changed so radically by Commonwealth Literature.* Then I met him in Ljubljana, Slovakia, last July 2018 for the CISLE (The Centre for the International Study of Literatures in English) conference. I gave my keynote paper on the theme of the conference: Transcending Borders: Refugees. We'd a drink or two with Russell McDougall and his companions. And shared breakfasts, lunches and dinners. As ever he was full of conviviality and warm friendship. My last trip with him was on a bus journey to and from Lake Bed. He was talking to a friend on the back seat and planning another trip to India. His enthusiastic voice still rings in my mind. I returned to Canberra with Jyoti. Then we heard of his sudden death.

My literary readings in English began with a New Zealand teacher named Mr Frederick Earnest Joyce. Mr Joyce had come to Fiji from Dunedin. He taught me for six months in Lautoka after I'd completed the ubiquitous Senior Cambridge examination in the colonies from a school in Nadi named after Swami Vivekananda, the fiery Hindu monk born in 19th century British-Bengali India.

At Vivekananda I read a few texts for the 'Literature' paper prescribed for the Senior Cambridge. These were Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and a few selected poems of Tennyson including 'The Lotus-Eaters' but not 'Ulysses'. Passing the examination was paramount for us as we dozed under avocado trees. We began with 88 in the class under a tin-shed but only a few survived to pass the

examination. A 'fail' in English meant you failed the entire exam and your four years' study was not recognized in any certified form and you were likely to end up as a cane-cutter on your father's ten-acre farm, run for the CSR company of Australia. Sugar often became bitter for the descendants of the 'girit', indentured, people.

I entered my secondary school from a home that had not a single English book; only my mother read a lot of Hindi magazines from India and a few Indian detective novels in Hindi supplied by a distant relative who lived in Lautoka town and sold jewelry to rustic women. We called him Mama Lal Singh. He was possibly the best read man I'd met in my childhood. After a sumptuous lunch, prepared by my mother, he would show us the parcel of books with colourful covers with dramatic, lurid pictures of murderous men, lotus-breasted women and a hooded detective, doubtless influenced by Bollywood. He'd leave one detective novel for my mother to read, to be collected on his next visit, after another lunch. Who said there's nothing like a 'free lunch'?

But before I started reading English, I'd done desultory readings in Hindi of the two Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. They were part of our daily evening readings. The stories from the *Ramayana* were enacted annually for a fortnight on the Ramlila grounds of the village of Votualevu. Hanuman, the monkey Brigadier-General, was my favourite character with a red swishing tail endless like the Nadi river. Pundit Rajbali's voice flashed and thundered in the darkening sky of my island-village in the sun as he bestrode the Ramlila grounds in his resplendent white safa, turban, and dhoti. Pundit's memory was phenomenal and he could recite the *Ramayana* story like a waterfall in the Himalayas. Only now I'm beginning to understand the richness of that oral tradition that men and women like Rajbali pundit had carried across the dark waters of the seven seas. The story of Rama and Sita was the story most intimately felt in the hearts of my ancestors, 10,000 miles from their unmarked villages found on no maps. They were exiled souls farther away from Sri Lanka.

For millennia my ancestors were illiterate but richly endowed in oral folklores and fabulous fables full of moral teachings. They carried the epics across the black waters wrapped in their memories. They were uprooted and transported to Fiji from the Gangetic Plains in sailing ships. Where *their* ancestors came from, I've no idea. But their unnumbered rites and rituals dominated their lives in a caste-ridden habitus. They lived in mud-huts, worshipping stone-images, and grew in a sea of mythology sanctioned by mantras for every act, especially birth, marriage and death. Especially death: the corpses and the wilted flowers were consigned into the sacred waters of a river or a stream and floated away towards the sea. Sometimes in a lake where lotus and water lilies flourished. Yet they had never seen an island, a sea-wave or a seashore.

But all water flows towards the indivisible ocean. So did my girit grandparents with incredible physical strength in their legs and hands. Soon after slavery was officially abolished on paper in 1833, these peasants became indentured laborers in many parts of mainly the British Empire. They carried in their tattered gathies, bundles, their meagre utensils and in their mind many rituals by which they worshipped, lived, loved, labored, and died. Most were cremated by the sea-shores; some were buried on the gashed hills in

the villages where they had built their fragile and flammable bures, thatched native huts, in the sun. We were afraid of their ghosts whistling in the wind at the midnight hour. Theirs was a long journey--in fact, the longest in Fiji's history. Now their children's children continue to other shores among other peoples, plane-load by plane-load.

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The last British Crown colony to be so populated by such migrants was Fiji--an archipelago of 333 islands and islets in the South Pacific. My indentured grandparents were transported to Fiji via Calcutta port on sailing ships to work on the sugar plantations owned by the CSR Company of Australia at a time when Indians were scarcely allowed to enter Australia. Ironically peasant Indians were uprooted from 10,000 miles away from their ancient land to come and protect the Fijian way of life from disintegrating--a unique fragment in imperial history?

Australia and New Zealand were our 'civilized' neighbours but 'dusky Indians' were not allowed to settle in either country. From 1879-1920, 60,939 men, women and children were brought to Fiji in 87 ships. Most of these people were illiterate and had signed their 'gimit', a pidgin distortion of the word 'agreement'. They had imprinted their left thumbmark on a piece of paper at Calcutta depot before embarking on their unknown voyage across the dark waters into the South Seas. Many thought 'Phijee' was in the Bay of Bengal. All was legal, if not quite ethical. Subsequently labourers were indentured from Madras.

Indenture was a step away from slavery with an expiry date: after ten years, they were entitled to a 'free passage' back to their lost homes. Many committed suicide in their isolation and loneliness and back-breaking work on the plantations; some returned to their villages but felt alienated by the oppressive caste considerations; most, however, remained in the islands, in their new thatched homes. And in the 'Lines'.

Years later, my third collection of poems was titled *Lines Across Black Waters*, launched by Professor Bruce Bennett at the International Word Festival in Canberra. I also published another volume, *The Loneliness of Islands*, launched in Fiji by the then vice-president of Fiji, Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi. Many of the pieces in the two volumes are about the grim gimit life of the gimitiyas. Some old men and women were put in Old People's Homes and died decrepit and destitute. They had arrived in Fiji as young men and women.

Life was hard and the labour grinding with 'coolumbers', overseers, from White Australia. And they exercised their authority through whips and Indian sirdars and village headmen. Many thought they'd little culture and belonged really only to agriculture.

Out of this experience come the unsettling and compelling narratives of a writer like Vibia Naipaul. Gimit is integral to his submerged area of darkness and in his writings one can perceive the psychic dislocation of his ancestors, giving them a hauntingly human face and accents of exile. No-one has explored this Indian experience with more unsentimental honesty of bitter irony than V S Naipaul, the literary Nobel-laureate, one of the descendants of the indentured, from Trinidad.

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Somehow I passed my Senior Cambridge examination--the first person in my family to do so; in fact I was the first person in the history of my ancestry to enter a secondary school; and to read a book in English. To think of it today is a miracle of a kind--we now have three PhDs in English in my immediate family! And all three in Commonwealth Literature.

But this was a common narrative thread of education in the girit children of my generation, born during the Second World War. We, in Fiji, escaped the wounds and horrors of that war. But the War changed the world and the waves touched our island shores in the South Pacific, including the magnificent mahatma Mohandas Gandhi's struggle for a profoundly flawed freedom on the subcontinent.

It was at Natabua school that Mr Joyce introduced me to a few selected poems of William Wordsworth and Gerard Manley Hopkins and the novels of James Joyce and Virginia Wolfe. More importantly, perhaps, he started a school magazine in which I contributed a few articles of my school experience. Living in the hostel was an experience for me--I'd not known such luxury when I walked barefoot for miles to my primary and secondary schools.

Until the age of 18, when I successfully completed the Senior Cambridge, I'd no shoes. Years later I wrote a short story 'A Pair of Black Shoes'--the most popular short story in Fiji secondary school English syllabus for the past forty-five years. A generation has grown up reading it. I'm known by it more than a score of books I've authored and edited. How the story came to me is a tale in itself. It was published in an Australian magazine *Hemisphere* and I was paid \$80 for it. *Hemisphere* was the cultural organ of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs where today two of my children work.

When I was in Natabua for two terms, Mr Joyce must have glimpsed something in me. He gave me books to read. He even awarded me the Joyce Prize for Literature in Form VI. In the late 50s there were few opportunities for the descendants of indentured Indians. Becoming taxi-drivers or being a primary school teacher was the ambition of most children of my village. Most ended as cane-cutters, farmers and tractor drivers.

It so happened the Government of India had a few ICCR scholarships for the Third World children, especially of Indian indentured origin. A couple were given to Fiji. I sent in half-filled forms, given to me by a class-mate, not expecting to hear from anyone. But because of my Senior Cambridge exam results, I was asked to attend an interview in Suva, the capital of Fiji. I'd never been there. City lights were a distant dream.

But I did go for the interview, accompanied by Mithai Lal, our tractor driver in the flourishing Pineapple Fields of Lega Lega, next to Nadi international airport where I grazed my Nani's holy cow Lali.

I've described this in my autobiography *Requiem for a Rainbow: A Fijian Indian Story* (2001), launched at the 11th ACLALS conference in Canberra by the then shadow minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Mr Bob McMullan. And at the India International Centre,

New Delhi, by my intellectually energetic friend, Professor Seumas Miller at a conference he organized on 'Terrorism'.

As luck would have it, I got one of the awards to travel to India the following year. The whole village and district was excited about it as Mr Shiv Nandan's son was going to Delhi to be educated by Pandit Nehru, the first prime minister of free India! My humble father got his bowl of grog at every home and shop he visited with this 'gret noos'.

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In June 1958 I flew from a nondescript Nadi airport to Sydney by the PanAm flight. The motley crowd which came to bid me goodbye was the largest seen at that airport created in the year 1939 by the NZ AirForce. And the place I embarked the aircraft was the very ground on which my holy cow Lali had grazed with a horse named Charlie.

So began a new journey to an ancient land about which I'd vaguely read in the great Indian epics and heard in innumerable ceremonies performed in my little village on a South Sea island. Mythical India was part of my knowledge of the subcontinent. Our grandparents didn't talk of their 'mulk', homeland, that they had left behind. This great silence still remains inarticulated, buried in their ashes of cremation.

But the turbulent realities of India hardly mattered to us--we'd no newspapers to read or radio to listen to. And when we got the radio, it was full of Bollywood songs which affected us all with its romance and illusions. I hardly saw any films as we had to walk six miles to the Nadi Theatre and return after midnight. We grew up without being aware of the epic struggles of freedom on the Indian soil. Even Partition was a dark and bloody fog that had descended over the mythological landscape of my mind. Only the sad songs we hummed as we worked and walked.

But India was more familiar to me than Australia, our closest and largest neighbour. Even today Fiji is barely four hours from Sydney; Delhi almost four times: the distance in time and several civilizations in between. Fiji people have a special bond with India - pilgrimages go annually, planeload by planeload. I believe no place in the Indian diaspora has this depth of feeling for India as the descendants of Indian indentured labourers of Fiji. Many members of my family have visited places in India several times; and a few studied in Delhi, Bombay, Bhopal and Madras.

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I arrived in Delhi's Indian summer: it was an oven and a loo, a hot wind, blew across an old city where we lived in a hostel in the remnants and ruins of several cities with squirrels scampering over broken rocks and kites flying in a dusty sky. One morning a few of us were taken to meet Pandit Nehru. I was in a crowd of strangers from many parts of the postcolonial world where Indian peasants were taken to work mainly on the sugar-cane plantations or to build railway lines: to Mauritius and Fiji, with Trinidad, Guyana, Malaysia, Surinam, South Africa, Uganda, Kenya, among other colonies.

Pandit Nehru was the first prime minister I met in my life. Later I met a few more but none measured up to his stature. It was in Delhi that I made some of my closest friends:

Rajinder, Sudhir, Deepak, Chander, Pradeep, Ramesh and Rupin Desai. But it was in Leeds, in the 1970s, that I read Jawaharlal Nehru's wonderful books.

In Delhi university's Hons English course with 8 papers, we began with the plays of Shakespeare and concluded with the poems of Tennyson. No Indian writer was ever mentioned by any of the lecturers. Writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R K Narayan, Nirad Chudhuri, Nehru, Gandhi were alien to the syllabus in the English courses.

After I completed my BA Hons in English, I was sent to the Central Institute of Education, next to Miranda House. My classmate was Jyoti and we fell in love. I've no idea how I passed my B Ed but I did begin writing poetry of a kind. Love makes you do wondrous things and write love poems with a melancholy tone. To be beloved is a gift. We trained to be teachers of English. And I left Delhi and Jyoti for Fiji only to return after a year.

Jyoti and I married in 1963. Our son Rohan, now a diplomat in DFAT, was born in New Delhi in 1964. During 1963-65 I trained as a journalist on *The Statesman*, New Delhi, and subsequently taught at India's two famous public schools, Delhi and the Doon. Vikram Seth was one of my students at Doon--I wrote about these experiences in a long essay for *Unfinished Journeys: India File from Canberra*, edited by Debjani Ganguly and Kavita Nandan, and published in Canberra, marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Indian independence.

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During my four year stay in Delhi University, I met only two writers in English: Dom Moraes and Ved Mehta. They were visiting India under the aegis of the British Council. The poet had deep, drunken eyes; the prose writer seemed blind from childhood. But they were friends and, years later, I was to read their many delightful books. And at the Hyderabad ACLALS I paid a special tribute to the late Dom Moraes. Otherwise even Indian writers were seldom invited to the college. Nirad Chaudhuri lived a few miles away from our college but I didn't hear about him until I went to Leeds. And he had published, in 1951, 'probably the greatest autobiography written in the English Language in the twentieth century', *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*.

It's only at the University of Leeds in 1971 that I began reading Commonwealth Literature. Arthur Ravenscroft had introduced a special Masters in Commonwealth Literature. And I was taught by CDN and William Walsh. William Walsh became the first Professor of Commonwealth Literature in the world; CDN, C D Narasimhaih from Mysore, was the great guru of Indian Writing in English, with F R Leavis's Great Tradition in his mind. With him, I met F R Leavis one evening in Leeds, after the latter's lecture on Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

But it was in London, in the winter of December 1971, after the completion of a Masters in Linguistics and English Language Teaching, that I read two novels of Patrick White remaindered in a bin in Foyles bookshop. *The Tree of Man* and *Voss* I read while looking after my three children in a hotel called Cambridge run by a Pakistani. My Commonwealth Fellowship was extended by another year to study Commonwealth Literature at Leeds. This was my sea-changing literary experience.

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My small world has been most significantly shaped by Commonwealth Literature which I'd discovered tentatively in a remarkable moment of serendipity in the newly created USP library. In my keynote paper at the 11<sup>th</sup> ACLALS triennial conference in Kuala Lumpur in 1998, I tried to capture a bit of the magic of 'Commonwealth Lit' in my talk titled 'Literature and Politics, Language and Freedom: A Commonwealth Inheritance', published in *Sharing A Commonwealth* edited by C S Lim, et al, and published in 2001.

What has Commonwealth Literature meant to me? To some there's no literature called Commonwealth Literature. For me, however, it's been a whole universe, new and refreshing and life shaping. It's through Commonwealth Lit that I began writing and reading world literatures in English with a few translations. Reading the novels of Patrick White and Vidia Naipaul has been both exhilarating and enlightening. They remain my favourite novelists from two different backgrounds, poles apart. And one consequence is that I'm in Canberra today where my wife Jyoti and my younger daughter Kavita are scholars and teachers in Commonwealth Literature. And my four grandchildren are all born in Canberra. I would not have come to Canberra if I'd not read Patrick White's *Voss* and written an essay on the Voss-Laura relationship in the course taught by William Walsh. *The Tree of Man*, not unlike *A House for Mr Biswas*, remains my favourite Australian novel.

In Leeds I also wrote a Masters dissertation on the 'Immigrant Experience' in V S Naipaul's writings. I'd seen him on the BBC in September 1970 when he had won the Booker Prize for *In A Free State*: a novel in fragments with an underlying unifying theme of human displacement that's become so urgent and heart-rending today. He was being astutely interviewed by Alastair Niven who was to become a dear friend later.

Indeed as I'm scribbling these words, I'm preparing a keynote paper I'm scheduled to give in Ljubljana, Slovenia, at a CISLE conference in July; Alastair, too, will be there. Both Jyoti and I'll be going. Jyoti will be giving her paper on Patrick White. My paper on 'Refugees' explores three literary texts: *King Lear*, *Go, Went, Gone* by Jenny Erpenbeck, and *Riders in the Chariot* by Patrick White. It concludes with my piece 'A Christmas Story'. I'll also be launching two of my books recently published, *Across the Seven Seas* (poems) and *Dispatches From Distant Shores* (essays). CISLE has been a great tributary for me flowing towards the Commonwealth ocean.

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So from Leeds I came to the ANU via USP. Bob Brissenden, who had done his doctoral studies at Leeds, became my delightful supervisor. A D Hope, Bob Brissenden, David Campbell, taught me about Aussie wines at the generous Staff Club. I spent three and half years of my happiest student life here with my young family, reading, researching and a bit of writing too. It was a rich orchard--I met Ian Donaldson, who became a life-long friend; and John Hardy and W S Ramson. Ian was the Foundation Director of the Humanities Research Centre, established at the ANU; in 1987 December, it was Ian's

letter of invitation to HRC that got me out of the clutches of a coup colonel. I'm still associated with HRC. But that is another story of almost another time.

Among the post-graduate students at the ANU my companions were Diana Brydon, John Docker, Bill Ashcroft, Frances Devlin-Glass and Michael Cotter. It was a rich harvest of friendships, some of these have lasted almost fifty years now. And a few have made notable contributions to Commonwealth-Postcolonial literary studies, both in theory and practice.

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When I returned to Fiji, politics became part of my roller-coaster journeys, from 1978-1987. But Commonwealth Literature sustained me because I'd read Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Vidia Naipaul, Wilson Harris, Nadine Gordimer, Gandhi and Nehru's writings. And when things became difficult for me, after the two racist coups in 1987, I returned to Canberra and taught here for 17 years, and lived on the ANU campus for four years in Judith Wright's Corner of Liversidge Street, next to the University House, almost on the edge of Lake Walter Burley Griffin. As fate would have it, Walter Burley Griffin, who originally designed Canberra, and died in Lucknow in 1937, is buried not far from the antique villages from which my grandparents were transported to Fiji as indentured labourers at the turn of that imperial century.

This literature had taught me that one shouldn't despair of despotism. That my fate in postcolonial societies was common to many better men and women. It strengthened me in many ways and taught me to look around for I knew the most creative ground is always under your bare feet. Indeed I liked it so much that my younger daughter, Kavita, and my wife, Jyoti, both did their doctoral studies in Commonwealth Literature in the A D Hope building at the ANU almost in the same room where I'd completed my PhD in English in 1977. Kavita, who has taught at several universities, is now teaching at Macquarie. She's also a writer and scholar. Her husband works at the UNSW. Jyoti is an Honorary Associate Professor in the School of Literature and Linguistics at the ANU. I mention this just to show how our lives have been so profoundly enriched and entwined by readings in Commonwealth Literature.

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In December 1977, I gave the keynote paper at the founding of SPACLALS at the University of Queensland. The inaugural SPACLALS was organised by Professor Ken Goodwin, Dr Chris Tiffin and Helen Tiffin. It gave recognition to the South Pacific writers and several Australasian scholars interested in regional literary culture, emerging from this region. My paper: "The Artist as a Healer" was published in South Pacific Images (UQP), edited by Chris Tiffin. Subsequently Ken, Chris and Helen came to Fiji and we organised the next ACLALS in at the University of the South Pacific in December 1981, chaired by Ken Goodwin. I was the director of the conference and edited the proceedings of the conference launched at the Guelph conference.

Ken, Chris and Helen became dear friends who opened the world for many of us in the South Seas.

It was also in 1977 that I attended my first ACLALS in New Delhi. Alec Hope and I were invited by CDN and ANU generously sent both of us to the conference. It's here I met a number of dear friends including Diana Brydon, Victor Ramraj, Subramani. Out of it came a poem 'Hope in Delhi' and lasting friendships. Sadly Victor is dead; gladly Subramani, this year, has just taken Jyoti's position at UniFiji where Jyoti and I had gone to establish a new University for the poor. And Diana continues to make her critically creative contributions beyond Canadian studies.

To pay my tribute to Canberra, Bruce and I managed to get the 2001 ACLALS in Canberra. It was also a tribute to the generosity of this small national capital that had given me and my family so much. ACLALS 2001 was attended by over 600 delegates from many places and institutions. Local and regional writers were given special sessions to read and talk. We established a branch in the USA also. Bruce was the Director of the conference; I was elected Chair, with Jacqui Lo as Secretary and Jen Webb as Treasurer. Both are now professors at ANU and UC respectively. J M Coetzee was one of our invited guests.

From here ACLALS went to India at Hyderabad with Meenakshi Mukherjee as the chair of ACLALS. Canberra ACLALS supported it with a generous grant. Indian ACLALS became my favourite branch of ACLALS with many special friendships. ACLALS also brought me in contact with some wonderfully generous writers like Janette Turner Hospital. I'd met her at the Guelph conference and she invited Pio Manoa, a Fijian poet, and me to come and stay in her Kingston home on the edge of the Great Lakes where she lived with her husband and two children. We developed a fond relationship and when things went haywire for me and Jyoti in Fiji during the 1987 coups, Janette flew from Canada to be with us for a few days; she was especially delighted to meet Fiji writers at our home for dinner. Such acts of kindness have sustained me throughout my life and healed the hurts of one's heart and betrayals of one's compatriots, indigenous and migrants. Years later Jyoti and I met Janette and Cliff in Montreal during a CISLE conference organized by Michael and Rhona Kenneally, scholars in Irish studies.

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Commonwealth Literature not only gave me a new world to explore; it brought my literary excavations closer to home. I began writing my short stories and poems and essays. My book *The Wounded Sea* (1991), published in Australia, was generously acclaimed and brought me awards and rewards--perhaps because it told the story of the first Fijian coup. Fiji was not well-known in Australia. I owe a lot to David Parker, ANU, who first brought me in touch with a young enterprising publisher, born in Mauritius, Philippe Tanguy. Vijay Mishra launched it at the Perth Festival and Don Dunstan at Canberra Word Festival. Two film-makers came to me to ask for the rights to make it into a film but disappeared, perhaps through lack of funding.

Commonwealth Literature gave me some of the finest friendships; it took me to every part of the Commonwealth I wished to visit. It brought me in contact with Professor Wolfgang Zach who is the Director of CISLE: I'd met him at the Jamaica ACLALS swimming in the Caribbean Sea. Here I met Isabel Santoalalla who became a family

friend. She organized a most stimulating conference in Zaragoza. Wolfgang launched *The Wounded Sea* at the Graz ACLALS conference with David Dabydeen in the chair.

At Wolfgang's invitations Jyoti and I have attended CISLE biennial conferences in Barcelona, Innsbruck, Montreal, Gottingen and this year we'll be in Ljubljana in July. I've met so many friends interested in the study and propagation of Commonwealth Literature. Among them Edwin Thumboo, Kirpal Singh, Ranjan Gonnetilke, Kee Thuan Chye, Harish Trivedi, Meenakshi Mukherjee, Santosh Sareen, Debjani Ganguly, Pankaj K Singh, Vijay Mishra, Bruce Bennett, Dennis Haskell, Alastair Niven, Gareth Griffiths, Chelva Kanaganayakam, Stan Atherton, Cecil Abrahams, Doug Killam, Edward Bough, Bharati Mukherjee. A few are no more: I miss friends like Ralph Elliot, Bruce Bennett and Bob Brissenden in Canberra.

Another remarkable offshoot of ACLALS was meeting Syd Harrex of Flinders University of South Australia. Syd, a talented poet and discerning critic, had seen the value of establishing the Centre for the Study of New Literatures in English. CRNLE published several writers and critical works and opened the overemphasized Eurocentric literary world in Australia to new literatures, particularly of India. He also invited me for a visit to Flinders and collaborated in publishing two books of mine. Two of my compatriots, Sudesh Mishra and Som Prakash, completed their doctoral studies at the CRNLE. At the First Fiji Writers Festival, organized by Jyoti on the campus of the FNU in Namaka, near the airport where I used to graze my cow, Syd was the chief guest and a real presence; others who came included Gillian Dooley who has been a bundle of creative energy for transnational literatures at Flinders. Although he was in frail health, Syd was full of life. I wrote an appreciation of this remarkable friend in my column for the daily *FijiSun* when we heard the news of his death.

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Indian ACLALS was a real revelation--CDN had opened the doors for many of us. From Mysore to Shimla, through Delhi, I went to these with great pleasure. A tributary of it has been the literature of the Indian Diaspora which has added a dimension to our lives for it is rooted in one's personal experience and community history and connects one to a world-wide phenomenon. I was invited to give talks at the inaugural Bharitya Pravasi Divas in New Delhi in 2004. V S Naipaul and Amartya Sen spoke with the then Prime Minister of India, Atalji, a poet. It's here I saw and met Sonia Gandhi who had sent two books to me on her husband Rajiv, so tragically assassinated in an obscure town in South India. I've visited the place where a monument in concrete was being erected. Rajiv was a student of Doon school. I'd given a memorial address at the ANU. Sonia Gandhi, after reading it, sent me two beautiful books she had edited on her husband's life and his untimely assassination.

A few years ago I was invited to the Regional Diaspora conference in Sydney. But nothing could exceed the generosity of the inaugural one in Delhi. And last year I was invited to give the Gandhi Oration at the Canberra National Press Club on October 3. Gandhi has been like an ocean for me---a voyage of many discoveries, comfort-giving, in

the currents of our turbulent and treacherous world. He has given me the light to see a bit more clearly by his life, work and writings. Hence my forthcoming volume *Gandhianjali*.

Another offshoot of ACLALS was ASSA and IASA--two Indian-oriented organizations enthusiastically run by Cynthia vanden Driesen of Edith Cowan University, and Santosh Sareen of JNU. Through these I discovered several friends like Greg Battye, Adesh Pal, Malati Mathur, Rita Kothari, among a host of others.

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Leeds was the creative catalyst. It had the first Professor of American Literature in England; it also appointed the first Professor of Commonwealth Literature in William Walsh. The volume titled *Commonwealth Literature*, edited by John Press, was published by the University of Leeds in 1965. I found a copy of the brown volume in the meager library of USP in Suva, Fiji, in 1969 when I joined the new university as one of its first local lecturers in English in February 1969. It changed my life's trajectory. I was determined to study in Leeds, if ever I got a scholarship. Meanwhile others came: Albert Wendt, Majorie Crocombe, Konai Thaman, Epeli H'uofa, Raymond Pillay, Jo Nacola, Ken Arvidson, Vilisoni Heneriko, Subramani, Vanessa Griffin, later Sudesh Mishra and Mohit Prasad among almost a new and inspired generation who continued their own creativity for the South Pacific with intense commitment and extraordinary energy. Stan Atherton from Canada and I co-edited the first collection of *Creative Writing From Fiji*. I also edited the proceedings of the ACLALS conference held at USP in 1981. It was launched by Ken Goodwin at the Guelph ACLALS in the presence of Arthur Ravenscroft from Leeds, one of the pioneers of Commonwealth Literature. At USP the volume was launched by Professor Frank Brosnahan, from New Zealand, the then Vice-Chancellor of USP. The South Pacific became the last region to become a part of the Commonwealth literary imagination and exploration. And our students grew up reading its varied and manifold voices to discover their own. Leeds had given me that gift.

I was given a Commonwealth fellowship in 1970 to study Linguistics and ELT at Leeds for two years. With my wife and three children, I left USP and took up the fellowship. Within a year I completed my first Masters and then luckily my award was extended for another year to study an MA in Commonwealth Literature. This most creative academic year gave a new direction to my life and the destinations of my family. It brought me in contact with literatures that spoke directly to my history and heart and made me half-perceive other horizons.

In Fiji we lived a life of sorts and the soil produced almost everything we needed for nourishment. We lived on the riparian banks of a clean and bountiful river full of fish and, in floods, it flowed with vegetables and fruits, towards the Pacific Ocean. We gathered them in sugar sacks and fed on them for weeks. On the river's banks farmers had planted fruits and vegetables in their teiteis, native vegetable gardens, and they grew in abundance in the alluvial soil. Slowly through reading, ideas of landscape, home, exile, migration became part of my and my family's life and movements. And it brought us finally to Canberra in December 1987. I did not return to Fiji for five years, three months and eight

days. The ANU and UC gave me a new life of the mind. And slowly Canberra became our home, away from home.

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After 17 years at the University of Canberra we created a new School of Creative Communication and taught many Commonwealth-postcolonial literary texts, including the works of Edward Said. It also led to the setting of a Centre for Writing, Cultural Studies and Media. I was its Director for a decade and several more talented colleagues joined the Faculty. We also established a branch of International PEN in Canberra with the assistance of poet-professor Dennis Haskell from Perth. I was its president for a dozen years. Scholars such as Bill Mandle, Graeme Osborne supported our efforts; Bill Vander Heide added films to the courses. on Aitkin, the vice-chancellor, became a friend and wrote his own works of fiction.

Then in 2005 I resigned from UC and, with my wife Dr Jyoti Nandan, who was teaching at the ANU, we went to Fiji to establish the University of Fiji. Here as the Foundation Dean and Professor of the School of Humanities and Arts, I introduced writers, mainly from the Commonwealth. Jyoti subsequently became the Head of Literature and Language studies: women writers became part of the literary fare of our postgraduate students. Perhaps the most important course we introduced at undergraduate level was 'Writing Fiji'.

It inspired our young students to read the literature, collect stories from living mouths, and study passages of history, politics and culture, contained in the words of people who have written about Fiji. We left after six years and I believe the course continues as the most popular unit in literary studies. Sometimes I've claimed that it was the first course of its kind in the smallest university in the Commonwealth! We also instituted The Nandan Literary Prize for Writing at UniFiji. This also led to the First Fijian Writers Festival in Fiji: around 3000 people attended over four days with a score of writers from overseas who had come to it at their expense. The local community supported the Writers Festival with exemplary generosity. We set up a Fijian Writers Association. I was elected its interim Chair. All this, I feel, we did because of our life enriching experience of ACLALS and its branches.

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Today I live in a suburb called Harrison in Canberra. Across it is another named Franklin where all streets are named after Australian writers, scholars, journalists, professors. I couldn't purchase a house on Patrick White Street; so we did the next best thing - we bought a house in the adjacent suburb. Near it is a park named Mullion Park. On concrete slabs are inscribed several poems by David Campbell and as we go for our evening strolls, I read them. Sometimes loudly to the amazement of passersby walking with their mobile phones attached to their right ear.

I'd met David Campbell with his very dear friends Bob Brissenden, W S Ramson and AD Hope on the ANU campus. In their company I learnt to drink red wines at the Staff Club at the ANU. At the death of Bob at the tender age of 63 (I was one of the pall-bearers), I

wrote an appreciation to my mentor, published in a magazine. At the death of A D Hope I wrote another piece published in *The Canberra Times*. David Campbell died when I was enmeshed in Fiji politics. Later, on my return to Canberra, Fred Langman and Greame Clarke became deeply hospitable friends.

It's been an exhilarating journey through Commonwealth Literature with readings, writings, teaching, travelling through so many landscapes and friendships, once strangers, now part of my imagination and contemplation and writing and relationships. Fiji was a long way from everywhere like all false paradises are but it gave me a life to see the world beyond an archipelago and into the republic of the imagination of literature. Here there are no borders or barbed wires. But there are always coups of many kinds.

Only yesterday I bought a wonderful edition of V S Naipaul's *Short Fiction* for my granddaughter Hannah Maya who goes to the ANU next year. I hope she will read it and understand how an accidental journey has become an endless voyage of joy for her grandparents' family. 'Good writing,' as A Norman Jeffares wrote in 1964 'transcends borders...it is possessed of human and universal qualities...we pay homage to those who create for us this way into an imaginative understanding of ourselves and the world in which we live' and make us understand lives distant from our own. And 'the real thought of a country--what it conserves from its past, what it makes of its present, what aims and ideals it forms for its future -- is expressed in its literature'.

It's through Commonwealth Literature I went into politics; it's through this literature I regained the poetics of my little life with some sense of wholeness.

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Only last month an old friend wrote from Dunedin, New Zealand, after almost 45 years. Once we were neighbours on the USP campus at Laucala Bay in Suva. Our children swam in the same pool with other children. One sentence moved me: 'Satendra', she'd written, 'you introduced me to so many writers of Commonwealth Literature'. Clare Brown is now a priest in the Anglican Church in Christchurch.

I receive emails from so many of our students now completing their postgraduate studies in Literatures in English, the heart of it is Commonwealth Lit. Several are also writing creatively. Commonwealth Literature may also take us on that inward journey that makes life and literature vibrate together and makes us a bit more human and humane as we read and imagine other lives seemingly distant but not so different from our own: our many lives on a single, vulnerable planet. No-one experiences daily its beauty and fragility better than the peoples of the Pacific. Commonwealth Literature has been a great gift to me and my family---it opened our world into other worlds.

*There's another world but it's in this one.*

It may even be within one--literature's deepest exploration--our common human wealth. Our shared humanity writ in words: hope and joy, in heart and head.

Easter, 2018

**Bionote:** Born in Nadi, Fiji, Satendra Nandan studied, under various scholarships and fellowships, in Delhi, Leeds, London and Canberra, where he completed his PhD in English in 1977. He joined the University of the South Pacific in 1969.

1982 he was elected to the Fiji Parliament and subsequently became a cabinet minister in the Bavadra Coalition Government of 1987. After the two Fijian coups, he came to the ANU at the Humanities Research Centre in December 1987, and stayed on for 17 years in Canberra. In 2005 he resigned from the University of Canberra and was made an Emeritus Professor for his creative and academic contributions; he returned 'home' with his wife Dr Jyoti Nandan to establish the University of Fiji as its Foundation Dean and Professor in the School of Humanities and Arts.

He's currently writing a novel as a Visiting Fellow, Humanities Research Centre, ANU, and compiling a collection of his writings on Gandhi entitled *Gandhianjali* as an Adjunct Research Professor at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, Barton Campus CSU, ACT. He's an Emeritus Professor in the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research, Faculty of Arts and Design, University of Canberra.