

## A Language that Divides and Unites

10th TRIENNIAL  
CONFERENCE

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In a world increasingly marked by ethnic, religious and linguistic conflicts, the writers and scholars who assembled in Colombo last month (August 13-18) for the tenth triennial meeting of the Association for Commonwealth Language and Literary Studies demonstrated that language still has the capacity to unite people from diverse backgrounds.

The theme of the conference, 'Islands and Continents', provided the metaphors for the discussion, and English provided a common language, but the tone was set by the opening address from Prof. G.M. Peiris, Minister for Justice in the Sri Lankan government, who spoke of the contradictory power of language to create community and to produce lethal division.

Peiris took Sri Lanka itself as the example of a state that, by both its separatist educational policies and its political habit of doing too little too late to recognise the legitimate aspirations of minorities, had promoted division, but offered a hope for a shared future based on listening to others to discover the common aspirations that unite the separate language groups in a common humanity.

The precautions that surrounded the Minister emphasised the urgency of his words. It is the only academic meeting I have known where the audience had to submit to two bag searches and a body frisking before being allowed into the lecture theatre. Yet, while these measures, like the roadblocks around the capital, reminded us of the perils and tensions that are part of daily life in Sri Lanka and its capital, the demeanour of the locals was remarkably relaxed. My host pointed out as a curiosity the marks of the recent bomb blast, part way between the Independence Memorial and the Colombo Sports Club, home of test cricket on the island.

The club, like much else in Sri Lanka, is a reminder both of past imperialism and present privilege, two recurring themes through the conference. My host at the club, James Goonewardene, is a novelist whose work stretches beyond both themes, the common legacy of the former colonies that constitute the present Commonwealth, to find a way of speaking from his particular time and place in an embattled century for a freedom that is the native right of every citizen of the planet.

His novel, One Mad Bid for Freedom (Penguin India) -- the only one of his works available at the conference bookshop -- is the story of how a group of layabouts, drunks and idealists try to reconstitute the memory of their former teacher, Korale, a man who has dropped out of society to find for himself by work, study and passion the truth of his relation to others and to the world he lives in. He takes all of nature and humanity into himself, but finally fails to communicate his learning to others, and so his legacy is frustrated by the violence of those political zealots who know the answers without seeking them.

Goonewardene's novel was emblematic of much of the discussion at the conference, which emphasised the isolation of individuals and states in the islands of their own consciousness and the separate traditions of their nations. Yet this separation of peoples also came under attack, first from the Indian novelist Nayantara Sahgal, who in her keynote address underlined the responsibility of writers and scholars to highlight oppression and bring people together in a common understanding of justice.

*The question of commonality however raised the issue of Commonwealth*

literature itself. Alastair Niven, one of the founders of the association, in a major address drew attention to the rejection of the concept by writers such as Salman Rushdie and critics like Edward Said, who believe that the idea of Commonwealth writing itself perpetuates the system of oppression the writers from the former colonies are rejecting.

The spirit of one of these writers, V.S. Naipaul, seemed to hang heavily over the conference, both as an object of discussion and as an illustration of the intellectual who, choosing to write from the imperial centre, loses touch with his own roots. Yet discussions of his work also suggested that, like Rushdie, he is able to make more sense of both centre and periphery because he has removed himself from the one without becoming absorbed in the other.

This theme led to some heated discussion among Indian delegates about whether the writers of the Indian diaspora, those now resident in America, England or Australia, could properly be considered Indian.

The final word in the conference went to the South African born London author Dan Jacobson, who in a moving address on 'Provinces and Capitals' pointed out that while all power rested in the capitals, this power was never permanent, and the virtues of healing and renewal constantly came from the provinces. The emergence of the oppressed in southern Africa, both in politics and in writing, provided the latest example.

The Commonwealth lives and changes as power moves from the centre to the old provinces. But the bomb-scarred building between the academic debate of the conference and the batsmen at their nets in the Sports Club is a reminder of the challenges that remain. The passions of separatism offer an urgent challenge to the cosmopolitan activities of the cricketers and writers who struggle to realise visions of a tradition and a common humanity.