

## Remembering Chelva

Chelva was the first person hired at Toronto to do what was then called Commonwealth literature. I was the second. Before us, there were people who taught Commonwealth literature at Toronto, Jim Howard and Ted Chamberlin, but they hadn't been hired to do so and they did it on the side as it were. Chelva was a pioneer, responsible for a major overhaul of how literature is studied at Toronto and for laying the foundations for an entirely new branch of literary study. When one is establishing new foundations, especially where there are already strong old ones, then one wants the qualities that characterized Chelva's scholarship: balance, accurate measurement, respect. He was the ideal writer to write the Cambridge History of South Asian Literature, the project that occupied him through this last year.

Chelva was later told he was hired because his love of literature shone so brightly at his interview. The hiring committee saw what was there. Throughout his career Chelva emphasized aesthetics and the workings of the imagination. Everything he did was at the service of the writers whose work he studied. I imagine that the committee thought they were hiring the person most likely to fit into Toronto. This was true: but in fitting so easily into Toronto Chelva also changed English at Toronto. For the next eight years, as the only postcolonialist at Toronto, Chelva occupied an anomalous position. I think his colleagues generally assumed that he read stuff that no one else did. But Chelva, a much loved teacher, was attracting a strong and steady stream of students. Many of his undergraduates went on to do graduate studies in postcolonial literature. He was changing the centre.

Of course the centre was changing throughout the world of literary study and Chelva was part of a much larger project. But change can come in different ways. Chelva was a man who won people over rather than push himself forward. That was true both in the department and in the larger discipline. Being at Toronto gave Chelva a lot of standing in Canada but he did not stand on status. He always had time for graduate students and junior colleagues. He never felt that he must display what he knew or put others in their place....

Chelva was my friend when I was a recent graduate without a permanent job and when I was a professor at a tiny no-name university. When I became his colleague, our friendship grew stronger but never changed in pitch. For many years we were on every postcolonial thesis in the department: that is, he supervised and I was a member. I have wandered with him through Hyderabad, Jamaica, Canberra, Boston, Charlottetown. We travelled by train to a Nazi concentration camp, by

foot up the Long Mountains in Jamaica, by car to see kangaroos. I thought of him as my mentor but also, because he was only a few years older, as my better self.

...Chelva used the respect he had won among colleagues and students to make peace but, where that was impossible, he found amusement in the very discomfort that made him unhappy. His laughter was possible because he saw the profession, others, and himself with a larger lens. This larger, tolerant, patient, wise lens is what Chelva brought to Toronto. He made the university a more considerate, humane place.

—Neil Ten Kortenaar, University of Toronto

Chelva Kanaganayakam—esteemed mentor, friend, and colleague—taught us through his own work on South Asian literary traditions the ways in which South Asian literary texts, in English or in English translation, can open up new worlds of knowledge. He exemplified this through his own translations of Tamil poetry into English and making them available for those of us who can only read it in English translation... Chelva's complex vision and dedication to South Asian literature will continue to provide inspirational lessons.

—Nandi Bhatia, University of Western Ontario



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It was a Fall day in late September 2002. We were flying on a wish all the way from sultry Bangkok to reinvent ourselves at the University of Toronto. It was a reconnaissance that was about to begin with a professor

of English who had earned himself a sizeable reputation with his counterparts at the National University of Singapore and the Singapore Management University, where I knew some of his close friends and was first introduced to his scholarship when I was interviewing his old friend, the feisty writer Gopal Baratham, while writing an article as features editor for The Straits Times group. My partner Harish and I were thrilled to have so easily found the path to the Munk Centre, at the University of Toronto. It was our first time in Canada in the Fall, and 1 Devonshire Road was carpeted with sodden red and gold leaves from the turning maples.

As we found our way up to Larkin 301, the old office of Professor Chelva Kanaganayakam, I paused at what would become a familiar threshold, and the door opened before my knuckles hit the wood. “I was expecting you,” he said with a smile. In the course of two hours in his office he made us feel that the University of Toronto was the place to come to and he agreed to be my dissertation supervisor. “After the high profile, exciting jobs as correspondents in Southeast Asia, this will have no fancy price tag. It’s almost all perspiration and very little inspiration.”

That first meeting was momentous. Though we had been selected to begin graduate programs by a leading university on the West Coast, by the time we left his office our minds had been changed by his gentle persuasion. In the summer of 2003, buoyed by the hope and assurance that Professor Chelva had lit, we had moved continents, said farewell to the warmth, luxury and bonhomie of a seventeen-year residency in Thailand and Singapore, to begin a challenging life, a different life in pursuit of a happiness that would come from a decade of reading, writing, teaching, grading and delighting in unforgettable transactions with students and peers. We smile over our morning cappuccinos every day, as we remember Chelva’s smiling admonishment to us as we walked out his door that day in September: “You can’t give this decade ahead of you a price tag. But the joy will never leave you, if you can make the grade.”

—Julie Mehta

I began my PhD in English at U of T in September 1990, a year after Chelva had arrived as a faculty member, and one of my first stops, on the suggestion of my supervisor, Jim Howard, was to Chelva’s office. Fall classes were about to begin, and he was clearly busy, but although I had come by unannounced, he was immediately welcoming, friendly, generous with his time, and sincerely interested in my proposed work in postcolonial literature. While he wasn’t yet teaching graduate courses, he invited me to audit his two fourth-year undergraduate seminars, one on Anita Desai and one on Salman Rushdie. I did so and it was a formative experience, not only for what I learned about those two favourite authors (of his and of mine) but as importantly for what Chelva showed me about conducting an effective seminar that shared knowledge in a participatory, democratic, patient, and non-hierarchical way. Any success my own

Honours and graduate seminars have achieved over the past 20 years at UNB owes much to Chelva's understated, respectful, and collaborative pedagogy...

During the remainder of my PhD I audited a second course with Chelva (his first graduate seminar, on South-East Asian literature), did a thesis-prep comprehensive exam with him, and benefited enormously from his advice on my thesis reading committee ... Chelva continued to offer me keen insights and helpful feedback on draft chapters throughout the writing process, and after I defended and moved to Fredericton we stayed in touch regularly. He invited me to a wonderful conference called "Competing Realities" in 1997 he had organized to celebrate 50 years of Indian literature since independence. He gave a keynote at CACLALS in 2005 and I was honoured to introduce him. He published prodigiously, won a well-deserved teaching award, attended conferences, and was inducted into the Royal Society.

I last saw him and spoke with Chelva in August 2013 at St. Lucia; he attended the triennial ACLALS conference there with his family (including grandchildren), whom I'd never met before. What a pleasure it was to see him in his element with them. He was happy, relaxed, avuncular. I last heard from him in September 2014, just two months before he passed away, when he emailed me to ask if I would write a letter supporting a nomination of M.G. Vassanji for the Molson Prize that he was spearheading. So in our final interaction, fittingly, Chelva was busy championing someone else's work and career, as he had done for so many people – students, colleagues, and writers – over the years. I feel very lucky to have been one of them and to have come under his gentle spell at a formative time.

—John Clement Ball, University of New Brunswick

For me, Chelva was, first and foremost, always a scholar, meaning that an examination of scholarship and ideas was always the basis of conversation. There was little chitchat, no gossip, and always something intellectual and important to think about when having a conversation with him. As we stood in the gardens in St. Lucia, outside of Sandals beach resort where the 16<sup>th</sup> Triennial Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies Conference was taking place, Chelva asked about my recent work, and the conversation soon turned to the act of translation. Chelva stressed to me that the basis of one's study of comparative literature should be languages—that scholars must simply learn other languages (he was using the example of South Asian literatures) if they were to understand literature with any integrity. "What's more," he added, "there's simply too much published. Too many translations. People need to make sure of the quality of literature before they invest their time. Not everything is great. People need to have more integrity."

Of course, I am remembering and paraphrasing the conversation from several years' distance, but I clearly remember that that was the tenor and

point of the discussion we had. The point of that talk and lesson was that people needed to have integrity.

I was not fortunate enough to have had Chelva teach me a course in literature during my doctoral years. However, I was incredibly fortunate to have had him supervise my dissertation. Inevitably, and above everything else, the most important things I learned working with Chelva were the importance of integrity and the importance of being gentle and having humility.

Chelva's instructional style was to sit back and to step in only if he saw me making an error or a move that would lead to potential errors. His role was not heavy handed, though it was also not slight. Chelva counselled me when to pursue an idea more fully, when to abandon a direction, when to take a new one, and he offered his professional perspective without trying to direct the project with his own initiatives. He listened a great deal. And he always remained gentle and encouraging. I always left his office and presence feeling better about my work and myself and inspired to do more.

I didn't think about the importance of these qualities I was learning until I had been teaching myself for a number of years. I don't think I could ever hope to be as good a mentor as Chelva, but I aim to consider more closely now what he taught me by example: the importance of praising students and telling them their ideas and work are valuable; the importance of being gentle and creating a safe space for students to grow; the importance of being humble and never trying to live out your own scholarly pursuits through those under your tutelage; and the importance of integrity—the importance of doing something to the utmost of your ability and with the most care, time and attention you have at your disposal.

In the Gardens of St. Lucia  
*for Chelva*

How to say what flowers do,  
the yucca and rose, orchid and  
allamanda.

Do we speak Latin or golden  
trumpets of the island,

press our scents in their noses  
or allow them to talk crabbed  
and lobster clawed? Heliconia,

the garden's sense, prevails  
sweet and strong.

—Stephanie McKenzie, Memorial University





Chelva's backyard, Toronto © Shankary Kanaganayakam

I had known Chelva for over twenty years first as a graduate student in History and later as an academic colleague, advisor and friend. I first met him during his early years at the University of Toronto in the early 90s due to our common interest in South Asia. At that time, the centre for South Asian Studies at the University of Toronto was very much connected with historians and it was only gradually that Chelva who was firmly in the English department began to be engaged with the centre's activities eventually serving as director of the centre for a number of terms. During this early period however, though he was only peripherally connected with my formal program of graduate studies in South Asian history, I found in Chelva someone I could speak with at ease on a range of subjects including of course my research work. His humble unpretentious nature, warm presence and his openness to discuss anything beyond the usual academic subjects were indeed rare qualities that I valued deeply. Thus began what I would call a close academic mentorship and friendship. I found in Chelva a rare academic mentor and friend with whom I could share ideas not only about research and scholarship but also other challenges, challenges of being an academic in the humanities coming as we both did from middle-class migrant South Asian backgrounds.

Though Chelva's scholarly focus was in the area of post-colonial literature in English, he at the same time had an abiding interest and passion for South Asian vernacular literature, specifically Tamil literature and Tamil literary history—a subject in which he was remarkably proficient. This great passion and immersion in South Asian vernacular literature drew him even more towards South Asian Studies and towards

greater participation in the Centre for South Asian Studies in which he served as an excellent director for a number of terms. One of his outstanding achievements was in organizing and conducting for several successful years the international inter-disciplinary Tamil Studies Conference which brought to the University of Toronto some of the best scholars in Tamil studies from around the world. While Chelva was a scholar open to a great range of theoretical currents in literature and postcolonial studies, my own suspicion was that he was above all—as he had himself once confessed, an admirer of fine literature—judged purely on the basis of aesthetics—and had little patience for what he regarded as works written with decidedly political or pedagogic agendas. This deep literary conservatism despite his theoretical eclecticism may have at times given the sense that he was rather too eclectic in terms of his own ideological position or even politically apathetic. His own position however appears consistent with his deep engagement with South Asian vernacular literature especially ancient and medieval Tamil poetry including the medieval Tamil Bhakti corpus. In fact, he felt that the key to understanding South Asian postcolonial writing must be firmly grounded in the South Asian vernacular literary tradition. He was clearly moving towards such a reading as revealed in a paper he presented at an invited lecture in 2008, titled, “Rethinking the Postcolonial and the Indigenous: Re-reading Postcolonial Indo-Anglian literature.” His numerous works of translation also reveal this commitment. In fact the project he was working on when he passed away, which he felt would be his Magnus-opus was on re-interpreting the medieval Tamil Bhakti corpus. As recently as March 2014, less than a year before his passing, he had presented a paper, titled “Refashioning Identities: Bhakti in Tamil Nadu.” The project remains sadly unfinished. The overwhelming burden of teaching, including supervising a huge number of graduate students, not to mention his family commitments all had contributed to this delay. In closing I must say Chelva was one of the most open and generous scholars and academic that I have come across and above all a fine human being, friend, and colleague whose warmth, gentleness for me at least is irreplaceable.

—Ravi Vaitheespara, University of Manitoba

Chelva, or Kanags as he was known till he left the island, had an abiding fondness for Sri Lanka despite establishing his international reputation as a Professor in English in Canada. He studied at Trinity College Kandy and the University of Kelaniya, grew up in the University of Peradeniya where his father was Professor of Tamil and worked briefly at the University of Jaffna before emigrating. His craving for Sri Lankan company was such that at major conferences, he would often identify Sri Lankan participants and spend an evening exclusively in their company because nothing pleased him more than to listen to and exchange anecdotes about his school teachers or university professors.

This sense of camaraderie enabled him to maintain friendly relations

with his academic peers in Sri Lanka even though his positions on several aspects of Sri Lankan writing differed from theirs. During my sixteen-year stint as the Editor of *The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities*, I would occasionally be short of an article and Chelva would always respond to my plea with something substantial. He also edited issues of *Nethra* for ICES, translated the Tamil novel *Sadangu* as *Ritual* for the Gratiaen Trust and contributed to *Navasilu*. Consequently, it was entirely fitting that Chelva who was equally at ease with the Sri Lankan and Sri Lankan expatriate community would be requested to edit the festschrift volume *Arbiters of a National Imaginary: Essays on Sri Lanka* dedicated to his Sri Lankan professor Ashley Halpé. In addition, he was often invited to be a plenary speaker at International Conferences held in Sri Lanka, including one organised by SLACLALS. He was working on a major article for what could yet be the final issue of *Phoenix*, the journal of this Association, at the time of his demise. That remembrance of Chelva Kanaganayakam continues to generate sadness among his professors, peers and students indicates that the void created by his passing more than a year ago will be extremely difficult to fill.

—Walter Perera, University of Peradeniya



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