

# 'The most ordinary life bears extraordinary stories'

In *Ayya's Accounts*, Anand Pandian documents his grandfather's journey from Burma to India during the Second World War. The author in conversation with **Arthur J Pais**

In 1941, as the Japanese were advancing into Burma, a 20-year-old man joined thousands of other people of Indian origin in starting to walk home. There were about 1 million people of Indian origin in Burma then, a substantial number of them from what would become the Tamil Nadu state many years later.

M P Mariappan's home was 1,700 miles away.

A train took him as far as Pyay, north of Rangoon. From there, he had to walk to Akyab near the Indian border, on a roughly 200-mile mountain path.

'It was a terrible area to cross,' Mariappan says in *Ayya's Accounts: A Ledger of Hope in Modern India* (Indiana University Press), which documents his journey and tells a larger survival story of a low caste Nadar community and how it became resurgence over the years. 'Hardly anyone came or went along this route... There was only jungle, climbing up and falling deep down once again, through endless thickets of bamboo.'

The Indian exodus from Burma is an underdocumented 20<sup>th</sup>-century migration — at least 400,000 Burmese Indians attempted the trek, and an estimated 10,000 to

50,000 people never completed it.

A labor of love, the book is collaboration between Anand Pandian, associate professor of anthropology, Johns Hopkins University, and his grandfather Mariappan, a school dropout.

Pandian intertwines his grandfather's voice with his own, his memories with his grandfather's and the history of the Nadar people.

'The result of that mediation is a profoundly compact read,' an overview in a Johns Hopkins publication declared.

**What is the most pivotal event in your grandfather, Ayya's life?**

The pivotal event was in 1941, and it is very important to the book, the treacherous journey he made as a refugee back to India from Burma. Ayya's stories of that time are terrible to think about, the way that they cooked, ate, and slept alongside countless bodies on the jungle route they took from Prome to the coast; the way that the wheels of their bullock cart would have to climb over the bodies heaped along that mountain path.

The historian Hugh Tinker has described this migration

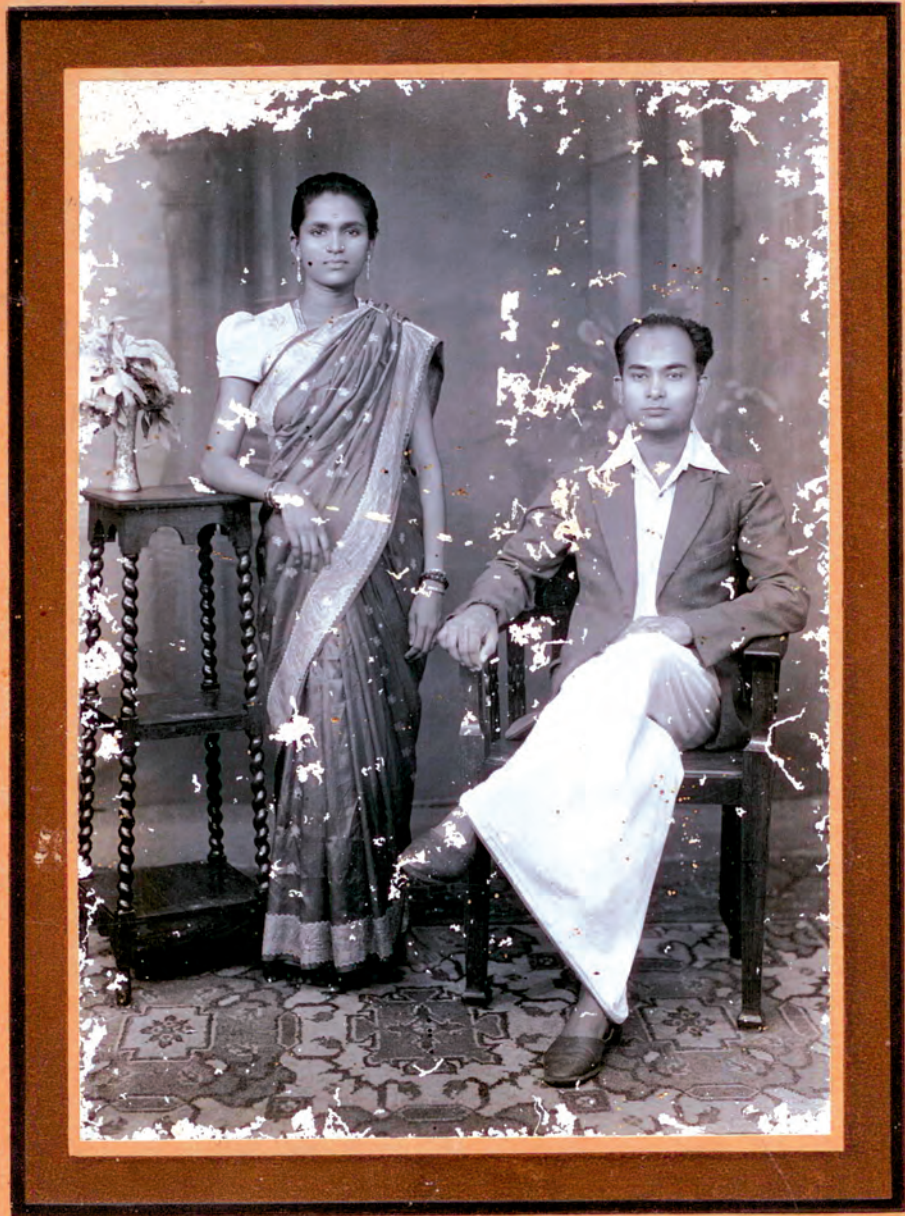
as a forgotten 'Long March.'

There were about 200,000 Indians who took that route through the Arakan mountains to get to the west coast of Burma. No one knows exactly how many of them died, but most likely between 10,000 and 50,000. They were completely and utterly neglected by the British government of Burma, there was just one officer posted to look after them along that entire route.'

**Why is this life important?**

As an anthropologist, I have come to believe deeply that any life is important, that the most ordinary life bears extraordinary stories, that no life is as small as it might appear from a distance.

My grandfather, Ayya, is 95; he has been alive now for nearly a century. Think of how different the world would have been when he was a child: George V was the emperor of India, Gandhi was still in South Africa, Burma was an integral part of British India. The stories and memories of ordinary individuals like Ayya can give us a unique perspective on the past. There are tremendous events of a global



M P Mariappan and M Chellammal, the author's grandparents, at a studio in Madurai in 1949.

Left, the Burma Evacuee Identity Certificate that Mariappan was granted in 1946 as a wartime refugee.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY: ANAND PANDIAN



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scope that my grandfather witnessed, things about which he has a great deal to say in this book: The effects of the Great Depression on the small town in Burma where he was living in the 1930s, the harrowing experience of Indian refugees who fled from there during the Second World War, the mixed feelings of parents as their children joined the wave of Diasporic emigration from India to the United States beginning in the 1970s.

His stories also yield insights into larger patterns of social and economic transformation in modern India: The struggles for advancement of formerly despised castes such as the Nadar community to which he belongs, or the way that Nehruvian ideals of economic development in the postwar era seized the imaginations of ordinary households in India.

When we think of hope and aspiration in India, we tend to look to the most famous 'success stories' or those who've been denied such possibilities altogether.

But there's a lot to learn from those who found themselves somewhere in the middle of the currents of change that have swept up millions in India's modern times: Those who sought prosperity and found some share of it, those who had to throw themselves into that complicated mix of luck, nerve, ruse and subterfuge that getting ahead so often demands.

## How did this book emerge?

In some ways, this book emerged as an answer to a question that Ayya challenged me with on the day after my wedding in Kerala in 2005: When are you going to write my life's story?

I was coming often to India, as an anthropologist, spending months on end with elder men, women, and others in villages near Madurai where my grandfather was living.

I felt a sense of responsibility to Ayya and began to do the same kind of work with him: Interviews, observation of daily life, and close conversations over many days and years that gradually took the shape of a book.

We published a different version of this book first in Tamil in 2012, working closely with a Tamil writer, Kamalalayan, who helped to translate my portions of the text into Tamil and to work with me in editing my grandfather's words and putting them in the form of cohesive stories.

All this has been happening over the last few years. But, in another way, you could say that the genesis of this book began some 17 or so years ago, when I first began visiting India for research and volunteer work from the United States, and I began to hear stories from my grandfather about his distant and unknown past.

I was astonished by the things he had to say, the sense that this small man carried somewhere within his person such a vast universe of experience. This sense has lingered with me all these years, and I'm grateful now to have had the chance to record what I have learned from him.

## What has been your experience in India?

I was born in New York, but lived in India for a few years as a young child. That was when I first learned Tamil.

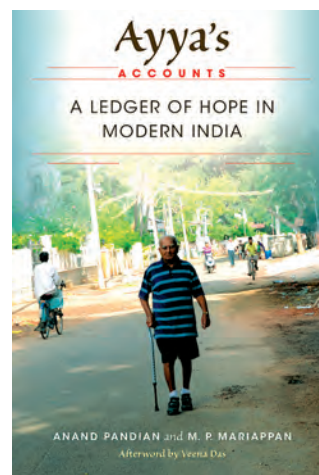
Later, we would often go to India on family trips, but we would never see anything more than the houses of our relatives. I had the desire to see something more of India and worked as a volunteer social worker at an NGO in rural



Anand Pandian with his Ayya in Norwalk, Connecticut, 1974. Below, Pandian records Ayya's Accounts on the front porch of the latter's house in Madurai, 2012.



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY: ANAND PANDIAN



thing that began in India in the 1990s. But already in the 1960s, my grandfather's fruit shop in Madurai was dealing in apples from America and Australia, pomegranates from Kabul.

In fact, the very depth of the historical connection between India and Burma was something new to me. We still have distant relations in Rangoon. When we took Ayya to Burma in 2002, to search for his father's grave, we met relatives who had married into various

Burmese ethnicities, who had photographs of K Kamaraj on their walls side by side with the Burmese nationalist leader Aung San. All of this was enormously interesting.

## There is plenty of drama and tension in the book.

Yes, that's right, and this drama and tension assumes many forms. There are more familiar kinds of drama that have an important place in Ayya's story, such as the loss of his wife, my grandmother Paati, in 1997.

My grandfather speaks very movingly and poignantly about that time, in one of the chapters of the book, about losing someone with whom he'd shared his life for over 50 years.

Ayya's story of his journey from Burma into India gives a very different picture of what happened than what you see in a film like *Parasakthi*, that iconic Tamil film of the 1950s. In *Parasakthi*, the brothers who flee from Burma are treated well with medical attention along their trek to India, then utterly neglected once they arrived.

What Ayya experienced was the very opposite: Complete indifference by the colonial government along the way, but then the Congress Party activists at every town once they arrived in India, welcoming the refugees with gifts of food, clothing, and free railway passage to their home towns.

## When you look back, what did you least expect about this book project, apart from your grandfather's stories?

I never thought that I would write a book about my grandfather, let alone work closely with him as a collaborator. Yet here we were, a professor at a well-known American university, with a PhD from UC Berkeley, writing together with someone who was forced to drop out of a village school in India in the eighth grade, only to trade in fruit for most of his life.

This, I think, is one of the most wonderful things about anthropology as a vocation. We produce knowledge

collaboratively with profoundly different people, whose stories and insights that have the capacity to displace, often quite deeply, our own ideas about what is worth knowing in the world. The ideal outgrowth of such a process, in my opinion, is something that in principle can be read by anyone.

One tremendous source of satisfaction with this project is the extent to which those who've read the book so far, in both its Tamil and English versions, have often found themselves thinking about their relationships with their own grandparents.

In fact, the well-known Tamil novelist Su Venkatesan, who wrote the foreword to the Tamil edition, spoke at the launch of that book in Madurai about how no one could put down the book without feeling some twinge of sorrow for having neglected to enter into a similar conversation with their own grandparents.

It's true that these are times of rapid and even dizzying change. Still, we have an enormous amount to learn from those who've come before us, and this is a book dedicated to that possibility.

## Was Ayya always eager to talk about the past?

My grandfather is not a natural storyteller, and although he wanted this book to be written and his stories told, I often had to coax him to elicit details and recollections that he might tend to brush off and move quickly past. There

Tirunelveli for a year after college.

I went back to graduate school to study questions of rural environment and development at UC Berkeley.

My dissertation research took place in the Cumbum Valley, west of Madurai, where I focused on ideas of morality and virtue among farmers in that region.

Right now, I'm finishing another book project based on years of research with Tamil filmmakers, looking at how cinematic experience is created.

## What are a few things that surprised you in your grandfather's stories?

The biggest surprises in this project came with my grandfather's unique perspective on the familiar large-scale events that also touched his own life.

I'm thinking, for example, about India's independence from Britain. Ayya had known of Nehru's visit to Rangoon with his daughter Indira, and had seen Gandhi speak in Madurai. Still, he says, he learned of the moment of Indian independence 10 days after it had happened!

When we think of that moment, we tend to imagine everyone in India huddled around their radios, listening to Nehru's famous 'Tryst with Destiny' speech.

How can we imagine then that this moment not only missed someone in a major market town like Madurai, but that it took days for it to actually register?

Things like nationalism look very different on the ground when you examine their interface with ordinary lives.

Or, think of globalization. We talk as though this is some-



M P Mariappan's children and grandchildren at the entrance to the Tirupparankundram temple south of Madurai, 1992.

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are some things that he does not say very much about at all, as the anthropologist Veena Das points out in her graceful yet challenging afterword to the book, such as the mysterious death of his daughter in 1969, or the death of his own mother when Ayya was still a child, about which he remembers feeling nothing in the way of sorrow.

There are also the circumstances of his economic development, of the progress in wealth and prosperity seen in the family over many decades.

Ayya does divulge many details of the moral compromises of the bazaar: The hiding of true costs and prices, the threats that overshadow economic transactions, even the way that his father-in-law had resorted to fooling peasants into buying inferior handspun cloth during the Second World War.

He admits that you can't earn anything in business without telling lies, and that he could not have raised and educated eight children without such ruses. Still, I'm not sure that he's told me everything when it comes to such stratagems and tactics.

All of this has something to do with the ways that he and others have gotten used to narrating his life, as an embodiment of virtues such as hard work, discipline, and stoic indifference to suffering. He is, after all, a very proud and wily old Indian man!

Still, one thing that often happened in our conversations is that the momentum of what he was telling overtook both of us, both my prodding and his inhibitions.

Suddenly, at times, we were in the space of an anecdote that could not be confined to the right point of view. Stories can do that sometimes, taking us far beyond the niceties and expectations of the present into a foreign and distant time that can be rather unsettling to confront directly.

**What are some of your grandfather's most painful memories?**

At several points in the book, he comes back to instances of betrayal that weigh on him still in his old age. The most significant of these was something that happened during

that long trek through the jungles of Burma, as people were dying of cholera and other diseases all around them.

One man in Ayya's own group, an Indian from a village close to my grandfather's native place, also fell ill, and they had to abandon him to fend for himself.

All around, dying people were begging for help: 'Father, please give me some water, please give me some water,' but they ignored those calls and also left behind this man for fear that they might not survive themselves.

More than 70 years later, my grandfather remains haunted by that memory.

**What are some of the most important reasons for the resurgence of the Nadar community?**

This is a complex story that has unfolded over nearly two centuries. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they were known as Shanars, toddy tappers, a poor and defiled community making country liquor from the sap of the palmyra palm.

Through the combination of Christian conversion, migration into new market towns, concerted community organizing and attention to schooling, they became one of the leading merchant castes of Tamil Nadu by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Known now as Nadars, many from the community have forgotten this Shanar past altogether. Yet Ayya himself recalls having to cup his hands to receive water from others as a child, as the touch of his lips to a glass was deemed too polluting by upper castes.

**What do you admire the most in your grandfather's life?**

His perseverance and resolve in the face of countless unforeseen hardships.

**What is the best gift you have received from Ayya?**

The gift of his stories, which it has been my privilege to record. This has been a humbling and sometimes awe-inspiring experience, trying to grasp my own life as a small speck in the tremendous current of history that has swept us along together.

I think of what Ayya says about when we first met in New York in 1974, when I was just a year old and he used to take me to the park: 'I was the first one to show Anand the light of the sun,' Ayya says.

What gift could be more extraordinary than such perspective?

## 'Pakistan, India and Bangladesh have betrayed the promise of Independence'

◀ M3

**read lately?**

I always read Pankaj Mishra. His *From the Ruins of an Empire* was a really good. It was an interesting way of turning history around. To look at the history of Asia rather than the history of Europe.

Rahul Bhattacharya's *Pundits from Pakistan*, which I recently re-read remains one of my favorite books.

**And in Pakistan?**

I hear Moni Mohsin's *The Diary of a Social Butterfly* is coming out soon and I've always loved Moni's work.

The book that I haven't read yet but just bought before leaving Karachi a few days ago was *The Prisoner* by Omar Shahid Hamid who used to be with the police. He has got a very interesting take on Karachi and the world of police and criminals.

**When a book is published and you can revel in what you've achieved — is that the best phase in a writer's life?**

The nicest phase is when you are quite near the end of the book. That is my favorite bit. The beginning of writing a book is really tough for me, but when you sense you are reaching the end, it is a very satisfying feeling.

**Your book covers a sweep of history, where did you source your material from?**

Mukulika's book was a starting point. There are collections of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan's speeches translated into English.

It is one of the ironies of life that London is the best place to be for studying colonial Peshawar. It has so much archival information.

I went through the India Office Library archive to see documents that were being produced at that time to get a sense of the politics then.

I have always loved history. The period covered in the book is such an interesting period and it is so well documented in the library.

I spent days and weeks there discovering things that were thrilling, which often made you very angry or sad but there was a wonderful sense of discovery.

**What fascinated you about Gandhara art? How is that art form with its strong Buddhist influence preserved in that region?**

Peshawar Museum has the world's best collection of Gandhara Art. The second largest is in the Lahore Museum and third largest is, I think, in the Taxila Museum.

I have been to all three and they are beautifully maintained. They have exceptional Gandhara work and they are certainly there and on display, but I don't think enough people go and see them.

According to me, the best thing in all of Pakistan is the Peshawar Museum.

**What do you see as the way forward for both India and Pakistan?**

I think it seems so obvious to so many of us that hostility is not beneficial to both countries. It is such an easy thing to say, but it requires equal political will on both sides of the border to get to the next stage.

The problem is that it takes so much to build things up into a better relationship and so little to derail it and that has always been the trouble between the two countries.