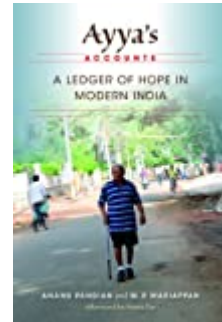


Anand Pandian, M. P. Mariappan, Veena Das. *Ayya's Accounts: A Ledger of Hope in Modern India*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014. xii + 216 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-01258-6; \$24.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-01250-0.



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Commissioned by Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

Across Time and Space: Grandfather and Grandson Converse

Anand Pandian, an American anthropologist with two fine books already to his credit, listened closely over the years to his grandfather, M. P. Mariappan, eliciting recollections of his grandfather's life in south India, Burma, and south India again. They spoke in Tamil, and a first Tamil edition of this book came out in 2012. The English translation reads well, with Mariappan's plain words matched by Pandian's brief but eloquent reflections on them. The book, *Ayya's Accounts: A Ledger of Hope in Modern India*, by Anand Pandian and M. P. Mariappan, is a life history but also a dialogue, a conversation held over years and noted and commented upon by both authors. As Pandian hoped it would, it tells a compelling story about modern India through the life of this single extraordinary individual.

The grandfather's personality emerges clearly as both men recount the life of the young orphan who was taken to Burma, became a shopkeeper there, and fled back to south India during World War II, journeying 1,700 miles overland and becoming a successful fruit merchant in Madurai. Pandian refers, in the preface, to his grandfa-

ther as a man of plain words and sparing expressions, a man whose prose displayed little ornamentation despite the stark beauty of his stories (p. xi). The grandfather's focus is on his life as a merchant, a man keeping accounts, rather than his life as a family man. His wife, Anand's grandmother, appears to have been an equally compelling figure, guiding their children's education. Veena Das remarks, in a penetrating afterword, on the poverty of words through which powerful emotions are sometimes kept at bay in the narrative (p. 200). She calls attention to the grandfather's apparent distancing from experiences of loss: his mother's death when he was very young and his eldest daughter's death (she had married the son of one of his sisters, sisters who disappeared from the narrative early). Only Mariappan's wife's death evokes tears and grief. Das draws attention to how Mariappan's difficulty with talking of his mother, sisters, and daughter is echoed by Anand's own enshrining of men and boys as the proper inheritors of Ayya's legacy (p. 205). I am not sure that Anand would agree with this assessment, although I also missed the

presence of the women in the family in the conversations. Anand remarks on his grandmother's vivid personality and the way she could have enriched the book (p. 148). However, she died in 1997, after the children had attained adulthood and established themselves (half of the children and most of the grandchildren) in the United States.

The book is an unusually evocative cross-generational memoir, a wonderful read. Pandian's own

elegant and sparse prose shows how a focus on one life can illuminate India's development and interaction with a rapidly modernizing world. As he and his grandfather set down accounts of interwoven lives, their own and many others, Pandian argues that by embracing the unsettled nature of such accounts, the book demonstrates hope, an ebb and flow of optimism and ambition in the world at large (p. 198). Mariappan's final words, at the end of the acknowledgements, exemplify this hope.

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