

## A Masterly Memoir of Another Era

Review of *A Journey across generations* and *The Raj agent in Ceylon, 1936-1940* by Sharada Nayak.  
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### BOOK SHELF

## A masterly memoir of another era

HEMA RAMANATHAN

Over the past 50 years there have been a series of biographies and autobiographies set in the 20th century, nostalgic journeys into the recent past. Sharada Nayak's *A Journey Across Generations* fits into this genre easily but is exceptional for many reasons.

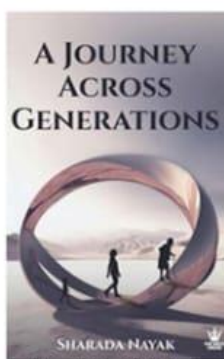
It explains how and why Sharada Nayak thrived as a professional, who for over 35 years ran the Fulbright program in Delhi and even after retirement organised an enlightening and unique program that challenged visiting students. And how it is in her eighties she can turn her hand to writing and author two absorbing books.

For a start, unlike many personal memoirs, not only is it a masterly blend of personal recollections from a sharp memory but it is also rigorously researched, based on primary sources of letters, reports and photos in her personal possession and in the national archives.

Nayak demonstrated this set of skills in her first book about her father A.V. Pai who had been an Agent for the Indian government in the 1930s in then-Ceylon to advocate for Indian immigrants who worked as indentured labour mainly in the tea estates. Her narrative unerringly highlighted echoes of present-day sentiments about immigrants stealing citizens jobs, and the social, political and financial pressures that continue to underlie these issues.

With that same clarity and precision, in her second book she recalls people and events that influenced her. The first half is a subtle but sharp take on the roles of women in her family as they evolved through three generations. She pokes gentle fun at her naïve self, the innocent ease with which she got admission into Briarcliff College, the first stepping stone to a distinguished career.

It is filled to the brim with sketches of famous people, to the extent that it sounds like name dropping - until you remind yourself that they were an integral part of her life! Growing up as a daughter of Prime Minister Nehru's first Principal Private Secretary, she had a front



Sharada Nayak. (2024). *A Journey Across Generations. The Write Order, India.* & Sharada Nayak. (2016). *The Raj Agent in Ceylon, 1936-1940. The Write Order, India.* Nayak1000@gmail.com

row seat for the political changes of a newly independent India. She recaptures her deep feeling of joy, awe and patriotism on attending the historic midnight session of Parliament on August 15, 1947, one of the few who is probably alive to tell the tale.

Two things from the book will stay with me. The first is her delightful and lively descriptions which provide a peek into an era long past gone but without sounding antiquated. For instance, the explanation for the three kinds of covering on the windows of a railway compartment pulled by a steam engine - glass to keep out smoke, net to let in fresh air, and wooden slats for privacy; now unfortunately replaced in most modern trains by a sealed pane of mundane glass.

The second is her delicacy of feeling shown in the closing of this book. 'Akka,' a young widow, came into the Nayak household as a servant and remained a valued and integral member of the family. This illiterate woman who had no life of her own, vested all her hopes and dreams in the three Nayak girls. Paying homage in the final page to her, rather than centring herself or the other illustrious figures who paraded through her life, Sharada Nayak has sensitively fulfilled her 'Akka's' dreams for her in this masterly memoir.

(Hema Ramanathan is a teacher, educator and author)

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It is filled to the brim with sketches of famous people, to the extent that it sounds like name dropping - until you remind yourself that they were an integral part of her life! Growing up as a daughter of Prime Minister Nehru's first Principal Private Secretary, she had a front row seat for the political changes of a newly independent India. She recaptures her deep feeling of joy, awe and patriotism on attending the historic midnight session of Parliament on August 15, 1947, one of the few who is probably alive to tell the tale.

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