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LIKE a certain Jack and Rose of the movie world, Nadesan and Janeki are also fictional characters whose love story is set against the backdrop of very real historical events. But, unlike that story about a sinking ship, author Dave Anthony's tale deals with issues that still have repercussions today.

Anthony, a former Catholic priest, had lived with the communities on rubber estates and was immersed in the struggles of the estate workers for many years. Though it was part of his work as a priest, he met with not just the Christians but everyone who lived and worked there. It gave Anthony an empathic insight into the lives of the rubber-tappers who earned a meagre existence in their isolated world of rubber trees, squalid living conditions, and the ever watchful eyes of the estate management.

He decided to bring their stories to the masses, originally through a screenplay. But the task proved too big, the story too long and epic, spanning generations. In the end, he streamlined it all down to a 400-page historical novel called *Love And Struggle Beyond The Rubber Estates*.

"It took me two years to write," says Anthony, when we meet at his home in Petaling Jaya. "Before that, the idea had been percolating in my mind. For a long time, I had been wanting to write a book because I had been working with the plantation workers for some time. Their plight, until today, hasn't changed very much. So I chose that particular period in history, which I think is almost a forgotten history especially for the Indians."

That period, from 1937 to 1948, encompasses British rule, World War II and the Japanese Occupation, and then the return of the British. It was a tumultuous time when kangannies (overseers) recruited workers from India who were promised a better future in Malaya, but who discover later that they were being shortchanged by the British planters. Then came the war during which many estate workers were forced to work on the infamous Death Railway in Burma, dying from exhaustion and starvation, buried in mass graves. When the British came back, the conditions never improved for them, and still they had to fight for justice.

In the midst of it all, is the story of two lovers who are separated by the war, then have to find their way back to each other.

In the book, protagonist Nadesan, or Desa as he is known to his friends, is the only one on the estate who has had an education and he naturally becomes the leader who unites the workers to fight for their rightful wages. In short, Anthony is emphasising the importance of education, which was largely denied to the workers by plantation owners. Anthony denotes in the book that the denial was a ploy by the estate owners to keep the workers ignorant and exploitable.

# More than a love story

A local author tells a tale of love set against the tumultuous history of Malaya's rubber estates.



"If they get a good education, it would be a good stepping stone for them," says Anthony. "So Desa had some education and he took on the leadership of the group. He even dared to challenge some of the practices on the plantation. The way they managed to assess their cost of living, he was able to do that, and none of them on their own would have been able to."

"And this kind of gave them a self-awareness, and they began to see how their situation was oppressive. So they wanted justice. He stirred them to action, and they paid the price, getting shot at."

Anthony says he researched extensively for the novel, drawing references and information from books and also the Internet. One of his sources was S. Marimuthu, 86, a survivor of the Death Railway. While working on the railway, Marimuthu had taken ill, and the Japanese, thinking that he was dead, threw him onto a pile of dead bodies and buried him alive. Fortunately, some fellow workers saw his hand sticking out of the sand and pulled him out. Anthony recreated that scene for his

**Historical roots:** Back in the (not so good) old days, conditions for workers on rubber plantations were dire and while some aspects might have improved over the years, author Dave Anthony raises the persistent problems that still plague these workers in his debut novel, wrapping the issues within a love story.

book, with some creative liberty, of course.

"I got to know him through a friend of a friend," says Anthony. "A student from Singapore had come over here and wanted to meet some people who had experienced estate life. So I took her to this particular family, and I met (Marimuthu) there. I started talking to him and he told me his story. I included quite a lot of it, about 80%."

*Love And Struggle Beyond The Rubber Estates* is, of course, more than just a love story. It is at its heart a human rights story, an inspiring tale that includes references to *makal sakthi* (people power) and also *hartal*, a general strike action the origin of which goes all the way back to Gandhi and the Indian Independence Movement.

"(The estate workers) were illiterate and couldn't get proper birth certificates and papers for their children," says Anthony. "Just imagine, they were isolated, illiterate, under the dominion of the planters. For the planters, these workers were like machines that they operated, and they didn't care for their future. "Also, at the time, citizenship was not an

issue. And today, the result of that is there are many stateless Indians in the country."

Anthony says that the struggle goes on today, under different circumstances, different living conditions. "Also, the dispersion from the estates have led a lot of the young people into a lot of violence. They are a bit lost and aimless. When they came out of the estates, they had no skills except rubber-tapping. They just fit into whatever they can find."

"The situation, in some respects, is even worse now than it was in the estates. Without any other skills, they became involved in driving lorries, roadworks. And even now, those jobs are being taken over by foreign labour. They are losing out even there. And we have political parties who are saying a lot of things but not doing much."

As such, the novel fittingly closes with the words "not The End". The struggle against oppression and injustice is a universal one, and Anthony's novel has bigger relevance than even he initially thought. He never set out to write such a book, but only wanted to write an engaging love story that also addresses the issues of the estate workers.

"It works on a micro level as well as on a macro level," he says. "Big nations, first world, the US, Europe, the International Monetary Fund and how they oppress the poorer countries. It's the same pattern, and it repeats itself."

■ *Love And Struggle Beyond The Rubber Estates* by Dave Anthony is available at major bookstores nationwide.

