

Guardians of My Childhood: The Appachens Who Shaped Our Family Legacy

By Dr. Ranjit Thomas Abraham

When I look back at the sunlit days of my childhood long before I had even turned ten - the memories that shine brightest are wrapped around three unforgettable patriarchs of our family tree. They were my father A.T. Abraham's favourite first cousins, whom I knew affectionately as the Malayil Appachen (Late Ninan Ninan), Thattarethu Appachen (Late T.A. Ninan), and Puliyodil Appachen (Late A.M. Varghese). To my young eyes, these men, already well into their eighties then, weren't just elderly relatives; they felt like timeless guardians of our history.

I remember being utterly fascinated by their thick, bushy eyebrows. In the innocent logic of my boyhood, those striking brows were the ultimate badge of ancient wisdom and absolute authority. To me, they were not simply features of age but symbols of dignity, like crowns bestowed by time itself.

Each Appachen held a unique, almost mythical place in my imagination:

- **Malayil Appachen** was a portrait of enduring strength. While age bowed others, he remained vibrant and full of life. I was convinced his vitality came from his daily ritual – the long, purposeful walks down to the banks of the River Pampa from the Malayil house at Mathapara, where he would bathe and emerge completely restored by its waters. Watching him stride with determination, I felt he carried the river's spirit within him, a living reminder that resilience is born from discipline.
- **Thattarethu Appachen** embodied quiet dignity. Always enthroned in his grand, old grandfather's chair at the house entrance, he seemed like a king presiding over his court. His strikingly fair complexion fascinated me, and I often wondered how the foreign sun of Malaysia had left him so pale while the Ethiopian sun had painted me a deep, warm brown. In those moments of childish curiosity, I realized how family stories stretch across continents, weaving us together through journeys and generations.

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- **Puliyodil Appachen** was our resident historian. His voice carried the weight of memory as he painted vivid, terrifying pictures of the Great Flood of '99 (1924), describing a world swallowed by water. I used to secretly doubt his tales, looking out at the giant nutmeg trees guarding his courtyard. They stood so tall, proud, and untouched that I couldn't imagine a flood ever rising high enough to challenge them. Yet his stories planted in me a reverence for the fragility of life and the power of nature.

What began as a strict duty enforced by my father to always stop and greet your elders got softened into the sweet anticipation of my favourite routine. Those wooden doors and shaded verandas became places of pure warmth. They never rushed me; instead, they met my endless, bubbling childhood chatter with deep patience and gentle smiles. I never felt like a child being watched but deeply seen, fiercely loved, and genuinely respected.

Decades later, the echoes of those visits remain safely tucked away in my heart. They were my first lessons in love, family honour, and the quiet dignity that comes with a life well-lived. The Appachens taught me that true strength is not loud but steady, that wisdom is not in words alone but in presence, and that respect is the foundation of family.

Even now, when I close my eyes, I can still see the sunlight filtering through the verandas, hear the rhythm of their voices, and feel the warmth of their smiles. Those moments remind me that family is not just about bloodlines but about guardianship, memory, and the timeless gift of love passed down through generations.
