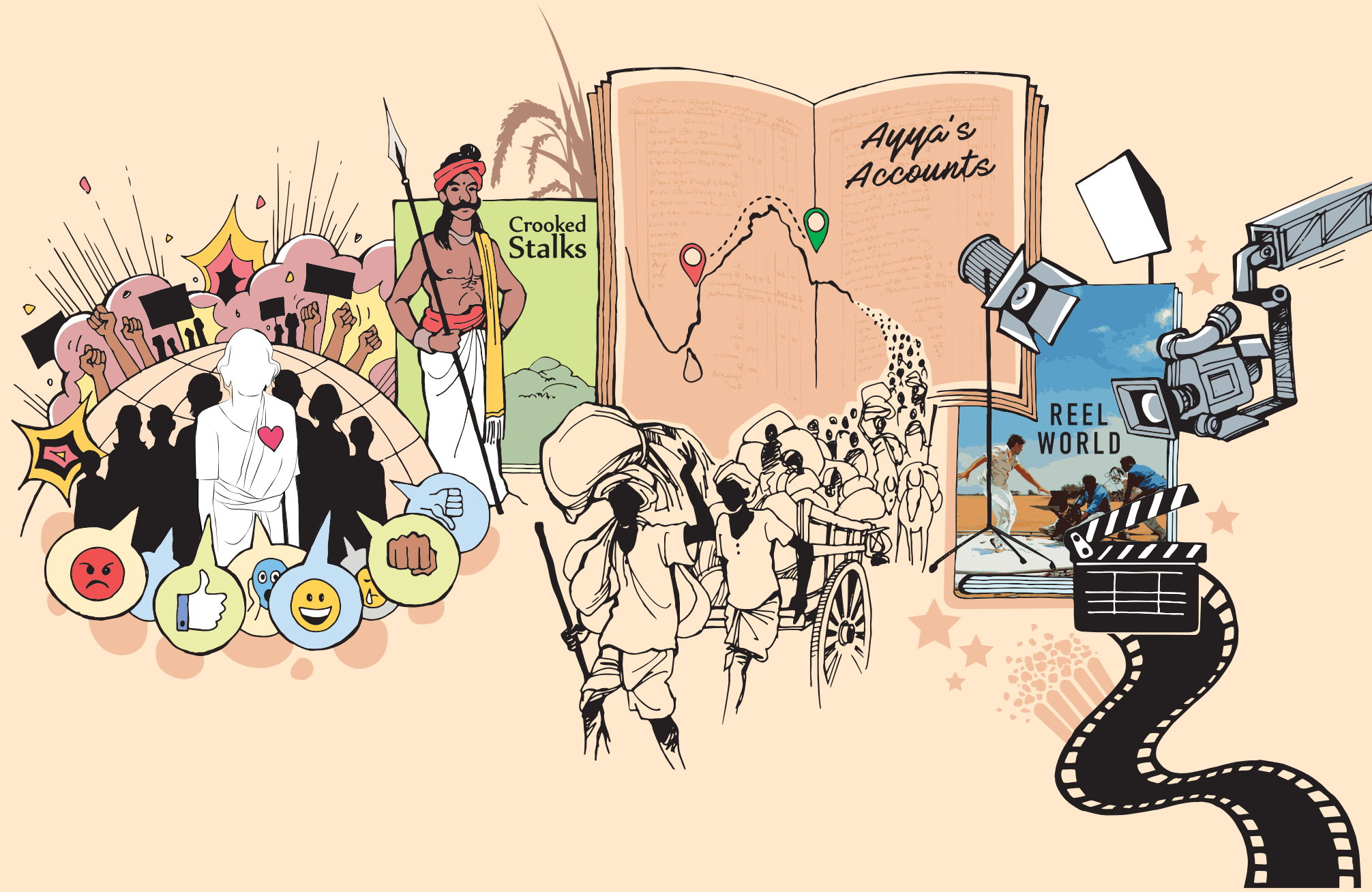


# SOCIAL SCIENCES



## HUMANITY AT ITS LIMITS

In a world of intense uncertainty, social strife, and ecological upheaval, what can happen to our sense of humanity? For the field of anthropology, this question is essential. People respond to challenging circumstances in many ways. They rely on the lessons of literary and moral traditions, on the familiar habits of everyday life, on the ebb and flow of feelings and desires. These resources are often enough to meet the challenges at hand. But there are also times of serious breakdown and moral impasse.

Anthropologists examine other ways of living and relating to one another, with the hope of shedding light on how to meet a difficult world with curiosity and care. Anthropology takes people into distant and unfamiliar places. The discipline expects that researchers will spend substantial time in these places, gradually learning to live as others do, developing an intimate sense of their experience, and trying to convey the texture of those lives through vivid and engaging stories.

This method runs throughout the work of Prof. Anand Pandian. His first book, *Crooked Stalks*, focuses on a Tamil community classified as criminal by nature in the colonial era. Tracing the weight of that history on the present, Pandian shows how farmers, shepherds, and laborers in rural Tamil Nadu think of agriculture as an arena of ethical life. A subsequent book, *Reel World*, took the anthropologist into the frenetic environment of filmmaking in Tamil cinema. Trailing directors, actors, designers and cameramen in and out of studios and shooting locales, Pandian captures the improvisational nature of creative process.

Ecology and environment are abiding themes in Pandian's work. His writings explore various ways to reconcile the tugs of human aspiration with the material conditions and limits in which people live and strive. These tensions come alive in *Ayya's Accounts*, a book written about his grandfather's century of life in India, Burma, and the United States. Pandian has been writing more recently about walls and boundaries in everyday America, trying to make sense of why so many there shut themselves off from the rest of the world. His latest book project explores decay as the underside of growth, the danger of neglecting the reality that things inevitably come apart: bodies and economies, plastic and waste.

In a classically anthropological spirit, all these works try to reimagine what seems natural and familiar from the vantage point of someplace outside.