

KUMBAMUNI BREAKS THE UMBRELLA HANDLE

At the end of the day, when the property was divided to the last paise, Kumbamuni's share came to an astounding Rs. 297,98,48468.33, and he was flabbergasted. There are only two ways one can amass that much wealth in India: it would be just impossible - even if you were a mega film star or a famed cricketer in the last twenty years. If you happen to be digging a well in your backyard, you should have ended up with gold - not like the itsy-bitsy stuff trickling in the Kolar Gold Fields - but ingots emerging in a continuous roll. Other possibilities are: a central minister-ship for at least ten years; a state chief minister-ship; an heir or a beneficiary to one of the Titans of the industrial world; a big wheel from the stock exchange with a clout in the appointment of the finance minister at the Centre. But none of those factors played a role in case of Kumbamuni; he inherited the wealth through the benevolence of Queen Anusha, the younger wife of Kattakadai Kunjattambiran Balarama Varma Jr. whose ancestry went back to the royalty of Neyyantinkarai.

If you are interested in further details about Queen Anusha Devi and Kunjattambiran Balarama Varma, you may read the following books:

1. Travancore State Manual, Volumes 1 - IV. by T.K. Velu Pillai;
2. Progress of Travancore under H.H. Sree Moolam Tirunal, by Ulloor Parameswaran Iyer;
3. A History of Kerala (1498-1801) by K.M. Panicker;
4. Travancore State Manual, Volumes 1 - II. by V.Nagamaiah;
5. Studies in Kerala History, by Elamkulam Kunjam Pillai;
6. Rise of Travancore - The Life and Times of Marthanda Varma, by Ibrahim Kunju;
7. History of Travancore from Earliest Time, by Sangunny Menon.

Now, you don't know where these books are available. Even if you did, you will never lay your hands on them, and reading them may not be of much help. So, I suggest you better believe what I say; if you don't, pick up a book of your favorite author and go to sleep. It is no loss to Kumbamuni.

All historical facts are murky, they lie buried under cover. They need to be dug out - in a way one turns a light on a statue of a courtesan in an ancient temple - and observing the sordid details of her anatomy.

Neither the author nor Kumbamuni needs to prove anything. Still, I must reveal the following to continue my story. Anusha Devi ended up as the king's younger wife when he happened to watch her bathing in the Kattakkadai River. Thus began a life of strong appetites - punctuated with *olan, kalan, ericheri, and pulicheri*.

The younger wife's influence on the king began to wane after he found himself bedridden with a stroke. The Queen's private appearances with admirers dwindled away and soon the pathway to the palace - once fitting for royal carriages - turned into a footpath overgrown with weeds and cockroaches.

Paramarthalingam was an eleven-year-old boy when he became the Queen's helper. The Queen was sixty-three, heavy in body and suffered from an affliction on the left leg. The trappings of royalty were not of much help to ease her pain.

Paramarthalingam served the queen for twenty-five years. Until she was eighty-eight, he was her personal assistant, cook, court jester, masseur, secretary, and messenger.

The title - younger wife - was just a formality; in reality she was the king's concubine. The king was smitten with her so much that he endowed her with many gifts - in royal decrees. Being childless, he also adopted Paramarthalingam as his son. Following Devi's death, all her assets passed on to the heir.

Still, the queen's relatives were in no mood to concede anything to the new heir. They went to court and the law suit dragged on to his last days.

The case was argued in several avenues - one after another - *Kattakkadai Parvathiyakkarar, Nedumangadu Tehsildar, Neyyantrikarai Sub Court, Thiruvananthapuram District Court, and Ernakulam High Court* - culminating at every stage with a judgment that was appealed to a higher legal authority.

Eventually Paramarthalingam suffered from paralysis and lay on death bed when he was surrounded by his three daughters and five sons. Three among them were childless and the total number of the grandchildren numbered twenty-two. This is all old news; years rolled by as the litigation limped in the courts with appeals and postponements - year after year. Kumbamuni is the only son of Paramarthalingam's last daughter. The state of affairs turned in his favor only during his golden years when Fate began sniffing around at his leg.

Kumbamuni has been eking out his life and, one day, while suffering from constipation and writer's block, he happened to read the details of that ancestral property from a legal document.

Kumbamuni felt as if he was reading some article in post-modernism genre or a commentary by the Elder Vachan Pillai on the King Tirumangai's extemporaneous rendering of 1084 songs of praise in *Tiruvazmozhi*.

Like *Chengottai* that included *Neyyattrinkarai*, *Talakkulam*, *Munchirai*, *Arumanai* and *Attingal*, *Nedumangadu* covered an area of 499 acres. But after getting bribes, the *Parvathiyakkarar* and *Tehsildar* had the records fudged showing it as 4,990 acres. And these false records were duly copied, recopied, certified correct and passed on to relevant departments confirming the latter number in the district's official records. Is it not a fact that, ultimately, the trees, canals and grasslands determine the borders of a territory? One can always reset the boundary markers on any parcel of land; those pointers protrude half-a-foot from the ground, so they can be easily pulled out and relocated elsewhere. If one hires contractors to demolish, say a 400-acres forest, it would not be too difficult to get an official certificate stating that area as 4,900 acres. It is not uncommon that official records often get revised and forest borders extended based on mere conjecture.

Of Paramarthalingam's twenty-two grandchildren, their offspring - 169 - claimed their right to Queen Anusha's wealth. That property had to be formally and legally distributed among all of them. Some of those heirs were lawyers who estimated the legal expenses to settle the lawsuit and finally arrived at the net amount for each heir; that's how Kumbamuni found out his share of wealth mentioned earlier.

Now you may wonder how a writer mostly ignored in literary circles, and not even a recipient of a *Sahitya Akademi* award or ~~the~~ *Padma Sri*, *Kalaimamani* titles could aspire to so much wealth. Well, God willing, even a Tsunami will do that job. It is not unusual that in the Indian, democratic, socialistic set up, one can earn Rs. 60,000 crores after twenty-five years of persistent hard work; another, who could not even afford an extra set of clothes, might earn Rs. 16,000 crores in ten years.

This is how wealth came to Kumbamuni, and if you keep wondering how he would actually have the money handed to him by due process, I can only conclude you have stopped reading the *Nakkeeran*, *Kumudam Reporter* or the *Junior Vikatan*.

Just think of the surrogates of the modern-day political revolutionaries; each one of them has enough money to buy off two states; should they ever end up with thirty states, they would go

out buying the small countries. There is no way neither you nor can I ever know the origin of their wealth.

This morning, as usual, Kumbamuni woke up, cleaned his gums, gargled the mouth and came to the front porch to rest on an easy-chair. He had a cup of strong coffee in one hand and leisurely began reading the English newspaper. Just then one his grandsons came along on a scooter and stopped in front of the house; he parked the vehicle and walked toward the house.

He rested on one of the steps and inquired: "*Pattaa*, What is this? You have already got up?"

"Has your mother dispatched you to see if I am dead or alive?"

"I want to share some good news with you . . . That's why I am here."

Tavasi Pillai, the in-house cook, now came out and stood near the door.

"See, he wants to eave-drop on our conversation," sneered Kumbamuni after hurling an expletive at his cook.

"Well, are you going to discuss with him how to invade Sri Lanka?" the cook laughed at him.

"Are you scared I will spread the secret all around?"

"Well, let him listen to our conversation, it is fine," said Kumbamuni. "What is it?"

"We have won the case."

"So far, we have won it more than fifty-eight times. Tell me what is new . . ."

"The Supreme Court has also ruled in our favor. Hereafter there won't be any hurdle in selling the assets to the public."

"Why don't you sign yourself and claim the money? You are good in rummaging dirt to find anything to eat . . ."

"Why don't you just keep quiet and let him talk?" Tavasi Pillai offered his opinion.

"The next step is that we all - 169 of us - should go and formally sign the papers. Some seven or eight parties are already interested in buying . . . But our lawyer Ammachi says we should keep this confidential."

"Who else would be interested in buying?" asked Tavasi Pillai. "Do you think the minister's mother-in-law wants it?"

"One of these days *Pattaa* should come to the Registrar's office. You better wash his clothes and get him ready."

“Why, you think it would be illegal if he signs the papers wearing a loin cloth?” the cook snickered. “The whole country is now standing with a loin cloth.”

“Well said. He’s right! Why should I go through the hassle? Ask Tavasi Pillai to go with you. Or you can sign the papers on my behalf . . . Who is going to find out?”

“*Pattaa*, How is that possible? You think people are crazy?” countered the grandson.

“Why not? I heard an exception was made in case of an important minister who could hardly move around . . . Do you realize even someone - who had been dead a long ago - had someone sign for him?”

“That might have been possible because they needed only an official seal above his name. Do you have any such assurance?” questioned the cook.

“Looks like you will protest even if they had no objection . . . Well, forget it! Now, tell me when can I have the money in my hands? Do they need anything else from us? Right now, can you lend me ten rupees? I owe money to the vegetable vendor, milk maid . . . It is turning into a big nuisance . . .”

“The paperboy has already hounded me four times . . .,” Tavasi Pillai reminded his master. “We owe him money for the last three months . . . I have been saying we better discontinue the newspaper, but you would never listen. And what good is the newspaper, anyway? The letters are too small to read and our eyes will surely get worse . . . Why do you have to read all that stuff? Are you preparing for civil service exams or something?”

Kumbamuni seethed with madness. He picked up an umbrella nearby and struck the cook very hard before he managed to slip away and retreat into a corner. It was a very old umbrella, the canopy already reduced to rags, the gits and stretchers rendered totally useless. It was beyond repair and it only served as a walking stick for Kumbamuni. Well, were you imagining a Tamil writer with a walking cane made in sandalwood and embossed with a golden hub on its top?

The stem was older than Kumbamuni himself, so it broke into two as the umbrella hit the door.

“Forget it! We will get a new ivory cane - made from a good oak, with a lion-formed handle on a gold collar at the top and a silver hub at the bottom.”

Kumbamuni let a deep sigh and tried to steady himself.

“We will pay back all the dues . . . Now, you may ask anyone of your own choice to accompany you to the Registrar’s Office . . . I will pay back the washerman, the postman and others . . .”

“Grandpa, why do you need to pay the postman?”

“Well, I used to ask him loan me the stamps when I sent articles and stories to the magazines,” Kumbamuni replied, and turned to the cook: “*Kannupillai*, how much will that be - fifty or sixty rupees?”

“Don’t ask me. We don’t even an umbrella to beat someone anymore. Didn’t I ask you why you had to borrow stamps to send your stuff?”

“This is what we call a disease that is born along with you and kills you. This fellow has been living with me for the last thirty-five years. See how he talks . . .”

“Grandpa, stop fighting . . . Why start a quarrel early in the morning?”

“This brass betel box is no good, we must buy one in stainless steel,” Tavasi Pillai complained.

“We will get you one made in gold . . . Like our old M.K. Tyagaraja Bhagavatar, we too can eat from a golden plate . . . Have you heard of any Tamil writer who ate food off a golden plate? We will do that too . . .”

“I have heard that when the Sahitya Akademi hands in awards, they always present a gold plate . . .”

Kumbamuni let out an off-color word, and hollered, “That’s not true! Even if it were true, nobody would be inclined to eat from that plate. Do you know the writer who gets the Sahitya Akademi award actually pawns his wife’s jewelry to eke out a livelihood? First, he has ^{to} buy that back. Don’t you think a writer deserves a pair of bracelets?”

“*Pattaa*, is it true? I have heard people say in Chettinad, five hundred silver plates - looking like the banana leaf - are in the royal palace.”

“Each plate probably weighed two *rattals* , who knows? We too can have them . . . Just now I remembered something: I owe seventeen rupees to the leaf-vendor . . .”

“Why do you need banana leaf to drink gruel? Can’t you simply use a coconut shell?”

“See how he talks!” Kumbamuni frowned, again. “Why shouldn’t I beat this fellow with my umbrella? By the way, we are talking about 298-crore rupees? Am I right?”

“We may have withhold close to seven hundred rupees . . .”

“Have you read the will of V.O.C?¹? You will easily shed tears . . . Of late, they have started treating him like a foreigner . . . Fortunately, ~~we~~ we still have our Kamaraj Nadar, Mahatma Gandhi- the Vysya business man, Vallu Prasad - the *Konar*- and Zail Singh, the goldsmith . . .”

Tavasi Pillai now intervened.

“*Pattaa*, I have one more thing to tell you. I hope you won’t feel offended. I notice, as you get on your years, you are easily getting angry. . .”

“Go ahead and tell me . . . When did you stop offending me because I would get angry?”

“I need a set of decent slippers. Our Chinnayya tells me they will cost three hundred rupees. Do you think I can get them?”

“Stop acting stingy - like a cat that only thinks of licking ~~the sea~~ when the whole ocean turned into milk! Do you know how many crores we are getting? Two hundred and ninety-eight! Only the finance minister knows how many zeros are in it! Why do you need to walk - once you are rich? You can ride a car instead of taking even a short walk - as when you go out to buy tobacco . . . Don’t worry, I will take care of all your future expenses . . .”

“What about my expenses for all these past years?”

“You don’t think I need money for myself? You are so stupid . . .” Kumbamuni scowled.

“I don’t want to be left in the cold . . .”

“Stop whining! Keep quiet! Looks like you want to stop the Lady Luck coming up to our home.”

“Well, why don’t you get out and meet her half-away near the bridge and walk her to the house?” the cook teased him. “I have to make gruel ” He retreated into the kitchen.

“Well, that’s the only thing you will be doing three times day,” Kumbamuni said in a tone of ridicule and turned to his grandson.

“See, you can never stop *Kannuppillai* spewing some nonsense from his stinking mouth. Now, tell me, when can I get the cash?”

“You are always in hurry,” said the grandson. “It may take at least two or three more months.”

“Two more months? Okay . . . Now, do this . . . You see the last part of that figure, 468.33? Forget the thirty-three paise. Now hand over me the rest, four hundred and sixty eight rupees. You can withhold that amount when you pay me the rest . . . Sounds reasonable?”

¹ Refers to V.O. Chidambaram Pillai (1872-1936), a Tamil freedom fighter

‘What about the money you already owe me? This is the reason I have avoided coming here. Every time you see me, you ask for a loan!’

‘Otherwise, how can you feel proud that your grandfather is a famous international author?’

‘Does ‘international’ mean the Tovalai Taluk?’ asked Tavasi Pillai.

‘You better keep quiet. Whether you agree or not I am an international writer . . .’

Kumbamuni turned to the grandson who took out and handed over five or six one-rupee bills to Kumbamuni.

‘I am leaving now . . . Please stop spreading around what I told you . . . Let’s wait till the money comes our hands.’

‘Don’t worry . . . Tavasi Pillai is the only one who does it.’

Kumbamuni again counted the rupee notes before he handed them over to the cook.

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