

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE ELECTION COMMISSION

Tavasi Pillai, the cook-in-residence, woke up very early in the morning; inside the house, the mosquitoes proved unbearable and, outside, the bedbugs played havoc. He washed his teeth, rinsed and dried his face, smeared the forehead with *vibhuti*, swallowed a betel leaf, and treaded softly on the floor to wake up Kumbamuni. A surprise awaited him: Kumbamuni was already seated in a cane chair on the front porch, his legs raised and propped up on a stool. On a nearby table lay a clip board with a sheaf of papers, and a fountain pen. Kumbamuni totally ignored the cook as he went on watching the palm trees in the front yard and the wasps nesting and ringing on their branches.

The house keeper understood the problem right away: a creative force was on its birth-pangs; that sort of thing usually happened on a full or new moon day. He stepped on the porch, approached the householder, and asked, “Would you like some strong coffee?”

Kumbamuni answered with a tiny jerk of his head, “Why don’t we wait until the 7.30 – 9.30 *rahu kalam* is over?”

The cook tried to contain his mounting anger; he had known Kumbamuni for the last thirty years. ‘This is a writer whose literary career is already dead,’ he told himself, ‘Still he’s waiting for auspicious times!’ Now, Kumbamuni knew his cook only too well - like a snake knows its tail: “Everyone has to turn into a corpse when their time comes,” he mused.

“There, you go again!” the cook sneered. “How can anybody put up with you?” He stepped out of the porch, and walked back to the kitchen.

Kumbamuni shook his head a little, grabbed a paper pile from the table, numbered a page, and wrote the title. He eagerly sought the cup of hot, strong coffee from Tavasi Pillai, took a sip, and smiled at the chef who knew that *Pattaa* – that’s how he addressed Kumbamuni, as a *grandpa* - always enjoyed coffee brewed freshly and richly sugared. There’s a legend in Guruvayur that when Narayana Bhattaadhri composed *Naarananeeyam* in praise of the Lord and recited the epic, verse by verse, in the presence of the deity Unni Krishnan, the latter is said to have listened to every verse and acknowledged with a smile. For the cook, Kumbamuni’s smile carried the same message.

Kumbamuni, again, took a mouthful from the cup when the cook noticed a loose sheet fly off the stack only to fall on the floor; he bent down, picked it, began slowly reading, and got around to know what the letters meant: *An Open Letter to the Election Commission*.

“*Pattaa*, what’s this? I have heard of open prisons, and open universities,” he asked. “I even know about open lavatories in our village. What’s this thing about an open letter? Aren’t you supposed to say *the opened letter*?”

“Leave me alone; get lost!” Kumbamuni yelled back. “Don’t try to act smart! Remember, you’re not qualified to offer advice to an intellectual. Stick with your routine: go back to the kitchen and make *rice uppuma* ready.”

“That’s no big deal; I can have it ready anytime now. You better answer my question.”

“I have no time to explain anything to people like you; leave me alone.”

The housekeeper mumbled to himself, retrieved the coffee cup and returned to the kitchen. He knew *rice uppuma* was Kumbamuni’s favorite breakfast item.

Kumbamuni loved wolfing down hot and sizzling *rice uppuma*; he needed no teeth and it didn’t hurt the stomach, either.

The aroma of fried boiled rice would be a shot in the arm: Kumbamuni’s mind, inspired, aroused and let loose like a horse, would neigh, gallop and jump out dragging the bridle along; all Kumbamuni needed to do was to give a twirl to the reins and, like a steed hauling King Nala’s chariot, it would hurtle at a speed of four hundred feet per minute.

Everyday Kumbamuni would get two daily newspapers: one, in English, for unhurried, concentrated reading; the other, in Tamil, to be nibbled away – in small bites – like a snack.

Six months ago, a legislative council member from a local constituency called *The Donkey Fair Village* was going on a morning walk to a flag-hoisting ceremony when he tripped on his way, hurt his brain and died on the spot. Luckily, he had been a member of the state ruling party; otherwise, the opposition parties would have protested and demanded an enquiry commission to be appointed to investigate his death. The deceased was eighty seven years old; yet condolence messages kept coming from all over: some called his death an irreplaceable loss that plunged the whole Tamilnadu into grief; others called him a shining star from the *Land of Kannagi*, and a luminary, now tumbled from heaven and lost forever; a few compared his death to the fall of *Meru*, the mighty mountain from Indian mythology.

Last month, a bye-election was held in that constituency, and the players were unchanged: the same caste members; the same party members; the same voters and the same merchants who traded donkeys, and the same prevailing attitudes. Still, leaders belonging to the ruling party, the opposition and splinter groups fighting tooth and nail were unanimous in calling the bye-election a watershed in the country's history. Money, power, authority and caste continued to be wielded as weapons in that bye-election; there were times when those weapons were deployed only behind scenes; now, they were being brandished in your face.

As he began reading the news Kumbamuni felt his blood boiling. He knew the intensity of his anger would be barely adequate to warm up even a pot of water; still, he was horrified at the level of corruption, money, power and men behind the bye election battle. This was a constituency where men traded donkeys and the attendant village activities included stints like fire-wood collection, cultivation of unauthorized crops, and collection of animal waste, while the average, daily wages of the locals never exceeded forty six rupees. That so much money, manpower and breaches of law could take place in a single poor constituency went against his grain.

What an outrage! Kumbamuni grabbed a sheet to put down his thoughts on paper; he understood a creative writer's obligation didn't end with just penning a story.

"To The Honorable

I, Kumbamuni, a member and law-abiding citizen of a secular, classless society that doesn't discriminate against wealth, language or caste, a resident of the *State of Kannagi*, who, in the last fifty years, has been faithfully exercising his voting right in the local, state and national elections, and a writer with no income and no other qualifications, would like to bring the following to your consideration and necessary action:

I further declare that the following observations reflect my own views and are not influenced by factors like caste, party affiliation, any business enterprise, organization or a foreign power. These views are also shared by my only companion and house keeper, Tavasi Pillai Kanu Pillai; please note the name denotes his profession only and not his surname.

1. The Nomination Papers to be filed by the candidates must include only the easily verifiable information, such as name, father's name, sex, and permanent address. Here, in this country, the majority of the population has no permanent address, so details such as temporary address, phone number, and cell number should suffice. As for a candidate's personal information in regard to his finances, criminal history, his participation in the electorate list, his mother-tongue and spoken language, proof of personal income and

documents attesting to his caste, religious and other communal background, they are totally irrelevant. We are all unanimous that a candidate's documents corroborating these details could be fraudulent or were obtained by bribery and illegal means. So, where's the need to continue this tradition?

2. The Security Deposit payable by a candidate at the time of filing his nomination may be increased hundred-fold with a proviso that it's non-returnable. A candidate may file nomination papers in as many constituencies as he desires. After all, such a measure would mean a substantial income to the government and would make the annual finance reports issued by the Finance Minister a little rosier.
3. A candidate for the state assemblies, when deemed of questionable character, may be selected by a legal tender offering him a constituency on a golden platter. The tender may be declared non-returnable and set at a very high value. For example, in a recent state assembly election where the successful candidate belonged to the ruling party, it was revealed by an investigative journalist from a weekly, that the candidate had spent fifty crores. So, in the next bye-election, we can increase the tender base amount to five hundred crores, and a candidate outbidding this amount may be awarded the lease for the next year; we may also stipulate that the Election Commissioner's decision would be final in the matter and cannot be appealed either to the Supreme Court or the United Nations. If more than one candidate has responded to a tender with the same amount, then preference may be accorded to the person who's older, has connections to the film industry, speaks his mother tongue or has given his children the Tamil names.
4. Several investigative reports on the last bye-election in *The Donkey Fair Village* have revealed these figures: The ruling party spent two thousand rupees per voter, the opposition one thousand rupees, and the splinter groups spent amounts varying anywhere from five hundred rupees to ten rupees per head. Some parties were alleged to have extorted money even from the voters; so I suggest that the Commission might be asked to assign the maximum and minimum values to each vote, in advance.

The Commission may also be charged with collecting, in advance, the money earmarked for the voters, and dispensing them through 'fair value' shops. Such an arrangement would guarantee that the voters receive their due share, the middle men couldn't filch the funds and the chances of multiple payments would be totally eliminated.

- 5 Looking at the country's population, by region and by caste, it's evident that every caste has at least thirty-nine subgroups. The Commission may choose to ignore these divisions and consider framing policies for a general, caste-based populace; it will assign a quota for each caste so recognized, and let the various political parties openly compete for those seats. Such a system will put in a place a region free from any communal riots, stabbings and homicides; no more buses would be set on fire and the acid-throwing weapons and hand grenades will cease to be part of the street demonstrations.

Alternatively, the government may determine the non-returnable Security Deposit for each caste by a secret ballot. While assessing the charges, it may consider certain criteria: for

example, if the forward community member is charged one hundred rupees, the backward community would pay only sixty rupees, schedule caste members forty, and those from the hill tribes twenty; the folks from the movie industry would pay nothing.

- 6 Should the government decide to conduct elections, the process would mean a three-day operation in all the 294 constituencies of *Kannagi state*. The logistics involving security forces, returning officers and the fraudulent vote getters and their deployment from one constituency to another would complicate the situation. Accordingly, I propose we dispense with the five-year elections and, alternately, conduct elections every week in ten constituencies. Such an arrangement, over time, would become an ordinary event in our daily life – like the train travel or electricity on demand.

Kumbamuni heard Tavasi Pillai's voice and raised his head; he has been busy penning his racy thoughts, and now he resented the rude intrusion – like a porcupine or an ant crawling on you - in paradise.

“Would *Pattaa* like to have rice *uppuma*, now?” the cook asked and Kumbamuni, now really hungry, nodded his head in approval. He's still thinking about the Election Commission while enjoying rice *uppuma*: We are talking about thirty regions and, approximately, seven thousand legislative members would have to be elected. There are 365 days in a year and it will be possible to conduct elections, daily, in twenty constituencies. It would be an excellent idea to allot security forces, election staff and courts for the exclusive use by the Election Commissioner.

Kumbamuni finished eating *uppuma*, washed his hands, chewed a betel leaf, and spat the betel juice out before resuming his writing.

The words came out in full blast.

- 7 There's no use in blaming the security forces. They are to take orders without questioning them. You can't expect them to act with fairness. So it may be a wise move to deploy security forces from other states, exclusively for the election duty. To quote an example, we may deploy forces from the *State of Kali* to the *State of Kannagi* or men from the *State of Bhagawati* to the *State of Ambabayi*. If this experiment fails, we may formally request and welcome the United Nations Peace Keeping Forces and have them patrol our constituencies. They would never be influenced by party loyalty, wealth or caste. The PKF would categorically reject any appeal of favoritism from the Members of Parliament, State Legislative Members and Ministers, their wives, sisters, brothers, cousins, brother-in-laws, mothers-in-laws, daughters-in-law or daughters. There's only one problem against this idea: the memory of UN Peace Keeping Forces deployed in Ceylon.
- 8 During the election, we can expect people, other than the voters authorized to participate, to travel to and from the constituency to perform some business, personal, or religious

obligations. They may be issued special permits and also charged a hefty fee only during the election time.

- 9 The government may identify illegal voters and bestow upon them the honorable titles of Justices of Peace, and publish a list of their names. Such members would be issued a special Government Identification Card with an official stamp. Their status being permanent, these members would be eligible to participate in any election at any time. The various political parties may co-opt with them and act according to their needs by wielding their influence through money, women, caste or promises of movie roles. And because these voters essentially determine the election outcome in a constituency, they may be provided, at no cost, amenities such as lodging, travel, daily expenses, transport and uniform. We may feel assured that no sky would fall if the cards issued to these illegitimate voters are traded or exchanged between one another.

10. The total number of illegitimate voters may not exceed the number arrived at by dividing the total number of the voters with the total number of constituencies. If the total number of voters in the *State of Kannagi* is three crores and twenty five lakhs, and if we divide it by 294, we end up with a quotient of one lakh, ten thousand, and five hundred and forty four. This would serve as our basis and the number of illegitimate voters may not exceed ten percent of this number. Simply put, the constituency should have no more than eleven thousand and fifty illegal voters.

Kumbamuni wanted to go on but he disliked the idea of leaving his cook in despair – like a calf separated from its mother. He felt his mouth turning dry even after swallowing many a betel leaf. Growing a little impatient, he arose and came down the steps, and peered inside. The time was only eleven; lunch can wait for a while.

“*Pattaa*, are you done with your writing?”

“How does that concern you? You are acting like the washer man chasing a goat’s head! I have some more work to do . . . Now; do you know how many people die, every year, in our *Donkey Village Fair* constituency?”

“Are you talking just about human beings only or including cows, goats, dogs, donkeys, crows and others?”

Kumbamuni hurled an obscenity at the house keeper, and said: “Tell me about human beings only.”

“How do I know? I am not an employee in the Office of Births and Deaths.”

“Take a guess . . .”

“You’re a writer, aren’t you? Why can’t you put down a number, say, one thousand?”

“You think that would do? We are talking about a thousand people dying in a population of one lakh.”

“What’s the big deal? Why do you need to talk about the dead, anyway?”

“Still, we need a figure.”

“Then, let me check with the gentleman from our neighboring village . . . He might know.”

“Do you think he will give you the information, freely?”

“Do you think he’s my uncle to offer me free advice? He will make me walk up and down at least four times; he’ll ask me to make a formal petition and attach a revenue stamp for five rupees; he will also demand that I spend fifty or hundred rupees for coffee and snacks. Then, I have my own expenses to take care of, transport and other things; in all, I may need two hundred rupees.”

“Why don’t you ask for five hundred rupees?” Kumbamuni asked in a mocking tone. He sighed and said, “I think we can get the figures from the government.”

“What government? Don’t you know how wrong their numbers are? Recently we read in a government survey that there are 168 tigers in the *Kalakkadu* forest. But the villagers are saying there are only six of them, actually living; some can hardly get up and move about; others are close to death or getting blind, and a few were shot and are crippled.”

“Who told you?”

“Do you think only writers know everything? Don’t we read newspapers?”

“Okay, let me have another cup of strong coffee; I have to do some more writing.”

Kumbamuni checked the page number and where the last sentence had ended.

11. When a new election becomes necessary in a constituency *after* the enumeration of the electorate in that constituency is complete, the names of the voters who have since deceased, relocated or whose health condition precludes their participation in the election, may be added to the list of the illegitimate voters. Thus the supervision of a department for maintaining a list of illegitimate voters becomes a vital operation, and it would be perfectly legal to appoint a party member who has lost his election bid to head that department.
12. All the above arrangements would cost money and also cause attendant problems like loss of productivity, loss of income, public protests, traffic congestion and even piles; they can be prevented if the Election Commission carries out a public auction of the seats of the Members of Parliament. The political parties and the various financial institutions that are now covertly trying to influence the elections may be invited to participate openly in public auction and nominate the individuals of their choice. Nobody will question their decision and, over the

time, we can expect those nominated through public auction would be acting in the best interests of their constituency, state and family. And because it is impossible for a single party or an institution to capture seats in all the constituencies, the auction could be carried out in groups of say, twenty at a time. Again, we're talking about a coalition administration, so the impact on the entire country would be minimal.

13. Informed circles have pointed out that in the recent bye- election the successful party had spent close to fifty crores of rupees. If we are to include the money spent by the other parties, the Election Commission, and the potential income lost for the day the election was held, the total cost for a constituency works out close to one hundred crores rupees. That translates, just for the *State of Kannagi* with 294 constituencies, 29,400 crores or 9,046 rupees per voter, which is higher than the per capita income of the country. This amount represents the tax imposed on the public by fraudulent means; so, why spend this money, unnecessarily? Accordingly, I suggest that the Election Commission itself may be authorized to nominate the Members of Parliament; we do have a precedent in the appointment of a state governor.
14. While appointing members of the state legislatures the Commission may consider naming them for full life terms and, in consequence of their death or disability, declare their seats shall pass on to their legal or illegal heirs; this would not only result in considerable savings in finance but also free the citizens to indulge in their most mundane and relaxed activities, like washing lice off the hair, picking the teeth, repeated scratching, watching movies or television, eating, sleeping or reproducing.
15. The state legislative members in all the 294 constituencies from the *State of Kannagi*, irrespective of their party affiliation, may be advised to divide themselves into influential groups like, say, women (50%); Backward Classes (69%); Those with criminal background (30%); Members affiliated with the movie industry (40%); and heirs of the state senior politicians (10%). This will go a long way in preventing the unnecessary electoral disputes that might be brought to the attention of the Supreme Court; we hear rumors that the Supreme Court is yet to pass judgment on the disputes that have been filed before the Navalani Theevu's independence.
16. These election reforms may be implemented, on an experimental basis, first in the *State of Kannagi* and, later, expanded and introduced at the Centre. This approach would help us identify the problems as we proceed further with these changes.

Kumbamuni interrupted his routine and rose from his seat; he spat out the betel juice and peeked into the kitchen to see what Tavasi Pillai was doing; the cook turned back and asked him:

“*Pattaa*, are you done with your writing?”

“Yes. My letter is going to shake up the whole nation!”

“Do you expect an earthquake?”

“What else? I have listed my complaints – item by item.”

“Then, nobody will ever challenge you. Am I right?”

“No one would dare . . . I may even get the Governor’s job,”

“You are already acting like a governor; aren’t you?”

“Oh, that’s what you think? You may be right.”

He wanted to end the letter right away; still he had to follow his line of thought before he continued writing.

17. It is unseemly that in a constituency of one hundred voters only fifty-two would care to vote while the other forty-eight spend their time entertaining themselves by watching an actress gyrate her hips on a television screen; this leads to a situation where the winner secures twenty-seven votes and his opponent, twenty five. In other words, the one with just twenty seven votes ends up ruling the entire nation. This is shameful! How could anyone claim this is a democratic rule worthy of our *Navalan Theevu*? The first order is therefore to make voting in our country compulsory. Every eligible voter, living in any part of the country and in any region, must be able to cast his vote even from his home, this being facilitated through mobile voting booths. Those who fail to cast their votes may be duly punished and ordered to serve a minimum of six months of imprisonment; these miscreants may also be forced to wear a permanent copper badge with an inscription so that others would be further discouraged not to fulfill their voting obligations. The individual’s name would be prominently displayed so that even when the badge is cast away into a garbage can, the offender can be apprehended and duly punished.

Dear Sir, I am submitting this proposal as an experiment, and I am fully conscious of your concern in regard to public reaction. Please stop worrying about the public: they are ever ready to bear the consequences: they would squirm in heat, get wet in water, fly in breeze and smolder in fire; what they’re asking for is some income. Let the government provide them a comb – just a comb – through fair price shops, and the public would thank the government for its generosity. These folks wouldn’t mind being hit, punched, torn down, whacked or crashing against a gate, climbing a wall or being crushed in a stampede.

18. Please don’t entertain any guilt feelings and agonize over the outcome. Please remember that politicians, industrial magnates, men and women from the film industry, merchants and the guilty souls, all share a common womb.

I have one final request to make:

I, Kumbamuni, the writer of this proposal, have no guardians or dependents. I am ailing, getting on years, and childless. I have no one to care for me or look for me – if I am ever beaten, hit by an acid bomb or when I call for an auto at midnight. I can hardly withstand two affectionate pats. So I would request you to treat my residential address as confidential. You may be unaware that I have no face recognition.

Should you find any merit in my proposal, I would request you to nominate me for one of the legislative assembly seats that may fall vacant in the near future. Any seat in the *Navalan*

Theevu is fine with me. I am hoping the Election Commission operates on a quota basis – as is currently practiced in our medical colleges, IIT and IIM.

In the event of such an appointment I request that Tavasi Pillai Kannu Pillai, my only relative and friend may be appointed as my personal assistant and cook for my full term. I hereby nominate Tavasi Pillai as my successor to continue serving as a member of the legislative assembly when my term ends.

Yours truly,

Kumbamuni.

(An old writer since retired unable to offer any service to the nation)

Kumbamuni dabbed his eyes – has he been reading or writing for a long time? Tavasi Pillai came to invite him for lunch and picked up the last page from the pile.

“Let’s say you get invited to a party at a M.L.A.’s house; would you still enjoy the rice-gruel and chutney?”

“Why not? That’s our national diet!”
