

## Letter from Chennai

---

### A WIDE OPEN SECRET

A two-column report in *The Hindu* was headlined 'Karnataka wants pregnant decoy for sting operation'. The health department wants to engage a decoy, who has to be between 14 and 22 weeks pregnant, to visit a number of ultrasound centres, ask for sex determination of her foetus and obtain a video of the proceedings, so that the guilty ultrasonologists could be prosecuted. With such wide publicity, is it likely that any of the culprits will not be aware of this action? They would clearly take precautions that no such video should be recorded, and that no attendant of the patient would be allowed in the ultrasound room. This sting sounds like something devised by the Keystone Kops.

### MAN'S INHUMANITY TO MAN

Chennai has no water. The lakes that supply the city are all dry, and Metrowater sends its lorries scouting around any remaining ponds and wells around the city that still have some water, to suck out whatever remains and supply the needs of the public. A family gets five pots of water for a week. The more affluent of us pay private lorry operators who get water from somewhere. We cannot be particular about the source or the quality, but we have to pay for a full lorry load, 12 000 L. Few people have sumps large enough to hold this much water, and the lorry operators do not allow two households to split the lorry load between them. The balance is taken by the operator and sold to someone else, so it is a lucrative business. During a previous year of drought, I bought a Sintex water tank of 5000 L, so that I could take the whole lorry load between that and my sump.

Let me revert to the metrowater lorry supply. One would expect the lorry drivers to have some sympathy for the poor who have to subsist on five pots of water a week. On the contrary, they demand a completely illegitimate fee of ₹10 per household before they allow the housewife to fill her five pots. Robin Hood robbed the rich and gave the proceeds to the poor. Our robbing hoods steal from the poor.

Meanwhile, the state government has arranged to have water transported from Jolarpettai, some 200 km away from Chennai. This town has an abundant water supply from the Kaveri river. *The Indian Express* reports that the railways will charge ₹8.6 lakhs per trainload of 2.5 million litres of water, and four such trains are planned each day. The figures suggest that this will only satisfy 2% of the needs of the city. The southwest monsoon was a relative failure again and brought us totally inadequate water for our lakes and tanks. Groundwater has been recharged to some extent, but we will be in a parlous state if the northeast monsoon also fails. The only solution seems to be the sea, and adequate efforts have not been made for desalination plants. We have two, and a third is planned which will only be operational some 2 years from now. Meanwhile, we look up to the skies and hope.

### PLAYING POLITICS WITH NATIONAL ELIGIBILITY CUM ENTRANCE TEST (NEET)

The old Madras Presidency prided itself on being at the top of all academic activities in the country. However, Tamil Nadu has lost that position, and now lies near the bottom. Successive

governments of the state have allowed our educational standards to fall. Because students of private institutions consistently outscored those from government schools, an earlier government decided to bring everyone down to the same low level by introducing what they called 'samacheerkalvi' or equal education. This was clearly a retrograde step, and our share of the all India pie fell ever lower. You would expect our leaders to move heaven and earth to raise our standards to match students from the rest of the country, but instead, we approached the Supreme Court to exempt us from NEET and allow us to go on our own mediocre way. The court gave us this exemption for just 1 year to give us time to catch up with the other states. When the year was over, we went to the court again to beg for recognition of our permanent inferiority, but the court was kinder to our students and firmly insisted that we fight the rest of the country on equal terms.

Our politicians have no remorse for having presided over the decline of our academic standards and our inability to compete with our peers from the rest of the country. Our present rulers tried to get the Central Government and the Supreme Court to exempt us. The thought that we would thereby prevent our young students from aspiring to higher positions in central services, and higher qualifications in central universities, did not deter them from a step that would set back the youth of our state. The Centre and the Supreme Court showed greater regard for them than we did ourselves. Anyway, we were told firmly that it was NEET or nothing. Our current opposition party said that it would make the Court and the Centre relent, as our present rulers had not tried hard enough. They want the State Government to pass fresh legislation that Tamil Nadu will not accept NEET, and prevail on the President and maybe later the Supreme Court to ratify it. I hope we Tamils will realize that the future of our youth lies in improving their school standards. Of course, we can do it. Some special classes were introduced in government schools to make our students more competitive, and they bore fruit for our pass percentage rose from 39.56% in 2018–19 to 48.57% in 2019–20.

The results of NEET should have shown our leaders that we are behind the rest of the country, and that we should improve our schools and catch up. Instead, both our major parties are trying to convince Tamilians that this is a conspiracy by the Central Government to suppress us. They try to make themselves out to be champions of the state, making sure that we are not made to compete with the rest of the country. No party wants to really help us to advance. How long will we the public prefer to wallow in our mediocrity?

### SOCIAL ACTIVISM IN CHENNAI

Arappor Iyakkam (literally the strong and righteous fight, defined by the Iyakkam itself as a good fight or a non-violent war) is an organization aiming to build a just and equitable society. Its major activity has been exposing corruption in public life, especially dealing with public health, and therefore administration of the health department, but also taking up other activities of the government and striving to educate the public. For some years, the government has outsourced cleaning and security of its hospitals to various private bodies, and Arappor Iyakkam has uncovered massive malpractices in the

award of contracts, including dummy attendance registers and payment of lower salaries than what was mentioned in the official documents. The activists maintained that government lost ₹35 crores or more in 3 years but refused to take action on the evidence submitted. On the contrary, a case has been registered against senior office bearers of the association for defamation of government officials and ministers.

The Solid Waste Management Rules of the Chennai Corporation specify that only a minimum residue of the waste should find its way to the landfills. However, Arappor Iyakkam says that the private operators who have the contract now dump 95% of the waste in the landfills. This exposure has forced the corporation to look at the matter again and issue fresh guidelines for the private operators.

Perhaps, our most famous activist is Mr K.R. Ramaswamy, popularly known as Traffic Ramaswamy, who files public interest litigations on many civic matters, and especially on matters relating to our roads and traffic. His efforts led to the demolition of some illegally constructed buildings in the city, decongestion of some major bus routes and banning of motorized flat carts which are notoriously unstable. Not everyone is pleased with his efforts, and he has a 24-hour police guard ordered by the High Court.

Most of us complain about many aspects of life in the city, but few take the effort and the risk of actually initiating action on these matters. Civic-minded citizens must be grateful to the few activists among us who take up these issues with the authorities and the courts and make the city more liveable.

#### GOVERNMENT OPTS FOR DRESS SENSE

The State Government amended its Office Manual to prescribe a dress code for its officers when on duty. Men should wear a formal shirt and trousers, women a sari or a salwar kameez of sober colour. When they have to appear in court, men should wear a coat and a tie or a full buttoned-up short coat. This replaces the earlier regulations that only called for officers to be decently dressed.

I believe being well dressed adds to the dignity of an officer. I must say that, while politicians opt for the far more comfortable dhoti and shirt, the members of the Dravidian parties always don spotlessly white clothes. I have never been able to get my dhotis as white as those of the politicians, and presume they have them bleached every day.

*Conflicts of interest.* None declared

M.K. MANI

---