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Why I Write?

My Pro and Contra views to George Orwell

by Sachi Sri Kantha, January 24, 2011

“What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into an art. My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice. When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, ‘I am going to produce a work of art’. I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing.”

65 years ago, George Orwell wrote the famous essay ‘Why I Write?’, to explain his motives for writing. In it, he excluded those who have to write “to earn a living” and proposed ‘four great motives’ for writing. To quote in full,

“Putting aside the need to earn a living, I think there are four great motives for writing, at any rate for writing prose. They exist in different degrees in every writer, and in any one writer the proportions will vary from time to time, according to the atmosphere in which he is living. They are:

- *Sheer egoism.* Desire to seem clever, to be talked about, to be remembered after death, to get your own back on the grown-ups who snubbed you in childhood, etc., etc. It is humbug to pretend this is not a motive, and a strong one. Writers share this characteristic with scientists, artists, politicians, lawyers, soldiers, successful businessmen—in short, with the whole top crust of humanity. The great mass of human beings are not acutely selfish. After the age of about thirty they almost abandon the sense of being individuals at all—and live chiefly for others, or are simply smothered under drudgery. But there is also the minority of gifted, willful people who are determined to live their own lives to the end, and writers belong in this class. Serious writers, I should say, are on the whole more vain and self-centered than journalists, though less interested in money.
- *Aesthetic enthusiasm.* Perception of beauty in the external world, or, on the other hand, in words and their right arrangement. Pleasure in the impact of one sound on another, in the firmness of good prose or the rhythm of a good story. Desire to share an experience which one feels is valuable and ought not to be missed. The aesthetic motive is very feeble in a lot of writers, but even a pamphleteer or writer of textbooks will have pet words and phrases which appeal to him for non-utilitarian reasons; or he may feel strongly about typography, width of margins, etc. Above the level of a railway guide, no book is quite free from aesthetic considerations.
- *Historical impulse.* Desire to see things as they are, to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity.
- *Political purpose.*—Using the word ‘political’ in the widest possible sense. Desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other peoples’ idea of the kind of society that they should strive after. Once again, no book is genuinely free from political bias. The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude.

It can be seen how these various impulses must war against one another, and how they must fluctuate from person to person and from time to time...”

A Contra view to Orwell

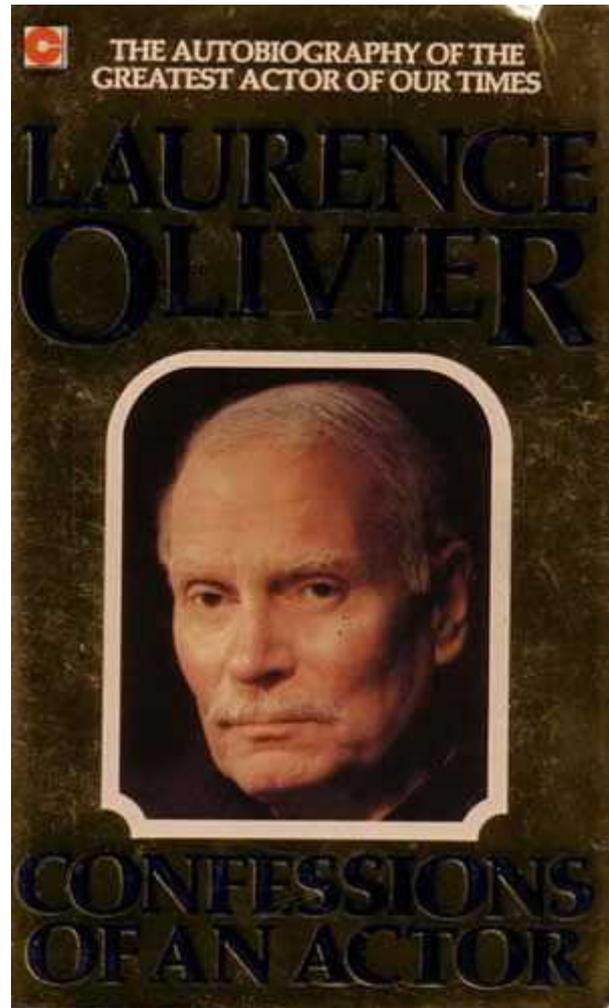
The very first great motive for writing cited by Orwell was ‘sheer egoism’. That word ‘ego’ was pushed into popularity by Sigmund Freud. Think about the great authors who influenced the society in which they lived, beginning from Plato and Aristotle to Freud, Mahatma Gandhi, Bertrand Russell, and Annadurai. The last four were Orwell’s contemporaries. Can it be implied that Plato and Aristotle wrote because of ‘sheer egoism’? We hardly have any vital evidence to prove it.

I don’t think that George Orwell had included some other ‘great motives’, which can influence writing of other authors. I would list, three more. These include, (1) self learning, (2) societal need, and (3)

parental wish fulfillment. These three motives cannot be included as a partial component to any of the four motives suggested by Orwell. I'd interpret that motives such as self learning and societal need influenced the output of Freud, Russell and Annadurai tremendously, though sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse and political purpose might have had some marginal degree of significance in their writing. While Orwell had implied 'ego' as the first great motive for writers, he had ignored another of Freud's pet theme 'wish fulfillment'.

On parental wish fulfillment of famous achievers, numerous records exist. The one, I liked best is that of British thespian Laurence (Larry) Olivier. He was the third child to his parents Gerard Kerr Olivier (1869-1939) and Agnes Olivier (1871-1920). Olivier's mom died when he was only 13. I quote a paragraph from his biographer Roger Lewis:

"[Agnes] suffered from glioblastoma, a malignant central nervous system tumour, that even today leaves a life expectancy for people over forty of only a few months. Its rapid enlargement destroys normal brain cells, with a progressive loss of function, and raises the intracranial pressure, causing headache, vomiting, and drowsiness. Her last words to her son – the scene sounds as staged as Cathy's deathbed in *Wuthering Heights*, or Lord Marchmain's in *Brideshead Revisited* – were, 'Darling Larry, no matter what your father says, be an actor. Be a great actor. For me.'



Laurence Olivier states in his 1982 autobiography *Confessions of an Actor*, where his father also decided what career his youngest son should take. Of the 15 chapters, of which chapter 1 'How It Began' was devoted to the actions of his father. Like a performer who captivates the audience while entering the stage, the first two beginning sentences of this chapter were simple and striking: "For my father, saving was a craving. This is no idle jingle but the plainest statement of fact." Olivier then mentions the astonishing scene in the bathroom where he and his father spent the evening, after they had sent off Larry's elder brother Dickie to India as a rubber planter. Note that, as his father was thrifty, he rationed even the hot water from the tap in seconds! To quote,

"Lowering myself into the water which was, I noticed unhappily, a little cleaner than usual, I snatched the hot tap on for the allotted number of seconds, and after a minute or so I asked my father how soon I might reckon on being allowed to follow Dickie to India. My father's answer was so astonishing that it gave me quite a deep shock: 'Don't be such a fool, you're not going to India, you're going on the stage? 'Am I?' I stammered lamely. 'Well, of course you are', he said..."

And that is how it was that, sitting in two or three inches of lukewarm water which was none too clean, on the orders of an eccentrically surprising father, my fate was sealed." At that particular moment in the bath tub, the loss of British colonial services to India turned into a great gift for Shakespearean stage and movies! From the reminiscence of his elder sister provided in the autobiography, one could guess that Olivier's father was keeping his promise given to his wife on her deathbed. Why I mention this vignette from the life of Laurence Olivier is that, for many writers (like actors, musicians and sportsmen or even lowly politicians!) parental wish fulfillment remains as a great motive.

I grant that George Orwell was a great writer, journalist, novelist and propagandist for British colonialism. But, he was not a stellar teacher! Orwell's career as a high school teacher lasted only for less than two years! When he was 29, Orwell taught at two high schools in West London during 1932-33; first at Hawthorne High School for Boys and then at Frays College, Uxbridge.

Teachers write books, because a societal need exists for them. Of the four great motives attributed by Orwell, in the writings of teachers, there should be aesthetic enthusiasm, there may be historical impulse and political purpose. But, there cannot be sheer egoism. Think about the great teacher Plato. He wrote because he must have had historical impulse and political purpose to pass to posterity about the treatment his tutor Socrates had from his tormentors. I don't think that we can be so sure whether Plato was influenced by egoism.

In my case, I consider self learning, societal need and parental wish fulfillment as main motives for writing the following three books.

Book 1: *Tamil Isai Theepam* (1977)

I began teaching Carnatic Music at the age of 18 in my alma mater Colombo Hindu College (Bambalapitiya), during my undergraduate days. I'd assert that my first book *Tamil Isai Theepam* (1977) – an elementary level book in Tamil on the theory of Karnatic Music - originated due to self learning, societal need and parental wish fulfillment motives that I had mentioned above, and not due to sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse and political purpose as stated by Orwell.

For record, I provide below excerpts from my autobiography *Tears and Cheers: Tale of a Tamil Scientist* (2004):

" ...Given the limitations I had in being a Sri Lankan Tamil, I chose to be a musicologist and not the performing artist. I reasoned that for every one hundred performing musicians in India, there was only one musicologist. Among the ranking musicologists, India had Professor P. Sambamoorthy and Eelam had Swami Vipulananda. I yearned to be counted in the minority with Professor Sambamoorthy and Swami Vipulananda.



EARLY YEARS

My father, the Reverend Gerard Olivier (1869-1939), cricketer, schoolmaster, Anglican priest and a strangely opportune encourager.

My mother, Agnes (1871-1920). No photograph that I have ever seen has revealed her loveliness.





The *Tamil Isai Theepam* book-release ceremony was held on August 18, 1978 Friday at the New Kathiresan Hall, Colombo. M. Sivasithamparam, the President of Tamil United Liberation Front and Member of Parliament for Nallur electorate, graced the occasion as the chief guest and offered me words of encouragement. I had become a rookie author at the age of 25. The function was presided by Tamil activist M.K. Eelaventhan. The print run of the book was 1,000 copies. I had spent a sum of 10,000 rupees [a personal fortune for me then; almost equivalent to my annual salary at the University of Peradeniya as an assistant lecturer] to get it printed in my native place – in Kalapavanam Press, Point Pedro. For S. Kannan, the proprietor of this press, it was a labor of love. Previously, I had received estimates from few named Colombo presses; none were willing to budge from their print quotation from 25,000 rupees for 1,000 copies, which of course was beyond my purse.

I was relieved that nearly 200 copies of the book were sold on that book release function. Each book was priced affordably at 10 rupees per copy, with no profit motive. Though I hardly gained monetarily from my self-publishing venture, I received the satisfaction of performing a needed educational service to young Tamil musicians. My mother sarcastically commented that my book release was nothing but a 'wedding' for me – in terms of anxiety, cost and labor. I couldn't rebut her view. The book was well received by the music teachers. In 1983 after I had left the island, belatedly, *Tamil Isai*

Theepam was awarded the 1977 Sahitya Prize by the Sri Lanka Government for that year's best research book in Tamil language. Since I was in Illinois, my mother had the satisfaction of receiving the honor on behalf of me, from Mr. Chelliah Rajadurai, then the Minister of Regional Affairs in 1984."

To support my view that self learning and societal needs were two great motives for writers, I provide excerpts from my prefaces to the first two books in English, published by the Greenwood Press (Westport, Connecticut).

Book 2: *Prostitutes in Medical Literature; An Annotated Bibliography (1991)*

I was introduced to this word 'prostitutes' in a circular manner via my father, around the age of 10. He worked in the clerical service of Ceylon's Ministry of Health. One of his work stations in mid 1960s was 'Anti V.D. Campaign' affiliated to the Colombo General Hospital. V.D. stands for Venereal Diseases. Occasionally, he used to bring home a few educational posters in Sinhalese and Tamil prepared for circulation among the public, with glaring one sentence cryptic message 'Be Careful of Your Contacts!'. That was my initiation to the word 'prostitutes'. Here is an excerpt from the preface that I wrote for this book.

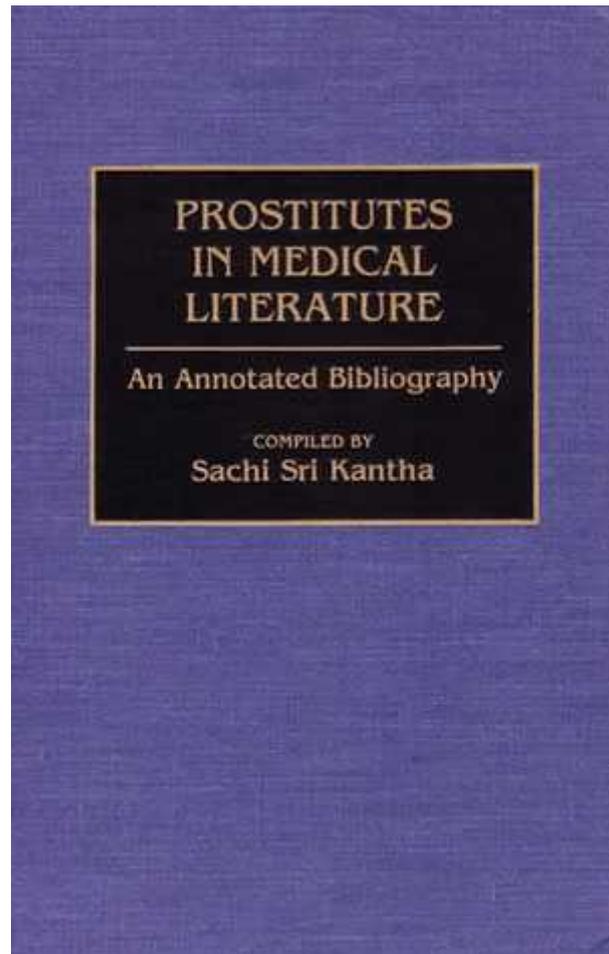
"...While I was a graduate student at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, I had the opportunity to attend the 6th World Congress of Sexology, held at Washington DC from May 22nd to 27th 1983. For a native of conservative Sri Lanka, it was a surprising revelation that the research on sex behavior could be so openly discussed in an august assembly of scholars, observers, and students. I was also pleased to see and listen to many scientists who explored the field of human sexual behavior. Though at that time I was engaged in dissertation research on food chemistry and nutrition, that Congress provided me the sparks to contribute something to the area of sexual behavior. With so much attention on the spread of AIDS then, I began collecting research papers on prostitution during spare time to satisfy my curiosity and this eventually led to the origin of this bibliography.

Since much of the medical literature on prostitutes remains scattered in a multitude of major, minor and obscure biomedical journals published in the USA and other countries, I planned to compile these scattered publications in a book so that it will be of use to professionals in medical and social sciences..."

I wish to mention one anecdote. As I have stated in this preface, I met quite a few of scientists in Washington DC in May 1983 while attending the World Congress of Sexology. My most memorable meeting was with Dr. Wardell Pomeroy (1913-2001), one of the collaborators and co-authors of Dr. Alfred Kinsey's landmark books on sexuality of Americans. I had carried with me, Pomeroy's biography of Kinsey, and after he delivered his lecture, I approached him at the podium and received his autograph. A scan of Pomeroy's autograph is provided nearby. Why I mention it here? These days, much propaganda is given to e-books and portable e-book readers (such as Amazon kindle) and their increasing sales. How can one get a famous scientist's valued autograph in an e-book? As long as some inventor comes out with a perfected design to receive autographs and convince me, I'll remain partial to the printed books. It has been one of my hobbies to receive autographs from eminent authors, on their works. Other than Pomeroy, I also have collected autographs from Linus Pauling, Sydney Brenner, James Watson (all Nobelists in science) and Jane Goodall in the past.

Book 3: *An Einstein Dictionary (1996)*

An excerpt from the preface I wrote for this book, is as follows:



DR. KINSEY

AND THE INSTITUTE FOR
SEX RESEARCH

WARDELL B. POMEROY

Greetings

To Sachi Sri Kantha.

5/23/83

from
Wardell B. PomerooyHARPER & ROW, PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK, EVANSTON, SAN FRANCISCO, LONDON

"...The publication of *The Collected Papers of Albert Einstein* was also unduly delayed due to the legal wrangling between the executors of Einstein's estate and Princeton University. Of the projected thirty five volumes, only the first five volumes have been published so far, beginning in 1987. These five volumes cover the first three decades of Einstein's life. The completion of publication of all the projected thirty five volumes may well take another two decades, according to some estimates by Einstein admirers. Furthermore, since Einstein wrote most of his correspondence in the German language, making it easily accessible to non-German scientists and students interested in science has also become an obstacle to those who have planned the publication of the remaining volumes.

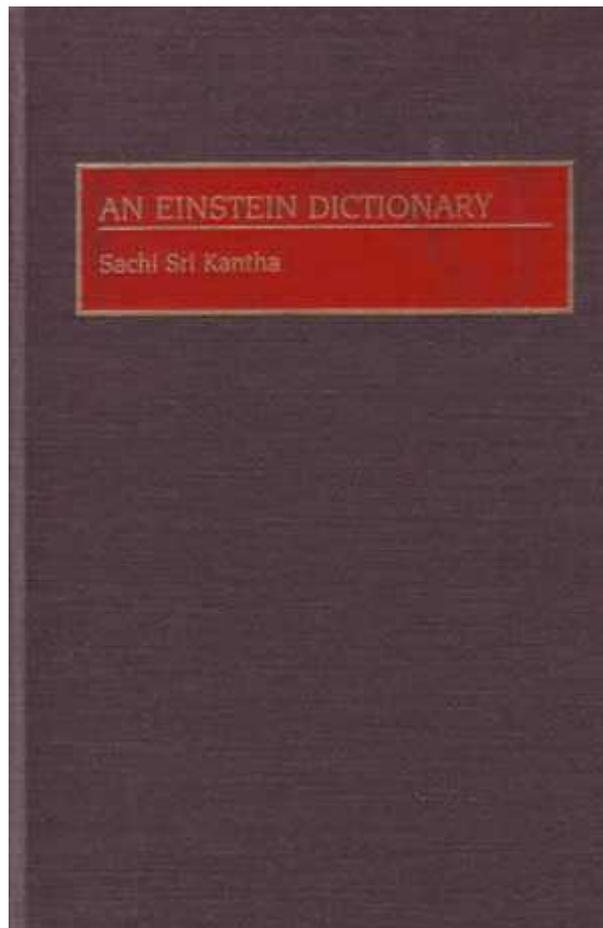
When Einstein died, I was a few weeks short of my second birthday. In 1967 I was introduced to his well-known equation $E=mc^2$ by my high school chemistry tutor Mr. P. Canagaratnam, in Colombo. Fifteen years later I read Abraham Pais's article, 'How Einstein got the Nobel Prize', published in the *American Scientist* of July-August 1982, while I was a graduate student at the University of Illinois. That commentary provided me with the initial sparks to study more about the Ulm-born

genius. In 1987, while I was in Tokyo, I wrote a letter to Dr. Pais requesting details about any existing bibliographies of Einstein's works. He alerted me to the 1949 bibliography of Margaret Shields published in the classic volume edited by Paul Schilpp. That was the origin of this book. To the best of my knowledge, there is no reference book on Einstein comparable to *Charles Darwin: A Companion* (1979) by R.B. Freeman, or *The Newton Handbook* (1987) by D. Gjersten. My book is an attempt to rectify this vacuum in Einstein scholarship..."

Pro view with Orwell, via Sangam website

But I do agree with George Orwell, when he wrote in the same essay,

"What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into an art. My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice. When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, 'I am going to produce a work of art'. I write it because there is some lie that I



want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing.”

This was the reason I wrote '*Pirabhakaran Phenomenon*' series at the sangam website from 2001 to 2004, which appeared as book number 4, in 2005. I do agree with George Orwell that it is 'sheer egoism' that buffets me in patting on my shoulders that I'm the only one in this world who could write four books on four varied themes in two languages. Monetary benefit was meager. But the pride in seeing my name entered in two directories [*Tamil Writers Directory*, 1981; *Contemporary Authors*, 2000] compensates my ego considerably.

For the past 10 years, due to the foresight and encouragement of the editors of the sangam website, I have been able to chronicle the lives and deeds of the following personalities who lived in Sri Lanka in our life time. [arranged tentatively by chronological year of birth]. These contributions originated due to the four great motives identified by Orwell in 1946. There is one specific reason, why I wrote about these individuals. There is no handy biographical dictionary of Eelam Tamils for 20th and 21st centuries. Again, my prime motive was the societal need. Rather than cursing the darkness, why not light a candle? This has been my main goal.

Politicians: S.J.V. Chelvanayagam, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, G.G. Ponnambalam Sr.,,

J.R. Jayewardene, V. Navaratnam, Edmund Samarakkody, S. Thondaman Sr,

K.P. Ratnam, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Pieter Keuneman, V.Dharmalingam,

M. Sivasithamparam, R. Premadasa, Alfred Duraiappah, A. Amirthalingam,

K. Thurairatnam, V. Anandasangari, Lakshman Kadirgamar, G.G.(Kumar) Ponnambalam Jr., Neelan Tiruchelvam, Chandrika Kumaratunga, Mahinda Rajapaksa, Anura Bandaranaike, Kethesh Loganathan, Douglas Devananda and V. Muralitharan (aka Karuna).

Rebel: V. Pirabhakaran

Academics: Rev. X. Thani Nayagam, Prof. Christie J. Eliezer, Prof. S. Vithianathan, Prof. K. Kailasapathy, Dr. Rajan Hoole, Prof. S. Raveendranath, Prof. Ratnajeewan Hoole, Dr. Rajani Thiranagama, Dr. Rohan Gunaratna.

Cartoonist: Sittampalam Sivagnanasundaram (*Sirithiran* Siva)

Writers and Poets: Arthur C. Clarke, V. Sivasubramaniam, Dr. C. Sivagnanasundaram (Nandhi), Kasi Ananthan.

Journalists: S.P. Amarasingam, Mervyn de Silva, S. Sivanayagam, Dayan Jayatileka, Taraki Sivaram.

Tamil Activists: James T. Rutnam, M.K. Eelaventhan, Mrs. Mangayarkarasi Amirthalingam, Anton Balasingham.

Public Official: K. Alvapillai.

Also, not to be forgotten were the profiles that I penned about the prominent and influential Tamils from India: R.K. Narayan, C.N. Annadurai (Anna), N.S.Krishnan (NSK), M.G. Ramachandran (MGR), Karunanidhi, Kaviarasu Kannadasan, Sivaji Ganesan, Pattukottai Kalyanasundaram and Narasimhan Ram.

A canard is being spread by a few malcontent critics of mine (Prof. Ratnajeewan Hoole for instance) that I'm opposed to Christian Tamils. Silly, I'd say. The reality is that I'm a fan of serious scholarship. I have written positively about Tamil Christians (James T. Rutnam, Rev. Xavier Thani Nayagam, Prof. Christie J. Eliezer and Anton Balasingham) who offered serious scholarship and contribution to the society at large. Equally, what I have opposed was the spurious scholarship of Hoole brothers, D.B.S. Jeyaraj and Rajani Thiranagama.

I'm rather proud of my corpus of fifty plus profiles that I've produced on these Sri Lankans and South Indians. I know for sure, that quite a few wouldn't agree with my portrayals of these personalities. My response is, 'So what?' At least, they serve one specific need of the times. **I have noticed that during the past 10 years, what I have contributed about these personalities have been cut and pasted in mutilated versions by anonymous contributors to the Wikipedia entries!** This fact reiterates in me the words of wisdom delivered by American humorist Andy Rooney 25 years ago.

In the preface to his book '*Word for Word*'(1986), Andy Rooney wrote: "Writing is difficult. That's why there's so little of it that's any good. Writing isn't like mathematics where what you've put down is either right or wrong. No writer ever put down anything on paper that he knows for certain is good or

bad." To those critics, who disagree with my portrayals and opinions, I'd say 'Relax! Sit in front of a keyboard and contribute your own writing (or profiles about Tamil individuals) at regular intervals (like what I have been doing since 1974) in an appropriate forum to propagate your thoughts'. Then, you'll understand the wisdom of Andy Rooney. Like the proverbial fox in the palmyrah field [*Panamkaatu Nari salasalappuku Anjuma?*– Will the fox of the palmyra field get scared by the rustling noise?], I will not be swayed by the rustling noise.

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