

A Legacy Of A Century

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Schokman & Samerawickreme is one of the oldest family businesses in the country. They are the pioneers in the field of auctioning in Sri Lanka with a history of 123 years. Keeping professionalism and quality of service as their core ethos the company has now become synonymous with the field of auctioning. The establishment stands proudly with a century-old success and reputation that were built brick by brick and shows great promise for the future as well. Navinda Samerawickreme, Managing Partner, and grandson of Edwin Samerawickreme talks about their journey of success.

By Archana Balakumar | Photography BT Images

Schokman & Samerawickreme is one of the oldest establishments in the country. Could you please tell us about the history of the company?

An English gentleman called Schokman who was a planter in the Badulla region founded the company. As a hobby he conducted auctions to sell off the belongings of his colleagues who were leaving for their motherland. He converted his hobby to a business and established an auctioning organisation called Schokman & Company. After a few years, my grandfather, Edwin Samerawickreme joined the company and it was renamed as Schokman & Samerawickreme. Both of them were committed to the business.

Mr Schokman didn't have any descendants and hence after the demise of my grandfather, the management of the business passed on to my father, Shirley Samerwickreme and his three brothers. All of them individually contributed to the growth of the company. They operated from 24, Torrington Road, Kandy which is our current head office. The business was brought to Colombo by one of my uncles who migrated here. So that is how we entered Colombo. Today my brother and I take care of the complete operations of the company.

Can you talk about the services offered by the company?

Primarily we offer auctioneering and valuation services of various nature. We conduct auctions on behalf of banks, to help them recover the money on mortgaged properties. We conduct house and property auctions and also undertake demolition of buildings. On request we conduct in-situ auctions in instances when a client wishes to vacate the premises. All contents are placed for bidding at the premises itself. We have conducted auctions of such nature, for corporate offices and homes as well. We have also ventured into real estate where we function like the middle men between the buyers and the sellers. But we offer this service for selected properties only.

Whatever be the nature of business that we venture into, at all times we wish to offer a personalised service. It is one of our primary principles. We don't believe in delegating certain tasks this is the reason why my brother and I involve ourselves personally in all the dealings.

Can you talk about the growth of the company and the expansion process?

We were based in Kandy and would travel to places where auctions were to be held. □The business was brought to Colombo by one of my uncles and ever since I started working in the company in the year 1992, we focused on expanding the business at the capital. Now, in total we have two showrooms in Colombo, our flagship auction store and the sales facility at Isipathana Mawatha. This branch also functions as a retail outlet, where our customers have

the convenience of walking in at any time to purchase the exhibits. All of these items are unique and carry a certain antique value.

Our other branch is at Havelock Road. We make a monthly schedule and conduct high-end auctions with mostly antiques and paintings there. We have a vehicle auctioning facility at Pelawatte as well. We have about 40 employees including executive and minor staff. Minor staff play a big role in the business, because they are the people who load, lift, carry and take care of the manual work, which is very important in this business. We are happy to say that we have a very hardworking and dedicated team. Our employees are one of the main reasons for our success. Some of them have been working with us for as long as 25-30 years.

Do you see the possibility for more competition in this field?

In a way, we don't see competition because there are very few people involved in this field. Except for some organisations that offer bank auction services there aren't many in the country as of now. And none of them are as big and well-established as we are. Customers place their faith and trust in us because of our name.

What are the future plans for the company?

We don't want to expand too much, as it would become difficult for us to provide a customised service. Since customers these days expect innovation from us, we decided to launch an auction web portal. This will be a truly novel initiative that will allow customers to participate in the auction and bid from wherever they are at. In this fast paced world of today, people rarely find the time to participate in auctions that last for long hours unlike in olden days, when this was more of a socialising occasion. I believe this option will be well-received by everyone.

Final thoughts?

What we are today is the result of the efforts and hard work of our parents and grandparents. This is a unique line of business, which many people hesitate to venture into. But because of what our forefathers had created for us, we were able to take the company to great heights. I don't think they themselves would have expected us to reach such a level. We have come a long way and we hope that our future generations carry forward our legacy. We are also happy about the fact that we are one of the few companies based in the

hill capital, to have grown and achieved as much as this. We are very humble about our success and popularity.