A Man on a Mission



Sepal Amarasinghe

Not everyone is a good communicator like Sepal Amarasinghe, presenter extraordinaire who is no stranger in Sri Lanka’s influencer ecosystem. The Sepal Amarasinghe YouTube channel has amassed large followership for the novelty that its presenter offers by exploring a plethora of pertinent subjects. Sepal describes it as an expedition into human nature, and human thought through philosophy, anthropology, psychoanalysis, history, and politics. At the core of his mission is to see change, a revamped Sri Lanka with a mature population no longer tolerant of deceptive politics and leaders. A rebel at heart, Sepal remains defiant and determined to purge the prevailing status quo of its ills to build an ideal society that will lead Sri Lanka out of its current economic and social morass. He is seeking to raise a visionary leader that Sri Lanka so desperately needs at this point. In the interim, he continues to drive his influential agenda to steer social change by urging

people to think and act differently; discard the hubris, and embrace the rational. In an interview with Business Today, Sepal spoke lengthily on his agenda and principles, where we, as a society, have erred, and his hope for the future.

Words: Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

Photography: Sujith Heenitigala and Dinesh Fernando.

You have adopted a novel presentation style. You are very animated, interactive, and engaging. You speak on a plethora of subjects that are educational and analytical. You create much awareness on pertinent issues, including a window to some pressing matters in the country. Your presentations are engaging as you relate to the audience, and you come up with terms in Sinhala and English to explain your point. Can you tell us something about what differentiates your programs?

When I launched my YouTube channel three years ago, I didn't have much hope of succeeding in a space replete with comedies, cooking programs, and wildlife. My discussions are interspersed with subjects such as philosophy, anthropology, psychoanalysis, history, and political science, which are absent in people's consciousness. People often assume that these subjects are irrelevant to their lives and that watching the news on television suffices. I explore these subjects in relevance to the topic of focus. Incidentally, my knowledge results from self-study and not from a university education.

My YouTube channel is an expedition into human nature and exploring human thought. To understand human thought, we must know the fundamentals of what guides that process. Humans are, by nature, selfish. It's in their genes. They are born with that gene ingrained in them. It would be a lie if anyone were to deny that fact. A motive of gain dictates every human action. My analysis begins from that standpoint, extending to my focus on analyzing society broadly. Also, you cannot simply talk to people and expect people to listen. There has to be an element of entertainment to make the listener happy, and in that, I quote what I have learned from my grandmother, which helps me convey my intended message to the viewers.

My experience has been like many others where my grandmother would narrate stories to keep us restless children well-behaved and calm. Telling her stories is a tool to build trust with my viewers, who accept such stories as accurate. In general, we can say that our grandmothers had a glut of knowledge. Sadhguru of India has said that if we unearth that sea of knowledge, we will have to commission million-dollar research. My program content should be a joy to watch and unharmful entertainment that will not pollute minds but rather assist intellectual development to help take a step forward in life. Learning a single new word should foster a degree of human growth. Every individual who watches my program should emerge as a better person. Otherwise, it becomes a futile exercise.

My program is a carefully planned and thought-out educational exercise. The objective is not to make my show a political one. However, stories from the lives of politicians are intended as a window to provide something more valuable and knowledgeable to the audience. I strive to make my program one of a kind that others cannot copy. It is a sharing of knowledge of the fundamentals and historical information and the relationship between facts, trends, and occurrences. I combine them with a presentation style that captures the viewer’s attention.

The stimulant to this YouTube initiative was the COVID-19 pandemic, as it gave me the time and space to make it better. The pandemic was when I put aside my other involvements to focus on adding value to the YouTube channel as all other income-generating avenues came to a standstill. Given the confinement imposed upon us, no other initiative would have worked. As I began by writing a script and recording my presentation from a camera or on my phone, I constantly focused on improving the content of my presentations. I intend to expand my reach by launching a new channel to educate people on various subjects. Teaching is an art that I have learned from watching my mother teach her students. Although I joined Royal College Colombo from Rathnapura after the grade five scholarship, I decided not to allow my school to dictate my life’s choices. And that’s why I have not joined the old boys’ union and consciously keep away from cricket matches and batch parties. One cannot focus enough on the mission of changing Sri Lanka through involvement in the OBU or by partying with friends. Not many are willing to step into the difficult task of resurrecting this country from the chaos and destruction it is plunging into, a job that I have embraced to help navigate this country out of the morass it is in right now.

My YouTube channel impacts all spheres of life and individuals, including politicians and political parties, the police, and the armed forces whose members have spoken to me personally. I hope to continue my programs and take them from strength to strength.

The differentiating factor is that I don't offer my professional services to any other government or private channel, except for an interview I gave to one YouTube channel. I'm very conscious about whom I speak with because individuals with tarnished reputations often own most businesses. I will talk to an outlet owned by an individual who has earned money through hard work. Many private television stations have invited me to do programs, but most of them are very vague about who owns them; hence I cannot accept an offer from such surreptitious outlets. We cannot raise this country by accepting every invitation for an interview or job. After all, our fight is against some of those duplicitous media companies. I have even questioned members of the
JVP for accepting invitations to participate in political discussions conducted by some of those devious media networks because it is the reckless behavior of such irresponsible channels that are destroying this country.

We see that you have built trust with your audience, connect with them well, and inspired them while enhancing their knowledge. Can you tell us something about the support you get from the local audience?

I have become one of the most loved media people in recent history after Premakeerthi de Alwis, whom people adored for his aesthetic and creative talent. I believe people love me for two reasons; my creative flair in communicating with them and my contribution to making a change since launching my YouTube program in July 2019. For instance, customarily, JVP members would address senior politicians as 'sir,' while none of those egoists reciprocated that courtesy. I went beyond a simple exposition of this practice to explore deeper the attitude governing such behavior, which was one of master-slave, which they were unaware of. Subsequently, they stopped using that term, which I believe was a good outcome. Similarly, I have been able to reduce people's subservience to religious institutions.

I firmly believe that we should separate the State and religion. We should confine religion to places of worship people choose to visit in their leisure time. We don't need instructions from the clergy on governance. Governance is the domain of the laity. The Buddha's teachings were primarily on how to live life. The path is different

for those who choose to be a disciple of the Buddha. I believe the clergy has destroyed this country. Most individuals who join the clergy are from underprivileged backgrounds holding a grudge against the prevailing social order. They use religion to resolve the injustice they endured because of their disadvantaged backgrounds. Some of them have birthed various militant religious movements that are harming society.

The teledramas' content is so distorted that they lead to family disharmony rather than peace. If we are to change Sri Lanka for the better, we must have serious discourse on what people watch as television entertainment. Teledrama makers must undergo in-depth training on making responsible content for public consumption. We are following in the footsteps of Indian television dramas replete with hostilities and backbiting. One of the teledrama followed a similar line where every character is constantly in conflict with each other. Later we heard that its producer and a prominent political leader in Sri Lanka had robbed millions and subsequently fled to Australia. I avoid accepting even a cup of tea from people with tainted credentials. Unless with my closest friends, I keep away from functions or meeting people over meals and drinks. If I do so, I will be derailing my project and its objectives. I have had many offers from prominent but notorious business people in this country. Last year an infamous businessman offered me 2.5 million rupees as a monthly salary with a Mercedes Benz with a driver to head his propaganda machinery. He claimed that I was his first choice as he believed I was the ideal man for the job. I thanked him for the offer but said I would respond once I completed the responsibility of changing the country. He claimed that his proposal would remain open and not hesitate to contact him. I requested him to tell everyone that Sepal Amarasinghe turned down his offer. In 2009 I was offered to take over the propaganda of Tharunyayata Hetak with a vehicle and a salary of one hundred thousand rupees. My response to those who invited me then was the same. I have received many requests from politicians, including a president. But I turned down all those offers.

> Many have no value and add no value to the country but only destroy it through corrupt practices. I attempt to create a change, a new political culture. We need a new government, which I believe we can usher in time to come. The change we envisage is not happening because we remain silent and fail to protest against injustice.

I have worked under very trying circumstances. I was so committed to the mission that I produced a magazine in the sweltering heat of a small room for ten years. At a time when we have to be conscious of conserving energy, look at the gas-guzzling vehicles used by our politicians. What worth do they have to use such valuable cars? I believe that a cobbler adds more value to the economy than some of our politicians. Many have no value and add no value to the country but only destroy it through corrupt practices. I attempt to create a change, a new political culture. We need a new government, which I believe we can usher in time to come. The change we envisage is not happening because we remain silent and fail to protest against injustice. Recently, a Muslim friend of mine was in tears, fearing for my safety because of what I was doing. I reminded him that many had lost their lives in vain, from Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, to Vijaya Kumaratunga. So, I cannot remain passive in fear of reprisal. Am I to stop working? We have created a force in society that even if they kill one person, there will be someone else to take up this mantle. I think victory is nearer when an individual sacrifices their life for what they stand for.

You have strong views on politics, religion, racism, gender, and violence. How would you view the hitherto ethnoreligious landscape in Sri Lanka?

In 2011, I was summoned to the fourth floor of the CID for calling a radical clergyman ‘machang’ in a magazine that I used to edit. I called him out and demanded a stop to his hateful rhetoric destroying this country. Rather than acknowledge the damage, such individuals claim that their warnings went unheeded. But what some of them ignore is the cause-and-effect of their actions. Some clergymen sowed the seeds for the growth of Islamic fundamentalism in Sri Lanka.

Let’s go back a few decades. There would not have been a Prabhakaran had not there been a Cyril Mathew in the 1980s. I have witnessed the injustice meted out to the minorities in my own eyes. I remember on the steps to the Kachcheri in Rathnapura, where my father worked, a Tamil cobbler was at work while a Sinhala man was begging. This beggar would get the Tamil cobbler to bring him tea every day using the money he earned doing his job.

I witnessed this injustice as a child. It’s untrue if anyone were to claim that Tamil people weren’t mistreated. Tamils were always treated discriminatorily and responded to that injustice in time. People may ask for evidence of where such

discriminatory practices occurred. It was everywhere. The level of injustice against the Tamils in this country happened in neighborhoods, the street, shops to the marketplace. That injustice didn't happen among the political class as everyone was acquainted. But at a much lower level, that injustice was evident. That injustice is very difficult to be corrected. I have Tamil friends. Even today, I sense fear when they speak to me. I believe this fear is in every Sri Lankan citizen who is not Sinhala Buddhist. We have failed to eliminate that fear because we are exploiting that fear for our benefit but doing so discreetly. The status quo desires this minority fear to prevail. We have to accept the presence of a Sinhala hegemony in Sri Lanka. This hegemony prevails in the minds of the majority. As long as this hegemony exists, we cannot eliminate the hierarchy. My mission is to speak against such injustices. If this hegemony did not prevail, then a majority of non-Tamils would be able to converse in Tamil. We can't speak Tamil because we have decided that we don't have to.

> I believe the people are ready for a fresh start, but no leader is waiting in the wings to drive that change. You need a very talented and skilled leader. Most politicians are not brave enough to take this challenge.

On the contrary, there is a rule that the Tamil people have to speak Sinhala. Otherwise, they will not be able to navigate themselves in their daily lives. In Jaffna, we meet Tamil people who had worked in Colombo, and they are the only Jaffna residents who can converse in Sinhala. The others reject speaking in Sinhala because they are angry and determined to continue their way of life as it is in the Tamil language.

The term Tamil diaspora is misplaced. The term diaspora describes people that have lost their homeland, first used to describe the Jews. So, the Tamils have lost not a Tamil homeland but Sri Lanka. There is no country called Tamil. The more they describe themselves as the Tamil diaspora they will distance themselves from Sri Lanka. They should be able to call Sri Lanka their country. Groups like 'Tamils for Biden,' my Tamil friends told me were small groups lobbying for a separate state. My argument was that although they may be a small group, their thoughts reflect the sentiments of a larger Tamil population.

Similarly, the radical thoughts of a militant Buddhist monk may come out as the

ideas of a single individual. However, he gives voice to the inherent sentiments of a majority of Sinhala people. Racism is inherent in the selfish gene of human beings. We love our motherland, our language, and everything about ourselves. Beyond that, we will not extend the same affection to something outside our identity. That's the nature of all living beings. The compulsion is to safeguard what belongs to us primarily. Only in acknowledging the presence of Sinhala Buddhist hegemonic ideology in one's mind can an individual refrain from using that identity improperly. We can unite as Sri Lankans only when we accept our differences as Sinhala and Tamil people. We must acknowledge our cultural differences that have been nurtured for years and cannot be changed overnight. Rather than trying to alter these differences, it's best that we understand and accept the differences and live peacefully as Sri Lankans.

Sri Lanka doesn't have a single festival that unites people of all races and religions. Our festivals are unique to faiths and ethnicities. Look at some of the festivals abroad, such as the Holi festival in India, the Tomatina Festival in Spain, and the Japanese Penis Festival, which unite all citizens. I intend to propose to a future government to have a food fight festival in Sri Lanka with anything we grow in surplus, such as pumpkins. When people engage in a fun activity of attacking each other, it quenches an inherent impulse to fight and lash out. In the bullfight in Mexico, the bull becomes the common enemy; this common enemy could be anything. People need such indulgences to satiate their mental and physical energy, without which I believe a country cannot move forward. Human energy is expressible positively or negatively, to create or to destroy. Therefore, it is essential to utilize this human energy appropriately. One cannot do that without preparing the necessary background. If this country gets a government we can work with; I will certainly contribute with my input.

> We have heard that this country has so many other natural resources that require much study and excavation through massive investment. But our elected leaders fail to pursue potential investment opportunities because importing raw materials profits them.

You are talking about creating an ideal society. Do you think people are ready for it?

I believe the people are ready for a fresh start, but no leader is waiting in the wings to drive that change. You need a very talented and skilled leader. Most politicians are not brave enough to take this challenge. Like in cricket, many miss a catch and forego the cup. May 9 was a historic moment to usher in this change, but that historic moment was lost.

Leo Tolstoy said, “Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself,” meaning that people have to change first. It’s been more than a hundred years since Tolstoy. Many people like Tolstoy have tried to instill wisdom to create a better world. I’m trying to do the same through my programs. However, the same people watching my programs watch YouTube comedies. We can’t change people for good, but we can condition their minds to behave in a certain way. For instance, the individual who cleans their hand on paper after a meal at a Saivite hotel will not do that at a five-star hotel. The conditioning is such that people’s behavior changes as soon as they enter a star-class hotel.

Another example is traffic stops and queues where people barely have the patience to wait for their turn. It’s different in the developed countries not because the people in those countries are better than us but because their systems are more developed and established. So, that is the change we must envisage.

> A new leader should have a vision. Only a leader with a legitimate mandate can mobilize the people. Today people are refusing to heed the call of their leader. As long as an arrogant and ignorant leadership is in control, people cannot rise in unison.

People will always be the same everywhere. The people who disregard discipline in Sri Lanka live differently in the west. Why? Because they will send them back if they don’t toe the line. In 1989, my friends and I were removed from a bus in Taiwan for smoking.

We didn’t have the maturity to understand that it’s not right to smoke inside a bus because that’s what we were doing in Sri Lanka. That was a learning opportunity for us as we practiced the same rule once we were back in Sri Lanka and stopped smoking in public places. So, I believe we can establish systems in Sri Lanka because, as a literate nation, our people can learn and adapt. Unfortunately, Sri

Lanka has leaders with zero vision, skills, and personality. We can't continue this dialogue with the main political parties because they aim to make money while in power. But a minority in politics is open to this kind of dialogue and change. I know of like- minded people like me who desire to drive this country to a better place.

Every individual elected to parliament is not ready to be president. Some are comfortable remaining where they are while others pursue their aspirations. In turn, the people have a minimal choice when they are allowed to elect a leader.

That's because many want to do their own thing and pursue their agendas. A leader is responsible for a plethora of things. Mahinda Rajapaksa was an individual who took on positions of leadership very eagerly. He was a risk-taker. If not for the allegations that have tainted his image, he was quite a dynamic leader. The country was able to use him to achieve specific objectives. Many don't have the confidence or the ability to take on leadership challenges. Beyond the war, he had no vision to develop the country.

Sri Lanka is blessed abundantly. But rather than use its natural resources, our leaders have supported an import-dependent economy to buttress their wellbeing through commissions. People in positions of power think of only filling their coffers rather than working for the greater good. Take, for instance, today's energy crisis. We are thrilled when our reservoirs fill, as that would redress the incessant power cuts. But owners of private power plants that sell power to the government use goons to open the sluice gates of reservoirs to release the water, so there isn't sufficient water to generate hydropower, forcing the government to purchase from them. They have been doing this for a long time. Isn't it a crime to release reservoir water because you want to profit? A good leader can stop such corrupt practices. I believe that we can put this country back on track. If I have been able to impact through my YouTube channel in three years, I think all we need for good governance is the right government in power. We have everything required to develop this country. As a preschooler, I learned we might have oil deposits in Pesalai. Similarly, we have heard that this country has so many other natural resources that require much study and excavation through massive investment. But our elected leaders fail to pursue potential investment opportunities because importing raw materials profits them. Sri Lanka's leading importer of a particular fruit was one of the biggest election donors to a powerful politician in Sri Lanka. What happened to all the local manufacturing facilities that Sirimavo Bandaranaike set up? We turned our backs on the manufacturing culture she developed to make way for imports. Some of those factories had the best machinery from Europe.

While we sold off high-quality machinery and those facilities ceased manufacturing, here we are today, waiting for fuel to arrive. But all is not lost. We can undoubtedly resurrect this country from its current morass.

I am determined to drive for change. I am also willing to join forces to provide advice to augment the country's forward march. When Gotabaya Rajapaksa was elected president, I told some of my associates working for him not to allow his victory to be sullied by promoting mundane projects. But unfortunately, I learned that those closest to any leader are the ones that block them from receiving rich counsel or getting the right person to navigate the future as their primary intent from the outset is to make money from that relationship. Most of them extend that association to benefit their families, spouses, children, and extended families.

The clergy in this country is another group that uses its power, influence, and wealth to corrupt society. We have to change this culture, and doing so will hurt many, but we need to do it if we are to eliminate the corrupt political culture ingrained in our system that has led to our downfall.

We teach children about history, a glorified past, the role of kings, and then about the part of the leaders of independence and how they governed with integrity. But our social, cultural, religious, and political landscape is ailing. Where did the rot set in? You envisage an ideal society. Where can that change happen?

I can explain this through a fine analogy from a famous local phrase. The Sinhala idiom 'Wanse Kabal Ganawa' may be figurative, but it emerged in response to events from real life. It describes the once noble, aristocratic, and well-to-do families that have fallen on hard times and continue to live in the past by speaking about their glory days. So, the story of this idiom tells of an aristocratic family that has hit upon hard times. One day when visitors turned up, they heard the cooking sound coming from the kitchen. But all the lady of the house was doing was stirring an empty pot with a spoon. And that's what we have been doing for a while now. But we have nothing. We have been stirring an empty pot for a long time. It's too late by the time the people turn up in the kitchen to see what's happening because all that they've heard for so long is just some noise from a futile exercise. The kitchen is empty. Local radio channels play patriotic songs at the start of the day. In today's context of long queues and shortages, don't those patriotic songs sound silly and irrelevant? Isn't it ironic that we have no electricity although we have an

air conditioner and no fuel for the vehicle?

We are like impotent people who cannot make use of the things we have. Why? Because for a very long time now, all our politicians and the clergy have propagated lies and fallacies. They should be held responsible for where we are as a nation. We cannot blame the people. People are like an ingredient that is open to change. They are amenable. If not, would the same people that overwhelmingly voted for Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2010 vote for Maithripala Sirisena in 2015 and 2019 elect Gotabaya Rajapaksa, and within ten years, the same people are rejecting all these individuals. But that's human nature.

Deception is a common trait of our leaders. Those few political leaders with an untainted image will eventually face rejection if they too begin to con the masses. Their houses, too, will be burned down. The next time the people take to the streets, they will go beyond burning down politicians' houses. Don't be surprised if the masses burn down the parliament building by the end of the year if the elected representatives continue their charade. If this calamity continues, don't be surprised if people resort to extreme means of dealing with politicians. If the government fails to resolve the energy crisis and the shortages aggravate in the coming months, people will resort to revolutionary means.

Don't disregard the strength of those who have risen to depose the current leadership. The incidents of May 9 are a testament to their strength and coordination. When government-backed goons attacked peaceful protestors, hordes came streaming into Galle Face within a short while. They intercepted the buses and vehicles carrying the attackers and caught some of the thugs that had stormed the protest site. None of that was an organized effort. It all happened through communication. People were texting their friends and reaching out through social media about the attack. The people's response to the organized attack on peaceful protestors is just a preview of what's to come. I believe the mega show is yet to come.

But can a movement gain direction and achieve the future they envisage through a people's struggle?

Violence begets change. Postmodernist theory propounds that deconstructing the prevailing order by purging the unsavory elements that control the system is the

only way to a new order. What we envisage for our society will be a far-fetched reality if deconstructivism doesn't happen in this struggle for change. We should dismantle the current system wholly. Society has to be purged of its ills if we are to usher in a new order. Our attempts in the past through the electoral process have been meaningless. Elections haven't changed anything but driven the country into an almost unredeemable abyss. The most one can do to reinforce an old crumbling house is to execute a few shoddy repairs to its surface. The solution is in a firm foundation.

Similarly, the prevailing order in this country should be razed to the ground and built anew upon a firm foundation. The French Revolution did that very thing from 1789 to 1799, taking ten years for change. The Arab Spring germinating in Tunisia is another example of the change we are promoting. The challenge in a new order is to raise visionary leadership to reconstruct that ideal society; it's a task that demands unrelenting commitment. Look at Rwanda. It was a country with one of the most violent clashes between the Tutsis and the Hutus. However, because the country received visionary leadership in a post-conflict setting, it emerged out of the abyss it had descended into. Look at where Ethiopia is today.

Where countries were at one point and where they are today depends on leadership. Mahinda Rajapaksa won the war, but beyond that phase, he did not have a vision or program for the country's future course.

Had he had the vision, we would have been ahead of many developed countries. Sri Lanka is blessed with abundant natural resources and the best atmosphere where one can be in different climatic zones within hours. This miscellany of structure is the ideal feature to promote tourism. But what have we done? What facilities have we given to individuals involved in the tourism industry? I was in Ella recently, where small entrepreneurs providing accommodation to tourists are struggling without State-backed support. But the tourists fascinated with the area's beauty were ready to cope with the power outages and the lack of cooking gas, leading to minimal food choices. I believe that Sri Lanka can be improved and developed by at least 75 percent of what we envisage in another five years. In ten years, we can propel Sri Lanka to unparalleled heights.

But is our system ready for it?

We have to establish those systems. Many people making money from the

prevailing system will feel the pinch. Equilibrium is essential to ensure that one group doesn't enjoy immeasurable comfort while another suffers. When one group of people stuff their vehicles with cartloads of goods from the supermarket while another group can afford only half a pound of bread and a handful of vegetables from the adjoining shop, it's evident that the gap is too broad. That's what happened when this government removed taxes.

In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution in 1917, ordinary people occupied the mansions of the rich. That equilibrium was achievable because someone took up the leadership role to realize the vision for change. How much can law enforcement stop people when they are suffering and burdened by hunger and poverty. Who stopped the people from doing what they did on May 9? The mighty elephant is controllable by the nudging of a small ankus but uncontrollable when it goes on a rampage, similar to what took place on May 9, 2022. Under such rage, what could law enforcement do? How many lives are they going to take to protect the status quo? If this continues, can we expect the hungry to merely watch food displays in shops and not take them by force? The people must have the opportunity to choose an alternative. If the government promises an election soon, the people will be patient because that's what they are demanding.

Change is what people are demanding. They will not revolt if the government allows them to choose a government of their choice. But a new leader should have a vision. Only a leader with a legitimate mandate can mobilize the people. Today people are refusing to heed the call of their leader. As long as an arrogant and ignorant leadership is in control, people cannot rise in unison.

In a South Asian country, where various beliefs govern people's lives, a country's leader is considered either propitious or ominous. Not every idea is pseudo- science. For instance, when we speak of a good time in astrology, it's about the right time to do something correctly, like planting a tree in the morning or evening to produce a higher yield. That's science. It's about how a particular plant interacts with nature. It's not a mystery. We have to understand how the universe's energies work. Media outlets have destroyed this science. People wear specific stones because they believe it interacts with some universal force that many believe impacts the wearer.

We have a population that elevates politicians to kingly and godly status, celebrating them as heroes who ride on the ordinary person's shoulders. They are the saviors. But what leads to their eventual decline from hero to

zero status?

I'll give you a simple analogy. Let's say you develop a skin rash from a soap you purchased because an advertisement convinced you to use it. Then you throw that soap away. Following on, you buy a different brand, again induced by marketing promotions, but you end up developing boils. You discard that too. Similarly, even with the voter, the media and marketing strategies sway their choices. When Jesus spoke of sheep, he preached the need for a shepherd to guide the flock. He describes the need for a Good Shepherd to keep the herd safe and guide them to greener pastures. People were sheep then and today and will be the same tomorrow; without proper leadership, manipulation is easy. The people as the flock are unaware that their leader is leading them to slaughter. Leaders constantly deceive people.

Many aspiring leaders in Sri Lanka are naïve and timid personalities who cannot lead a country. My mother, who was a teacher at Thurstan College, has told me about the many antics of Mahinda Rajapaksa that signify a personality ready to take up challenges, and that's why he was able to take on someone like Prabhakaran. The people duly thanked him for that achievement. Where he went wrong was following the war victory. By then, he desired kingly status. Like Winston Churchill, Mahinda Rajapaksa was the man for the moment. Winston Churchill became Prime Minister out of nowhere, but he was picked because he was deemed the man for the occasion, and having won the second world war, he lost at the next election.

Leaders should be able to live with dignity. Just because a leader gives leadership to war, one cannot expect elevation to godly status. Mahinda Rajapaksa, following the war victory, should have exited politics dignifiedly. Had he done so, he would have been held in great esteem and had he done so at the right time.

When people become well-known on YouTube with their channels, they begin endorsing products. How have you navigated through such pressures to maintain your program's neutrality?

I have many requests from brands to give advertising space on my channel. I have no control over ads inserted by YouTube as it's their platform. I don't endorse any brand using my visibility among a large audience. I could earn more than a million rupees a month apart from the earnings from YouTube by supporting various brands in the country. YouTube compensates me more than any other media outlet

in Sri Lanka has for my past contributions. YouTube pays a very fair amount for my work. Hence, I continue doing my programs with pleasure. If I desire to augment my earnings, I have the freedom to accept the offers that come my way almost daily. I am a man of policy, and that defines my journey.

I have no desire to own the best vehicle or build the most prominent house. I grew up traveling by bus, often on the footboard, and to this day, children are traveling on the footboard of buses.

Even after 40 years, Sri Lanka is still lagging. We see the same scenes as 40 years ago. I desire to change that trajectory, to push the discourse in the direction of change. I hope to see the difference I envisage before leaving this world. I have worked abroad, earned money, and bought a house. I have had the means to live for the last twenty years. I can’t be like others who are happy minding their own business.

My objective is to push for the change I desire, and you could say that the confrontation I’m creating with the political authority is a pastime that I enjoy indulging in. What I enjoy most is taking on the power elite in politics, business, and other spheres, who are treated like gods by some. I don’t hesitate to speak about their wrongdoings. But you cannot do that by being a double- crosser. Sadly, many media personnel who have been killed or had to flee the country were those who were deceptive in their work. If you are truly independent, I think no one will challenge you. My criticism is across the board because the objective is to provide direction for the country to bring in the system change everyone desires. I will continue doing my work and giving guidance even when Sri Lanka gets the exemplary leadership it envisages.

I have refused more than a hundred requests for interviews to be shown on my YouTube channel. Many want my channel to promote themselves. Protecting the authenticity of my channel is a challenge when many approach me with wads of money from Sri Lanka and abroad. I called out a Sri Lankan living in Australia wanting to drive change in Sri Lanka by seeking visibility through my channel. I told him to pursue his mission in Australia. They are fraudsters who are looking for visibility and prominence. One must be straightforward. I know many people are angry with me. But even though they disagree with my criticisms of them, they approve of the aim of my pursuit.

I can do what I am doing thanks to mediums like YouTube. I wouldn't be wielding the kind of influence that I have today through government media. In the past, I have contributed to almost all the Sinhala newspapers in Sri Lanka. But the limitation to writing for private-owned newspapers is that one cannot write against a subject that intervenes with the business interests of its owners. Those limitations led me to start my newspaper, the Alchemist, which I wrote and published for ten years, but that didn't have much circulation.

Can you tell us about your programs challenging various companies, individuals, celebrities, and even the adverts for their inappropriateness and duplicity? Some may argue that specific adverts mean to impact society positively. More recently, you have spoken about not giving special treatment to the clergy and that celebrities and famous people don't have to have a privileged position. Are you on a mission to inculcate new thinking into people's psyches?

I have taken on a corporate for their fraudulent labeling targeting different markets. One such case was for a particular biscuit playing safe for the foreign markets while using a blatantly misleading label for the Sri Lankan consumer. I questioned the two well- known musicians promoting the product on television whether they knew about the contents of the product they were promoting. They said they didn't. I asked them whether they'd take responsibility if something happened to people who consumed the biscuit believing their endorsement. I've asked the same from a well- known cricketer. Are these individuals sure that the products that they endorse are not harmful to humans? Otherwise, how do they have the heart to endorse
a product? These are what I want to change. People need to develop a conscience to do the right thing. We must not fear confronting celebrities that endorse miscellaneous products in return for money.

Sri Lankan advertisements are very duplicitous. In real life, will we see a BMW pulling over to pick up a woman who has returned from the field? Those are mere pretenses at amplifying goodness that we don't have. An event in an individual's life portrayed in an advertisement is not the reality in the outside world.

I have tried to explain that to people. Many human acts of kindness are to uphold one's illogical virtues. Our good deeds may be just empty. When addressing this

shallowness, I take on the clergy in the highest positions. It’s a complex operation. People have agreed to a recent proposal to stop offering the clergy a seat on the bus. We don’t have to allocate a special seat to the clergy. It could be voluntary. Why should it be voluntary? Because if clergy members have conducted themselves in such a way that they deserve respect, then someone would voluntarily offer a seat. Such a practice will drive them towards better conduct worthy of an individual in robes so that they deserve a seat on the bus. Priority should be for sick and pregnant women. Creating awareness and change will be a slow process. People don’t have to be excessively kind. Exaggerated kindness leads to social stagnation. I believe we should change this narrative and create a mature society.

I hope to focus on social problems such as issues in personal relationships that spill over to the social domain and, in the long run become a social problem through a new online channel that I intend to launch shortly. Like politically, the citizens of this country are not given a voice to speak but have to forcefully get that liberty by pushing the boundary line. Whatever change I promote and envisage should be done rationally.

Tell us something about yourself and your background.

I am from Rathnapura. I entered Royal College Colombo after passing the grade five scholarship, where I completed my GCE advanced level. I was quite a radical young man even then. I had no desire to enter any local university because I strongly opposed the ragging culture. I hate the mental manipulation that takes place through such a monstrous practice. In 1989, when I immaturely got entangled in radical political activities, my mother sent me abroad. I worked for five years in Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore. On my return, I began working in media around 1995.

I began writing in about 2005. I have authored nearly 12 books and contributed to all the Sinhala newspapers in Sri Lanka. I used to write about 30 articles a month. I am in the process of translating Simone de Beauvoir’s book The Second Sex, which is on the backburner owing to my involvement in making content for my YouTube channel.

I wrote and published the Alchemist magazine for ten years, and as the name implies, I gathered scattered knowledge in folklore and linguistics to create something valuable. I continue the same practice through my YouTube channel.

I have given up and refused incessant requests to return to writing for newspapers and contributing to television because my mission is to use my channel to bring about a positive change in Sri Lanka. I have three daughters and a son. As a policy, my family and I don’t use the visibility I have to get favors or take the easy way out. In this period of shortage, I have been asked by many owners of fuel stations and gas distribution centers whether they could help me get my fill. But I have chosen to walk the talk as this is the virtue I want to inculcate in our people. It will not be easy as many may not want to fall in line, but the systems must change so that everyone will have to do the right thing.

My struggle is for change. My battle began when I saw an advertisement on the Discovery Channel where in a long line of people, one man was walking in the opposite direction with a tagline that read ‘what one can do.’ A lone individual can drive for change. It was solitary individuals who achieved change around the world. From the Buddha to Jesus, they have fought for their mission alone. However, to mobilize the people to achieve the desired change, the changemaker must possess integrity.





Sepal Amarasinghe