

# Be Strong



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**Dudley Sirisena, Chairman, Araliya Group of Companies is a self-made man who has developed his business through first hand experiences. He understands the need to be dedicated and trustworthy where one's**

**performance determines the strength of character. While he has reached a strong level in terms of social, political and economic sphere he affirms that he developed his businesses on his own. Dudley Sirisena is a person who loves his country and has a great sense of spiritual belief. His story is one of character and strength.**

**By** Udeshi Amarasinghe

**Photography** Mahesh Bandara and Menaka Aravinda

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**We first published your interview in June 2014, what have been the developments that you have achieved in your business journey since?**

Though people were aware that I am a businessman, it was with the publishing of the Business Today interview in June 2014 that they realized the extent of my businesses and who I really am. The exposure and the recognition I received was immense, which uplifted my profile.

In terms of my business, before looking at the period from 2014 to 2016, I must first say that my journey as a businessman started in June 6, 1986. However, due to the prevailing political situation and the insecurity in the country because of the height of the war and insurgency there were many challenges that we had to face. It was a very slow journey. Then in 1993, I was able to obtain a loan of 800,000 rupees from Bank of Ceylon and it was with this money that I started my first rice mill on a very small scale. While there were many opportunities, which would have taken my business to greater heights, I was not able to utilise those due to the prevailing situation. However, since then, regardless of the political, social or economic changes in the country, I have been able to develop my businesses successfully.

With the end of the conflict in 2009, I was able to develop my business at a rapid scale. By 2014 Araliya Group had grown from eight companies to 12 companies and thereafter I was able to venture into new businesses in a very successful manner.

As with any business I had to unfortunately close one of my companies, which focused on vehicle sales. Generally, there is no clear policy or tax regime on the

sale of vehicles therefore I decided that instead of engaging in this business and incurring a loss it is better to exit. This happened at the end of 2014.

During the period of 2014-2016 I was able to develop my existing businesses to a greater level while also starting new businesses. This includes new ventures in the hospitality sector, new storage and processing facilities in term of the rice business and expanding our stake in the dhal and spices sectors. I continue to journey forward with strength in my business.

**Rice is the most important food item in Sri Lanka, and your product Araliya Sahal is a respected brand in the country, can you tell us how this sector is faring?**

I started Araliya Sahal in 1993 as a rice mill operation on a very small scale. From 1994 I was supplying rice to Sathosa, which was mainly being provided to the Armed Forces. With the election of the UNP government in 2002, Sathosa stopped purchasing from us, the order was given to another private company. They in turn purchased rice from Araliya Sahal. Till the end of the war, rice was supplied by this company to the Armed Forces. I was a very small player in the rice market until 2008, but with the end of the war I had to make a quick decision as with massive scale development of infrastructure and roads there were new activities were happening and there were new players entering the sector. Therefore, I made the decision to enter the market. It was a great challenge to compete and succeed.

**Araliya Sahal Is The Number One Brand For Rice In Sri Lanka And It Is Well Respected By The Consumers...The Superior Taste, Ease Of Preparation And Quality Are The Combined Strength Of Araliya Sahal. This Is The Reason For The Popularity Of Our Brand.**

Araliya Sahal is the number one brand for rice in Sri Lanka and it is well respected by the consumers. It is actually a privilege for me to say this to a magazine such as Business Today. To be on par internationally maintaining quality is very important. Consumers not only globally but within Sri Lanka place a great emphasis on quality. There are many varieties of rice, some are very expensive and the lowest price is naadu sahal. I am not doing an analysis on the living standards of the people of this country but, the lowest income earners who are those who work in the plantation

sector, also purchase Araliya naadu sahal because even if the price is higher than the others, they know that we provide the best quality. The superior taste, ease of preparation and quality are the combined strength of Araliya Sahal. This is the reason for the popularity of our brand.

We are in the process of building a warehouse facility that will be equipped with the latest technology to store good quality paddy. At the moment the storage of paddy is not happening in a proper manner even though we have reached a high standard. We are in the process of implementing the Silo system, which is an investment of over one billion rupees. I believe that we will be able to complete construction by mid next year. We are also in the process of building a facility to clean rice, in which we will use the latest technology that is prevalent internationally, methods being used in countries such as Switzerland and Japan. I believe very strongly that Araliya Sahal will be at an even higher level after the new facilities begin operations next year. We will make sure that it will happen.

**What were the challenges that you faced during your journey and how were those overcome?**

I must say that businessmen and entrepreneurs who are based out of Colombo have many challenges to face. Generally, the main businessmen outside of Colombo are actually those who have been born and bred in those area. It is the norm that there will be difficulties when doing business, but overcoming challenges and becoming a success shows the strength of character. I have to say that my elder brother's political journey has been a major obstacle to me when facing the numerous challenges in the my businesses. Therefore if you consider everything I should be the most successful businessman in the country.

Because if you look at my economic background I must be one of the best businessmen in the country. My parents were employed in the government sector; my mother was a teacher and my father was the head of the village (Gam Muladeni). There are 12 siblings in the family; my elder brother, two younger brothers and I were all employed in the government sector. My six sisters were not employed and they did not get the opportunity to do so either. I started from the very beginning and I was able to build my business to this level. While my elder brother's politics has at times been a strength, which I cannot deny, more than that strength certain sections of society have on many occasions made false accusations

saying that my brother's politics helped me in my business. I can say very truthfully and with responsibility that this is not the case. There can be many perceptions in society, but it should not bother us or be relevant to us. I always believe that if a person has jealousy, hatred and anger in their minds, they must clear their minds of those negative thoughts. Everyone should keep in mind that they will die someday. If that can be understood, then everyone can lead a better life. I would not have been able to come this far if I had kept all the negative criticisms in mind. Actually it is not only me but even others in the fields of social, economics or politics will not be able to journey far if they focus on all these negative sentiments. Therefore, I request from everyone not to waste their time and energy on unnecessary thoughts and instead to focus on themselves, their family and specially towards our country and society. Then, overcoming any challenge will not be an issue.

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To develop my business, I have overcome economic, social and political challenges and I have brought all three to equal levels. I have been a strength to my brother, and I can be proud that I have been able to support him in some way to reach the pinnacle of his political career. I believe I have fulfilled my responsibilities to society as well. I have achieved much, I am 56 years old, at this age generally people think in a different way and they have already made many decisions in their lives. I feel that I have greater strength and experience today to take my business even further. I will not waste my time or energy on any aspect other than developing my business. If people can understand this and learn from my experience, it would be of great benefit and value to them. This is the true story.

**Sri Lanka imports some of its rice requirements, is there any way that we can develop this sector and produce rice for export?**

There is an issue in terms of importing rice to the country. However, we have to first realise the total land available in our country in relation to the size of our population. We have to think whether the land we have is enough to fulfill the needs of the people of Sri Lanka. If you take agriculture as a whole this sector needs vast amounts of land. As such considering the available paddy land and the population

we are not able to produce more than the requirement of the country.

We have to consider that if we are to produce greater quantities of rice we would have to clear large forest areas, which would harm the environment. This would result in climatic changes, which would adversely affect the country. Instead of clearing land to increase paddy production for export there are many other ventures that we can focus on. Paddy land in the country is sufficient only to produce the required quantity that is needed for the people of this country. It is impossible to produce more. Considering our high labour and production costs it is very difficult for Sri Lankan companies to produce rice that is on par with international manufactures at a reasonable price. Therefore, it is not practical to speak about producing rice for export.

### **What are your plans for Araliya Sahal?**

Previously we used gunny bags to store paddy. However, with the increase in the price of these bags and the introduction of polythene polysacks, which was becoming the preferred method of storage internationally, we stopped using gunny bags. The flow of air within these polysack bags are less than in gunny bags. Therefore the stored paddy and rice started to discolour and decay. There was a 10-20 per cent drop in quality. This happened to all rice producers including us and had a negative impact on the rice production in the country. We used a colour sorter to remove the decayed rice and extract the good quality rice.

### **The Storage And Processing Of Paddy Using The Silo System Is A Separate Business. Araliya Sahal Is The First Company To Have Started This Process In Sri Lanka.**

The new Silo system will enable us to store up to 4,000 tonnes of paddy according to international standards. Before storage there is a mechanism to dry the paddy using scientific methods. After storing in the Silo we can control the temperature and the conditions within the system. Therefore, the interior conditions will change according to external temperature fluctuations. Internal moisture and ventilation can be controlled as well. I believe that with the implementation of this new system we will have more nutritious, environmentally friendly and high quality rice.

The storage and processing of paddy using the Silo system is a separate business and will be a separate company. Araliya Sahal is the first company to have started this process and the production of this quality of rice will commence during the end of next year.

**You are also in the hospitality sector with Sudu Araliya in Polonnaruwa and Araliya Green Hills in Nuwara Eliya. What can you tell us about this sector?**

My first hotel project was Sudu Araliay in Polonnaruwa, which is a 104 room property. Then Araliya Green Hills, Nuwara Eliya has 160 rooms and is the largest in the area. This month we will be starting the construction work of a 250 room property in Unawatunwa, which is one of the best beaches in Sri Lanka. In April 2017 we will be opening a property in Nuwara Eliya with 192 rooms, fully equipped apartments, food courts, shopping complex, swimming pool and gym.

Sri Lanka will be able to achieve economic development only if we are able to bring our knowledge, technology, strength and cooperation between the people to one platform. I am aware of the situation of many of the companies in this country. For a country to develop we have to earn foreign exchange. The Sri Lankan domestic market is very small, then we have to gain access to large markets such as China and India as well as UK, Europe and US. Our main export crops are tea, rubber and coconut. During my younger days, the main beverage of the country was tea and the only available soft drink was Elephant House. But today if we go to a supermarket there are so many beverages to select from. The demand for tea is declining, it is not an issue with tea per se but Sri Lanka is lagging in terms of value addition of tea. We need to compete with other beverages in the world. Therefore, we need to give much more attention to the tea industry. However, we should also look at other ways of earning foreign exchange.

**In The World There Is No Other Country Like Sri Lanka And It Is Unfortunate That We Are Not Realising Its True Potential. I Am Not Happy With The Current Tourism Industry. There Should Be A Proper Mechanism.**

During our Advanced Levels we were told that in about 40 years the world's fuel

resources will be finished. But, when you look at the amount of vehicles that were there at that time and now I cannot say how many times the numbers have increased. Even factories are fully automated and there is a greater consumption of fuel. I am 56 years, then in four years all resources should be depleted, however the world has discovered many more fossil fuel reserves. With the increased usage of fuel, more artificial rubber products have come into the market as well. As such our rubber industry is facing a crisis. It is essential for us to develop these industries, but we also need to look at alternative sources of generating foreign exchange. It is the same story with coconut and related products. I am not saying that we should give up on these three main export crops, but we must look at alternative sources of income.

I sat for my A Levels, but I did not pass the exam. I have only passed my O Levels. Therefore, with my knowledge and experience I feel that in this country there are only two ways that we can easily generate foreign exchange for our country. One is the tourism sector. In the world there is no other country like Sri Lanka and it is unfortunate that we are not realising its true potential. I am not happy with the current tourism industry. There should be a proper mechanism. In Sri Lanka within a very short period of time you can experience diverse natural beauty and different climatic conditions. I have travelled to many countries, and am yet to see a country like Sri Lanka anywhere else in the world.

The second is the fisheries sector. There is no other country in the world that has such a large oceanic resource. Even if any country has a greater oceanic area they do not experience such diverse weather conditions like ours. The variety of fish and seafood that our ocean offers cannot be found anywhere else. However, when you consider the fisheries sector we have not reached a satisfactory level. We still import large quantities of fish. The present government as well as governments in the future should give their attention to these matters. Other than the tourism sector and fisheries sector I cannot see any other industry that has the capacity or capability to earn the foreign exchange that the country requires.

The two industries that I speak about are what the people of this country know from birth. Therefore, I have given special attention to the tourism sector. I have made massive investments in this sector. After the end of the war there is an increase in tourist arrivals and development happening in this sector. However, Sri Lanka has

to develop more activities for tourists to engage in.

In our multi cultural society, with religious and cultural values there are certain difficulties in implementing certain concepts. The people in this country need to be educated on tourism, which can be introduced as a subject in the school curricular.

When you look at the tourism industry, if there is even a slightest insecurity about the country the entire industry is affected. We have had a 30-year long war in our recent history. Then the main fisheries areas are home to the Tamil and Muslim communities. Therefore, we must strive for reconciliation, co-existence, friendliness between the various sections of society and communities. We have to find a solution to this political issue. We have lived our lives, but we need to create a country filled with peace and harmony for our children. We need to reach a consensus with everyone. It is our responsibility as adults. It is the responsibility of the political and religious leaders.

I purchased Sudu Araliya Hotel in 1998 at an auction held by People's Bank. At that time this hotel was owned by one of the major players in the tourism industry. After the troubles in 1983, the hotel was closed down. Then in 1986 the property was taken over by the military, subsequently the property was auctioned. I was able to purchase this at a very low price as at the time no one was willing to invest in the tourism sector. I purchased this in 1998 and then in 1999 I started the construction work with great difficulty. I obtained a loan from the NDB Bank, I completed construction and on the day of my son's birthday in June, I opened the hotel. During that same year in November the LTTE attacked the airport and destroyed a number of airplanes. The tourism industry crashed and I became totally vulnerable as I knew my business could not survive. It is an experience that I will never forget. There were months when we could not even sell a bottle of water. It is because of this experience that I stress that we must find a solution for this problem.

**There are plans being made to develop the tourism sector with designated segments, what are your thoughts on this?**

Currently, the tourists that are arriving in Sri Lanka are low budget tourists. However, we have to keep in mind that even globally you do not find many high budget tourists. The entire global economy is experiencing a downturn. As a small

country we should be happy that the majority of tourists coming into Sri Lanka are from China and India. These countries will become the strongest economies in the world. I am in fact very happy that these two countries are showing rapid growth. They have a population of more than one billion in each country, which will provide a good market for Sri Lanka.

**Why Do People Travel To Bangkok, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia And Such Other Countries? Because They Provide Activities Of Interest To The Tourists. However, It Is Difficult To Have Such Activities In Sri Lanka, Because Of Our Culture, Heritage And Religious Backgrounds.**

The segregation of tourists as low budget and high budget is not really relevant. If the country can have a plan to develop more activities to attract tourists to the country that would be better. Why do people travel to Bangkok, the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia? Because they provide activities that interest tourists. However, it is difficult to have such activities in Sri Lanka, because of our culture, heritage and religious backgrounds. Now, in Maldives which is a short distance away from us they sell rooms for USD 10,000-15,000. However, that market is very small. Before we focus on that we must first have experience as well as practical knowledge and then aim higher. That is better than trying to suddenly reach a higher level. It is always better to think about what you can do and aim towards that than try to do something else. A simple example is that my first hotel, Sudu Araliya is a three star hotel; Araliya Green Hills is a four star and the new property that we are going to open in April 2017 in Nuwara Eliya is five star.

If you try to compete with others and are immersed in unnecessary troubles, then you will not be able to do anything. In my experience, high end tourists mostly eat, drink and party. Sri Lanka is still not ready for mass scale tourism. We do not even have 25,000 hotel rooms as yet. We cannot aim for high end right now. We need to start at the low-level and gradually climb the ladder.

**How is the land and property market faring?**

The property business is a lucrative venture not only in Sri Lanka but anywhere in the world. When we purchase a property the value will differ from person to person.

You can market the land according to the requirement of each person. When you say a property is near the highway entrance or a town the value and price are high. However, in Sri Lanka there are only a few people who have the financial strength to purchase a land without any problem. Majority purchase land with great difficulty. We have put a mechanism in place to assist such customers.

Even though I am involved in this business I feel that, considering the population of the country, we must stop dividing land into plots and start looking at vertical living. It does not make sense to divide land into small plots, it is better to have reasonably priced condominiums.

### **It Is Only When A Country Develops That The People And Businesses Grow.**

You can earn a profit in the land business. Araliya Land and Homes is my fourth business, however there are much bigger players than me. It is a business that has profit, but there are environmental consequences. Therefore, I really do not want to focus too much on this business.

### **As an experienced businessman, what are your thoughts on the economy in terms of developing new businesses?**

It is only when a country develops that the people and businesses grow. It is of the utmost importance for the country to have a stable economic policy. In order to achieve this political parties and leaders must come together for the betterment of the country. However, having associated with many politicians very closely and having vast political experience I can confidently say that the prevailing political environment is not conducive for such a process. I can however say that the current political leadership of Sri Lanka has made a great effort in this regard and is continuing to do so. The President is looking at solving the ethnic issue that is troubling our country so that all communities can live in harmony. This is the greatest challenge for him today as well.

There must be a proper policy and strategy, where bribery, corruption, fraud, theft are eliminated from society. If politicians love this country as much as they say they do, then they should work together for the progress of the country. Everyone is looking at personal gain and power. The opposition will disagree with everything, then if those in the Government were in the Opposition they would do the same.

How can we then develop the country?

**The Leaders Of This Country Must Formulate A Plan And Policy To Ensure The Growth Of This Country So That It Benefits Our Children And The Future Generations.**

We must mentally and physically strengthen our society. After gaining Independence, the Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kwan Yu had said that he aims to make Singapore like Sri Lanka. Yet today, consider the position of Singapore and Sri Lanka. There is much that the senior members of the country must do. The responsibility that the leaders of this country have are immense. It is over 60 years since we gained independence, but we are still in a social structure where we are in debt. We must at least change now.

The country needs a proper tax policy where everyone is taxed equally. Today, there is a big difference between the person who pays taxes and those that do not. The person who does not pay taxes can sell his products at a cheaper price, but those who do pay their taxes will charge a higher price. Then, tax payers are at a loss.

When you rule a country obviously there are going to be many problems. We should not be protesting and trying to destroy this country. We need to work together. If a mistake is made by one person they should accept it, and those responsible should find a solution and continue with the work.

We have to develop this country in the social, economic and political spheres. Then we can make this country a strong nation. The leaders of this country must formulate a plan and policy to ensure the growth of this country so that it benefits our children and the future generations.

We know that if we are born then definitely we will die, therefore when we die we leave everything behind. We must all realize the truth of the teachings of Lord Buddha.

**There is an annual trip that you make each year where you take thousands of people from your district on a pilgrimage. Can you elaborate on the reasons behind this?**

In 2008 due to a political incident I broke my leg in two places. This was on August 20, 2008 at 1.15am just two days before the elections, which was to be held on August 22. I was immediately brought to Colombo and treated at the National Hospital for 72 days. Thereafter for another 60 days I was treated by an Ayurvedic physician in Mahiyangana. My friend Sulaiman Careem who is the owner of Maliban Garments took care of me. Later, I was admitted to Nawaloka Hospital where I underwent a surgery. For about nine months I received treatment for my leg. During this time, the people in Polonnaruwa who are very fond of me, came in buses and in their own vehicles to see me in Colombo and Mahiyangana.

After my recovery when I returned home a very special group of people came to see me. They were above 60, some in wheelchairs and others unable to walk or move. At that moment I made the decision that I must do something for the people who visited me. From that day onwards I made a decision that I will celebrate my birthday with people who are over the age of 55 years and take them on a one-day tour every year. We leave around 3am in the morning and we return by eight in the night. We initially looked at the Thamankaduwa Division, then we went to Dimbulagala, Welikanda, there are seven divisions and we have already gone on seven trips. This is the eighth year. First time we went to Dalada Maligawa, then we went to Nagadeepa. The third trip was to Kataragama because I believe greatly in God Kataragama. Thereafter Lankapatuna, Marvil Aru, Seruvavila and Koneswaran (Trincomalee). This endeavour developed annually. The first trip was for 850 people and then with Kataragama it became 2,500.

**From That Day Onwards I Made A Decision That I Will Celebrate My Birthday With People Who Are Over The Age Of 55 Years And Take Them On A One-Day Tour Every Year.**

During the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth years there were over 6,000 people. In 2016 from the Medirigiriya and Dimbulagala Divisions, I took over 7,500 people on the trip.

We provide everything to them. I do not allow them to even bring a bottle of water. We give them morning tea, then we serve them breakfast in the bus, lunch is a buffet and we serve them evening tea as well. We treat them with great respect and provide them the best hospitality. They listen to bana, and get a spiritual upliftment as well. We also give alms to the temples. Early in the morning we first go to the Sri Maha Bodhi to worship. We present a kapruka to the Ruwanveliseya. After the pooja we journey to Nendikulama where there are 500 statues. It is at these various places that we arrange the meals. The entire project is organised by the staff of the Araliya Group, they have been a constant support to me.

I took this decision with my mother and it is one of the greatest decisions that I made in my life. My mother was living for five of the eight trips. She was my guiding light. My wife too has been a great strength to me; she has stood by me at all times.

### **What is your message to the readers?**

If you do not dedicate yourself completely to what you are doing, then not only in business, you will not be able to do anything in life properly. Once you have reached a certain level in your business you need to have proper mechanisms in place. Then you can relax and focus your mind on developing the business.

Everyone has to keep in mind that they hold a certain area of influence. I cannot immediately aim to take a big leap and enter another person's circle of influence. I must gradually expand my circle. If you are not careful then your circle of influence can get smaller.

### **A Person Should Become Strong While Adhering To The Law, Respecting The Environment And Living According To One's Religion. My Advice To Is To Be Strong And Not Be Weak.**

Total dedication is necessary for business. At the end of the day what is a business? It is all about monetary transactions. Therefore, trust is very important as well. When I first started my business, I made sure that I built a strong relationship with the banks. That is how I was able to obtain loans. Today, they all come to my house to provide me loans. That is because I have repaid in whole all my loans and fulfilled all obligations for all the financial services that I acquired to develop my businesses.

A business cannot be operated alone. You must look after your staff and look into their welfare. I always believe, that even a child of one of my staff can become a greater businessman than me. That is our duty to society. We have to always keep in mind that nothing is permanent.

People should not believe in horoscopes, predictions and auspicious times. I do not believe in any of those. I believe that for any person it is a question of strength and weakness. If we lose our strength, we become weak. Then whatever we have will automatically go to the person who is strong. The battle in this world is between the strong and the weak. If we become weak we will lose everything to a strong person.

People tend to lose their strength because of alcoholism and other forms of entertainments. They become weak both physically and mentally. Strong people always grow in society. However, maintaining that strength is very difficult. Another reason why a person loses their strength is when they cannot keep a sound mind. If hate, anger and jealousy enter your mind you will become weak very quickly. Therefore, you must be completely dedicated. You have to be totally trustworthy. A person should become strong while adhering to the law, respecting the environment and living according to one's religion. My advice to is to be strong and not be weak.









