Continuing A Journey Of Growth



Commercial Bank of Ceylon is one of the country’s largest and leading corporates. It is the only private bank in Sri Lanka to have ventured overseas, and continues to expand international operations. With a strong team-based ethos and customer-centric strategic direction, service excellence is imbued in the DNA of the Bank. Under the leadership of Jegan Durairatnam, Managing Director and CEO, the Bank has achieved many milestones. After a four-year tenure at the helm, he hands over the reigns to Sivakrishnarajah Renganathan, presently COO, who has been with Commercial Bank for 37 years and has spearheaded some of the Bank’s defining initiatives within the last decade. Highlighting the distinctive operational culture of Commercial Bank, they are confident that the Bank’s growth trajectory will continue.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe and Keshini De Silva
Photography Mahesh Bandara and Menaka Aravinda

Would you be able to tell us the highlights of the journey of Commercial Bank during the past four years?

Jegan Durairatnam (JD): The journey of Commercial Bank is not restricted to one person. It is an incremental journey with value additions from every Managing Director, who has served at the helm of the Bank. This is a story that has been growing over the last 15 years. Each one of us has added to that journey and I am confident that my successor will add substantially to the Bank's journey.

Looking back, Commercial Bank has constantly been on a steady path. Considering the highlights during my time, all have been achieved due to the Bank's ethos. We ventured overseas and expanded our operations to Bangladesh, which was infact an initiative that was entrusted to Renga. Since then the Bank has expanded its footprint across the globe, establishing operations in the Maldives, Myanmar and Italy. Together we have been able to raise the profile of Commercial Bank, especially its public image.

> **Commercial Bank's Success And Its Development Within The Sector Is Because Of Our Unique Culture. Service Excellence Is In The DNA Of Every Staff Member.**

Commercial Bank has always been a quiet, stable and conservative bank, but the profile of the Bank in the public view has grown substantially. This is in addition to the strong balance sheet the Bank displays while our profitability is one of the best in the country.

Sivakrishnarajah Renganathan (SR): The success of Commercial Bank and its development within the sector is because of our unique culture. Service excellence is in the DNA of every staff member. The team spirit that we have built within the organisation has added tremendous value to the Bank.

After our success in Bangladesh operations that were established in 2003, we started venturing into other markets, becoming the only Sri Lankan private sector bank to have ventured overseas. As of today, Commercial Bank of Ceylon is in four overseas locations.

We are transforming from a Sri Lankan bank to a regional bank. At the end of the day, all our success is due to our team spirit. We do not operate only with specific job roles or profiles; we work as a team.

What can you tell us about the growth of the Bank during your tenure?
JD: Commercial Bank has always been on a path of growth; both Renga and I were merely able to put our foot on the accelerator and take the Bank to greater heights. We were the first private bank in Sri Lanka to reach the one trillion-rupee mark in assets. We have grown to be included in the world's top 1,000 banks consecutively for eight years. We have received every known banking award. We have kept the Bank on course while accelerating growth and not losing our core values, which is the greatest success that we have achieved.

Every venture that we have taken has achieved success due to our team spirit. This is due to our humility to learn. In every market we had to learn how to manage that market first. This is the secret to our success.

> **All Decisions Were Made In A Participatory Manner, Where The Decision-Makers Know Where The Bank Wants To Go And Where It Is Going. There Is Nothing New That Needs To Be Told.**

SR: Under MD's leadership, he has looked after employees and has taken many initiatives in the interest of employees. The team spirit has reached a higher level under his leadership. The Bank's image has also grown to become a regional bank, because of the success achieved during his period we were able to commence overseas operations. Soon we will be opening the Myanmar Micro Finance entity. As such, the once Sri Lanka based Commercial Bank is becoming a regional bank.

What about the Bank's shareholders?
JD: We must say a big thank you to our shareholders. Whenever the Bank needed to raise capital, they have helped us. Our capital adequacy is one of the best in the market. Our balance sheet is considered one of the strongest in Sri Lanka. In fact, it is one of the strongest in most parts of this region; excluding the big Indian banks. Therefore, shareholder value is sacred to us and we are always conscious of that. We also have a good mix of shareholders and the fact that no individual or business has undue influence on the Bank.

One of the biggest shareholders in the Bank does not even have a seat on the Board. This is because he has the confidence in the Bank. We have constantly proved that we can maintain share value. No one diluted their shares during the capital raise. Our shareholders were even prepared to provide more capital than what was required.

What is your advice to the Bank at the juncture of your departure?
JD: Commercial Bank has a culture of its own and the decisions taken are not done in an individualistic manner. All decisions were made in a participatory manner, where the decision-makers know where the Bank wants to go and where it is going. There is nothing new that needs to be told. Our team has been in the banking sector for quite some time with considerable experience in operating within Commercial Bank. All of us know what our roles are. Therefore, there is nothing new in terms of words of wisdom to be given. Our policies and strategies have been tried and tested.

As the in-coming Managing Director, could you tell us about yourself?
SR: I joined the Bank in 1981 and have gathered over 37 years of experience. In fact, I joined Commercial Bank soon after leaving school. I started as a clerk and worked myself through to this position. I had the opportunity to work in different departments and with different teams of the Bank. Therefore, the ethos of the Bank is in my DNA. Some of the milestone achievements during my career have been spearheading the Bank's first overseas operation as the first Country Head for Bangladesh as well as being appointed the Bank's first Chief Risk Officer.

JD: The most difficult decisions that Commercial Bank undertook were spearheaded

by Renga. For example, going overseas was a momentous decision that we made at that time. He took on the challenge. I was his superior at the time, and know how difficult it was for Commercial Bank to establish operations in Bangladesh. I understand the effort it took. Similarly, when risk became a notion where various banks had different viewpoints, we chose Renga to spearhead the risk department at Commercial Bank. It is today one of our most important departments and, I believe, one of the most stable risk departments in the industry. In all difficult challenges in which the Bank wanted to spearhead growth, it is Renga that we chose. He is too modest to say that.

SR: It was a team effort. MD supported me through operations in Sri Lanka.

> **We Will Continue To Focus On The Main Stakeholders Of Commercial Bank. As Always, Year On Year, Whether The Leadership Changes Or Not, Commercial Bank Has Always Focused On Providing The Best Value To Our Stakeholders.**

What are your plans for the Bank and the strategic direction of Commercial Bank?

SR: The culture of the Bank is such that we continuously focus on what exactly the customer wants and requires. We constantly consider the different segments of customers and their particular requirements. Products and services have been launched by us with the aim of satisfying different types of customers. We have also considered different sectors and areas through, which added convenience could be provided. Everything is changing. What we have done in the past is changing according to future requirements. We are geared towards this change and are continuously reviewing ourselves as well as the sector. Today, customers are on digital channels and we will introduce various products and services, which suit the future customers of the Bank. We are also very keen and mindful of customer convenience. Similar to how we reacted to opportunities in the past, we will take new initiatives and look at things from new angles. Our primary objective is to service the customer.

What are your experiences in having grown from within Commercial Bank?

JD: Commercial Bank, unlike many other organisations, is a place where no

individual has substantial influence over the Bank's operations. This is a great place for a professional to work. We have a culture of standing up and the respect given to those who stood out from the rest has been tremendous. Career progression at the Bank is entirely based on merit. Overall working at Commercial Bank has been a satisfying experience. It is also reflected in the fact that staff turnover at the Bank is almost negligible. Those join the Bank become immersed in the culture, and find that this is a good place to work. There is a sense of being rewarded, opportunities are given and you are empowered to take initiatives. The encouragement you receive to move forward is great. This is one of the few places where everyone is focused on how to take the Bank forward. It's a unique situation.

SR: This has been my university. I joined the Bank even before receiving my Advanced Level results. Throughout my 37 years at the Bank, I have learnt many lessons and I have also been able to pass on these learnings to my teams. The team spirit at the Bank is lovely. Although many attractive offers came my way during various stages in my career, I was not attracted to them. I was determined to continue to be apart of the Commercial Bank team as there is a feeling of family at the Bank.

At the time you started, most were moving to other sectors or moving overseas. What made you stay with the Bank?
JD: Most went overseas to join new banks that had opened. After you choose a great place to work, you have to express your ideas and work towards turning those ideas into action, against monetary benefit. All of us received offers to join international banks, but then our role would have been to follow certain principles laid down from entities far away. We would not have been able to express our own individuality. Commercial Bank on the other hand has given us that opportunity.

What are your plans as you leave Commercial Bank?
JD: The only thing I can say is that I will never be a threat to Commercial Bank.

What can we expect from Commercial Bank in the near future?
SR: We will continue to focus on the main stakeholders of Commercial Bank. As always, year on year, whether the leadership changes or not, Commercial Bank has always focused on providing the best value to our stakeholders. We will continue to

look at stakeholder requirements and strive to provide them enhanced value.

> **The Traditions Of Commercial Bank Are Built Into The Ethos Of The Bank. Hence, Everyone Who Takes This Position Has Only One Thing In Mind, To Take The Bank Forward.**

The leadership of Commercial Bank has always been unassuming and simple, despite being at the helm of one of the biggest corporates in the country. What can you tell us about this?
JD: We are a family. It has been and always will be about the Bank; it is never about us. This is something that has been inculcated in us from the start. We understand that we are a small part of Commercial Bank. The Bank is bigger than an individual. It is a thought that stays with us even after we leave. Even previous MD/CEOs whenever they refer to 'my bank', it is always Commercial Bank.

Thoughts on passing on the reins?
JD: The traditions of Commercial Bank are built into the ethos of the Bank. Hence, everyone who takes this position has only one thing in mind, to take the Bank forward. Those who are immersed in this culture will reach success. Everyone has used their strengths to take this Bank to great heights. I am confident Renga will use his strengths to take Commercial Bank to greater heights.

SR: We have one of the best teams in the country. Though the leadership changes, it is really the team that takes the Bank forward. Personally, for me, the last four years where I worked under the guidance of Mr Durairatnam has been an extremely happy tenure and a great learning curve. Working for and with him has been one of the best experiences in my whole career. Because he provided the leadership to the whole team, he has kept the Bank's reputation and image flying high. We will miss him and his great leadership.

However, I can assure you that Commercial Bank will continue to build on the traditional strengths backed by new capabilities to deliver enhanced value to all our stakeholders- customers, staff, shareholders, community and the Nation.





