

Continuously Evolving

Posted on

In a two-decade-long journey, Dilshan Drapers has reached many milestones to expand the potential of the interior design landscape in Sri Lanka. Led by a visionary and risk-taking leader, I G V K Ganegama, Chairman, the company has transformed with time. Since launching his first business venture in vehicle upholstery and seat manufacturing, he has achieved many firsts for the country due to his enterprising and daring attitude towards business. While emphasizing his confidence in the Sri Lankan economy, he states that the Government needs to provide more assistance to the manufacturing sector. I G V K Ganegama also leverages on his experiences to advise the younger generation about the potential in the industry and the life skills required to accomplish their goals.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe and Keshini de Silva. | **Photography** Mahesh Bandara and Menaka Aravinda.

What was the beginning of your business endeavors?

Before venturing into the sphere of interiors, I was involved in the industry of manufacturing vehicle seats. This was at a time when the vehicle industry in Sri Lanka was booming, and a significant number of vehicles were being imported and were being reassembled in Sri Lanka. Therefore, our strength and focus have been in manufacturing as opposed to retail. After that, there was a concept by DIMO and Ceylinco to manufacture buses in Sri Lanka. This saw the creation of Colombo Rider buses, and we collaborated with them by providing vehicle upholstery and seats. With DIMO, we manufactured bus seats for the export and Sri Lankan markets. In the beginning, although the team was small, it was a good team. The output was of higher quality, and there was great teamwork. We too got our hands dirty and worked together. Usually, we would commence work in the morning and work well into the night. That has been the reason for our success.

The Colombo Rider buses was a Malaysian brand. These were designed in Malaysia but assembled in Sri Lanka. However, Malaysia did not want to purchase anything that was made in Sri Lanka, and they only wanted us to handle the assembling of the vehicle. I spoke

to the Malaysian manufacturer and requested from them to give us a chance, citing that we had manufactured for buses in the past and were capable. However, they refused. I then requested the design to do the sample and for costing purposes. With significant personal investment, I created the molds to manufacture seats and to upholster them. Amidst the upholstery was an imported seat, and the Malaysian businessmen could not tell the difference. After that, we received an order for 400 buses. This was a turning point for the industry that I was able to achieve. We did work for Colombo Rider, Chooti Jeep for Mitsubishi and Micro. We were the first total vehicle interior upholster for Micro in Sri Lanka.



G.V.K. Gamage, Chairman, Dilshan Drapers.

We were the only vehicle seat manufacturer registered with the Ministry of Industry and Commerce in Sri Lanka, even at the time of closing the business. As such, we are still the only seat manufacturer in Sri Lanka. There were continuous requests for us to accept orders. However, I closed the factories five years ago, and provided alternative employment for my staff at Dilshan Drapers.

It is in this context that I shifted to the interiors of buildings. We revamped the company with a focus on interior design and launched Dilshan Drapers. In 1998, we opened the first

branch on Kandy Road, Kelaniya. At this point, we had a small market share, and fabric importers had a monopoly. After visiting similar suppliers overseas, I realized that fabrics of the same quality were sold at significantly high prices in Sri Lanka. I sought after my own suppliers and sold materials that were very high in quality at a reasonable price, while maintaining a profit for myself. Through these measures, I was able to bring the market to a particular standard with fairness for the consumer. Since, we have grown organically and presently have stores in Nawala, Negombo and Kelaniya. We have built a strong business. We then became notable interior suppliers in the hospitality space and became a registered supplier for state enterprises as well. We work with many hotels in Sri Lanka to supply their interior fabrics and curtains according to their requirements. Dilshan Drapers has the largest curtain manufacturing facility and the largest retail store in terms of interior décor and curtains. We have a massive stock within Sri Lanka. And, our facilities are fully equipped with the latest technologies in production. As such we are able to provide the client's requirements within the shortest time with the best quality product.

Our unique selling point has been that we do not merely supply the customer with what we have, but we cater to what they require. For example, if a customer provides us their logo, fabric composition, and material thickness, we meet their requirements through our collaborations with over 20 factories. Therefore, we can specialize the product to suit the client's needs, be it to print a logo on a sheet or carpet we have the means to deliver. After delving in interiors first with curtains, we expanded into providing fabrics for furniture. We are not simply about manufacturing a product and supplying to the customer, we provide a total creative solution. A great amount of finesse, craftsmanship, attention to detail and quality assurance are aspects that we focus on prior to implementation. I personally visit the manufacturing facilities to inspect and ensure that the product is of the required standard and quality.

Our Unique Selling Point Has Been That We Do Not Merely Supply The Customer With What We Have, But We Cater To What They Require.

We provide the entire range of interior and exterior design solutions and products. This includes blinds, window drapes, furniture and much more. We have introduced new innovations such as suede leather fabric to Sri Lanka. This material is synthetic as such it is cruelty free and environmentally friendly. The quality, color and feel are the same as the original. We always strive to introduce new materials, which are ethical and environmentally friendly.

I continued to travel and visit fairs overseas and took the risk to introduce new materials to the market. I was confident because when I was a manufacturer, I took greater risks for the sake of the country. Therefore, I was aware of the potential for new fabrics in Sri Lanka and introduced these concepts. We also competed on a price basis to ensure that we could provide these innovative quality fabrics at a reasonable price, thus ensuring products are accessible for all customers. All the fabrics that we use are specially tested in our laboratories to ensure that the fabric is of international standard, that they do not harm the environment or animals and are also durable.

When did you commence manufacturing?

We commenced vehicle seat manufacturing in 1985. Around this time, companies such as Indra Traders and Ishara Traders imported vehicles from overseas. We provided seats for these vehicles to meet super luxury standards. Previously, one of the first projects we embarked on was manufacturing seats for CGR train carriages with a Korean businessman in 1985.

In the 1980s, you were into manufacturing at a time when imports were extremely popular. How did this concept come to be?

At the time, we commenced operations as a small business, and we did not have a significant capital investment. We initially manufactured seats for commercial vehicles and progressed to manufacturing seats for buses. After that, with assistance from banks, we proceeded forward. Subsequently, it was announced by the Board of Investments that benefits would be provided to companies that invested in projects in rural areas. We too commenced a manufacturing project in Kurunegala. However, we realized that in the long-term, this was not a feasible option for us. If we did not change, we would have faced many challenges. Companies that were on par with us and did not adapt to the market remain in the same position. Therefore, we do not know how we will change in the future. We have always introduced something new to the country. Exclusive furniture, curtains, window treatment solutions, blinds and much more that have never been seen in Sri Lanka and in most instances in Asia as well. We have always been able to set the trend in the interior design sector.

The next generation is my son Dilshan, and he is making a significant contribution to the company with new concepts and new thinking. Most of what we are currently engaged in are based on his designs. He is a great strength for us. Chairmen such as ourselves, face the issue of our children preferring to live overseas and not be involved in our companies. However, my greatest strength is that my son and daughter are dedicated to working to

take the company to greater heights. They develop digital marketing strategies, create advertising concepts and products. It is because of their tireless efforts that we are in this position today. After all, there would be no value in gemstones, if they have not been cut and polished.

Why did you move away from manufacturing?

Although there is potential for manufacturing in Sri Lanka, we are unable to offer competitive prices. We cannot compare the standards of quality in Sri Lankan-made products with any other country. They do not have the Sri Lankan touch. Our quality is high. I must say the standard in Sri Lanka is greater. Our craftsmanship, creative interior solutions, attention to detail, quality of materials used, and the skills and talents of Sri Lankan ensure that our products are of the best quality.

However, another critical issue today in the manufacturing sector, is the lack of skilled workers. If we have skilled and technologically savvy workers in Sri Lanka, there is much that we can achieve. However, we do not have that opportunity and we always feel the pressure. We are unable to work with Sri Lankan skilled workers to deliver sound output. We do not have another option to take the company to the future. Our present team works to the maximum, and even within a group of 200 people, we can only place our trust for superior quality work in few people. The company cannot move forward in such a scenario. In the past, there would only be ten staff members who underperformed. Therefore, it is challenging to continue manufacturing in Sri Lanka due to high overheads, increased utility costs, there is a lot of pressure on companies, and bank rates are also high. There are no concessions for manufacturers. Even those who manufacture essential products do not receive any assistance. Therefore, 90 percent in Sri Lanka is imported. Although we have the determination to manufacture, we are unable to do so.

The Success Of The Business Depends On The Determination, Effort And Commitment Of The Person, Regardless Of Whether The Government Provides Support Or Not.

How can the Government support these industries?

It was because we did not receive Government support that I closed the seat manufacturing company. The Government had no consistent plan or policy, they would import in one instance and purchase from local industries in the next. The Government offers very little

support to our industry. Sri Lanka faces the issue of skilled workers migrating overseas. There needs to be a programme that will enable the country to retain these people in Sri Lanka by providing benefits to them. It is only if such skilled workers remain in the country that companies such as ours can function.

Furthermore, to encourage entrepreneurs and regional industries, the Government should look at providing financial support and tax concessions in terms of importing the necessary material from overseas, which are not available in Sri Lanka. Alternatively, they can also provide support to purchase from a national supplier instead of importing directly. There should be programmes to promote and uplift the local businessman or entrepreneur.

At the end of the day however, the success of the business depends on the determination, effort and commitment of the person, regardless of whether the Government provides support or not. Everything we have achieved is a testament to our hardwork. We did not expect anything from the Government, and we work diligently toward achieving our goals with determination.

Considering the portfolio of products offered by Dilshan Drapers, what is the response from the market?

The company has changed significantly over the past few years. Previously, the shareholders of the company were my wife and I. As of today, we have two new directors, my son and daughter, who have steered the company to the modern era with new concepts. They have created novel showrooms and have introduced new products to the market. This has resulted in the expansion of the potential of the market, thereby increasing our customer base, increasing our output and attracting a good response. We have a good customer base because we provide the best customer service, quality and standard in our products as well as providing total interior consultation from concept to final product or implementation. We can proudly state that we are the number one interior company in Sri Lanka.

Could you tell us about your staff?

We work closely with our employees, and our relationship with them exceeds that of the payment of a wage. We have a family culture where everyone is a part of the team. Some of our employees have been there for more than 30 years, that is from the time I had my seat manufacturing business. We have identified the issues that our employees face daily. The upper management works closely with the staff. Thereby, we have been able to quickly resolve many issues faced by employees. We place importance on talent and skill when

recruiting new employees and do not concern ourselves with ethnicity, religion, or creed. We do not have any biases towards our employees and reward them based on their skills and talents. Our remuneration packages are varied as we create these in consultation with the employees. We all work together as one family to achieve our goals and to contribute to our country.

You have achieved success after surpassing many obstacles. The younger generation is wary of venturing into entrepreneurial pursuits due to the associated risks and challenges. What is your advice to them?

In terms of our industry, there is a lot of interest from the younger generation. However, they have merely researched designs or may have followed a short design course before establishing their own consultancy. They have not learned from the bottom up and only operate with a design perspective. As such, their designs are not practical.



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They charge exorbitant amounts and subcontract the work. They are not aware of the trust or standard of the subcontracted supplier. This destroys trust in the entire interior design

and decor industry. Therefore, we urge customers to seek out established companies with a proven track record. The younger generation must first build their trust amongst the public, and this can only be achieved by working one's way up from the bottom. This cannot be achieved by only using technology. They have to work with love, passion and commitment. They should not be money oriented but focus on being good at what they do. This is applicable not only to our industry but to any sector.

They must follow the correct career path and growth trajectory. Interior designing is significantly different from managing an interior design company. To be able to operate an interior design company, you need to either have a workshop or at least have the experience of working with a few skilled craftsmen. Even ensuring the manufacture and supply of two chairs for a coffee shop provides valuable experience. Without practical experience, many will face issues and may also be the victims of scams. Therefore, if they have a workshop and can provide certain products, there would be potential in the company. Or else, if they depend merely on conceptualizing the design, there would be no potential for the future. Education or technology alone is not sufficient. They have to provide creative solutions and also make sure that what they provide is practical and also of the best quality.

Considering the challenges, Sri Lanka faced recently there has been a slight dip in the economy. As a seasoned business operating in Sri Lanka for decades, do you have confidence in the country?

Yes, we are confident. One of the main reasons for this is the fact that we are a company that continually adapts and changes. It is not easy to do business in a country such as Sri Lanka as there are constant economic risks. Therefore, we remain alert. For example, ten years ago, we established a furniture company under Dilshan Drapers. This business has significant potential and has surpassed the success of Dilshan Drapers. Currently, we supply furniture to Government offices, hotels, universities, cinemas and auditoriums. We are also supplying furniture for a project initiated by the President in Polonnaruwa. The furniture is assembled in Sri Lanka using imported parts as well as locally manufactured elements.

Another company in our Group primarily focuses on blinds and window drapes. We have a diversified portfolio, and as these companies have acquired significant market share, we consistently receive orders. Today many companies have closed permanently as they could not face the challenges that these four months posed. We were able to hang on because we were working on already secured business at the time. Any further instability and uncertainty would lead us into troubled waters as well. It would have been detrimental to the entire country.

There are always risks, however, calculated risks need to be taken. At that time, the construction landscape in Sri Lanka changed due to the increased construction of apartments. There was also the introduction of modern housing. Through architectural exhibitions, we realized that the market was expanding. We made decisions and opened up to the possibilities of the market. In the present market, the future is based on new concepts. One of the main factors of importance today is high quality and efficiency for the customer, especially to be able to purchase many products and services from the same company. They want all their interior design requirements catered to under one roof. We are probably the only company in Sri Lanka that provide professional consultancy by qualified designers free of charge. Our designers will visit the site and give an estimate and solution immediately. We also offer free advisory services to customers through our well-experienced team. We visit clients till seven in the night on weekdays and even on Saturdays. It is easy for customers to work with us. We also have an after-service warranty. These are the advantages of choosing a trusted company. Although the price percentages might be slightly higher, we continue to maintain a significant customer base. Our service is the same to all clients, regardless whether it is a small home-owner or a large business, we ensure that all are treated equally.

As Sri Lankans We Are Doing Our Best For The Country. We Are Looking At Expanding And Venturing Into The Overseas Market As Well. We Will Continue To Provide Innovative And Eco-Friendly Solutions That Are Sustainable

Future plans?

We are a company that is continuously changing and adapting to the new environment. We offer a holistic interior solution, from the roof to the floor, including furniture and window trimmings. We also provide customized services, and if a customer requests a specially designed product, we can deliver through our workshops. We can replicate their designs either through import or local manufacture. This has been the reason for our success. For example, we produce the dummy for products in Sri Lanka and have the order manufactured overseas. We can ensure the delivery of the product as we work with factories across the globe. We also possess significant production knowledge.

The specialty of Dilshan Drapers is our technology and novel marketing trends. We do not dwell on traditional designs but continue to innovate. For example, we have introduced smart curtains and enhanced curtains with mosquito repellent properties. Every season we

offer a new product or service to the customer. Moreover, we produce limited edition furniture, thereby enabling our customers to a novel product. We must continue to provide our customers with the best. A flaw in the industry today is a lack of consideration for customer complaints, but we always prioritize our customers. Word of mouth is crucial for the longevity in the industry.

As Sri Lankans we are doing our best for the country. We are looking at expanding and venturing into the overseas market as well. We will continue to provide innovative and eco-friendly solutions that are sustainable.