

For The Sake Of The Industry



Bertram Nihal is a revered name in the Sri Lanka television industry. His work is known for high quality and his creations are timeless. With more than 30 years in the industry, he has many firsts to his name. Today, with his own company—Bert Digital Audio Visual Production, Bertram Nihal is an independent director and producer developing material for a high-end clientele. He speaks about the challenges in the television industry and what needs to be done for its revival.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe

Photographs Mahesh Bandara and Indika De Silva

You are a well-respected director and producer and have more than 30 years of experience in audio-visual production; can you elaborate on the state of the industry today?

The television industry in Sri Lanka is not organised and this has impeded its development. The major challenge that we face in the industry today is that a few individuals control it; they have the bargaining power, which in turn has affected the sector. We have never done a value-chain analysis for the industry; if we do, then we can identify the shortcomings and address those issues. In a production there is the screenwriter, producer, director, artistes, television channels and the audience. All are interlinked and a good quality production cannot be done alone.

If you take developed countries, the industry has a good network but in Sri Lanka the television production sector has no unity to have such a mutually beneficial environment. In this industry we consider technology, creativity, skill and talent as resources and production houses and television channels are support systems. However, currently there is no relationship between these various segments. As such, new developments or innovations that should take place within an industry have not happened. We have failed to embrace innovation and therefore, been backward in many aspects.

In Sri Lanka, the television industry is not regulated and we do not have a body to accomplish this. We do not have a national policy for media. Regulations should be introduced and implemented through a regulation commission. That is how the industry can be developed. However, the industry is controlled by a limited number of people who wish to fulfill their personal agendas and ideologies through this medium. There is a new trend where television channels pivot around certain commercial entities that seek ways to keep the viewers tuned to their medium or channel. While that is part of the work they do, what is happening today is that low quality material is produced in order to reduce the cost. That is the standard of many of the dramas that are shown on television today, which are at a very low level. In most instances the storyline is weak and there is no message given to viewers.

In many countries, television productions are done either by independent producers or production houses. Unfortunately this does not happen in Sri Lanka as the services of creative people and independent entities are not sought. They feel that

acquiring the services of an external party will incur a large cost. Usually an independent producer is brought in only for mega teledramas. This type of teledramas do not have a standard and it is meaningless for a production house to engage in such work. And for the rest of the programmes, the television channels try to see how they can manage the production of teledramas within their organisation. That is fine, but by acquiring resources that are available from outside there is much that the industry can gain, whether it be in terms of technology, creativity, professionalism and other factors.

There are many independent producers who are not part of any television station and they are unable to telecast their work through these channels or connect with them. This of course is a setback to the industry. In other countries, many productions are done by independent production companies, but in Sri Lanka that is not so. As such, new ways of thinking are not presented and thereby novel content and creations are not produced. This is a major issue for the development of the industry.

We have a very small market in this country. Though the external environment has an impact on us, as a country there is no one to urge the various stakeholders of this industry to unite, which is also an issue.

There Needs To Be A Dialogue Between The Television And Film Industries Because It Is Those Who Are Actively Engaged In The Industry That Need To Come Together To Put In Place The Required Regulations..

Production houses in India have a significant influence owing to their massive market. In Sri Lanka, television channels and advertising agencies influence production houses where work is done according to their requirements. But, if production houses are allowed to be independent and produce works of art, and if television channels are willing to spend some extra money to acquire these services, then the industry can progress.

Sri Lanka too has high-end technology to do productions. Can you elaborate on that?

We use 4K technology, ultra HD, digital editing systems and other such powerful

technology available in the world. However, still our transmission system is done in analogue whereas globally, production and distribution are done through digital format. Here, we do not have the means or focus to create a market for that.

These are the issues that hinder the progress of the television industry. 4K technology is used for transmission in countries such as Japan, but in Sri Lanka we do not have the ability to transmit even in HD. As such, we are unable to move on par with the innovations that are taking place in the rest of the world. Television channels in Sri Lanka should acquire new technology, management systems and procedures as the television industry is continuously evolving in the world.

In recent time, television productions are done by Indian companies in Sri Lanka. How has this affected the Sri Lankan industry?

At first I felt that the advent of the Indian production sector into the Sri Lankan industry was a good thing because it would challenge our producers and artistes to create better works of art. I thought that the Sri Lankan industry would respond in an effective and stronger manner, because it is market based. Disappointingly, this did not happen in Sri Lanka. The reasons behind this are the policies that television channels follow and the traditional methods of transmission that they practice. What is happening today is that if one channel does something, then others follow suit. There is no creativity or quality.

Advertising agencies too do not support independent producers and production houses. They are able to acquire the same services that they seek from Indian companies from the talented professionals in this industry. However, there is room for improvement in terms of professionalism. As such, whether this prevented agencies from acquiring the services of local professionals, I do not know. But there is no reason for Sri Lankan agencies to go to India to produce a commercial. It is neither effective nor does it fulfill the quality standards.

Advertising agencies have the ability to give projects to local experts and if they do not have skills or capacity then they should provide the necessary support to enhance their capabilities. However, I feel that the advertising agencies are intentionally not assisting the local television industry, which has had an adverse effect on this sector. The cost is much higher when production is done in India.

If Production Houses Are Allowed To Be Independent And Produce Works Of Art, And If Television Channels Are Willing To Spend Some Extra Money To Acquire These Services Then The Industry Can Progress.

We also need to develop the necessary infrastructure that is required for production. It is important to obtain the support that we need to grow as a Sri Lankan industry. That is why I am saying that there needs to be a dialogue between the television and film industries, because it is those who are actively engaged in the industry that need to come together to put in place the required regulations. Television channels, advertising agencies, producers, artistes and viewers are the active stakeholders of the industry and all these entities need to give their input in order to put in place a set of regulations. If not, we cannot move forward as an industry. Initiating regulations based on political motives or to safeguard the interests of a few will not help the industry. We need to find the root cause and then work on a cure. And for that we need to have a good discussion where all issues are brought to light. That is how the industry can be revived.

Can Sri Lankan production houses cater to overseas markets?
At the moment it is difficult for us to access overseas markets. Before we consider going out of the country we have to develop the local industry. Only then can we create pathways to enter the international arena. At the current state it is very difficult for our channels to garner an international viewership. The reasons that they give are that Sri Lanka is a small market and that we do not have the creative or required skilled labour. Yes, these are challenges, but solutions must be found. Countries that are smaller than ours or have challenging conditions, have been able to develop their film and television industries. Two good examples are Iran and Iraq.

The fact that only a few people in the industry have the bargaining power has hindered its development, because those who do not have a bargaining power find it hard to secure work with those who do.

There Should Be A Level Playing Field Where Everyone Gets An Opportunity To Produce Good Quality Programmes.

As a director, what can you say about the quality of contemporary teledramas?
The quality of Sri Lankan teledramas has declined drastically. The stories are

meaningless, naive and give only a very temporary happiness to the viewers. These productions cannot be considered as art. They do not stimulate the viewers' intellect and can be considered as cheap entertainment. We do not need to spend large sums of money to produce a good quality programme. Today, technology is advanced and you can produce a quality creation with a small number of people and equipment. But you need to have creativity. The issue that we are facing today is that many creative professionals in this industry do not want to lower their standards and in the same manner television stations do not want to hire such individuals because they are only looking to fill the time gap with low cost entertainment. As such, having high-end technology alone is not enough. Channels should have the ability to provide a wide array of programmes, featuring the works of various creators and their creative abilities.

Currently it is very difficult for independent producers and production houses to approach television stations as we are not able to build a relationship with them. What happens is that our creative ability or concept is faced with many influences and we encounter many challenges during the production process. Furthermore, once produced we are unable to approach these channels because most of the time they acquire and change it according to their thinking. Since we do not have a regulatory body, there is nothing we can do to ensure that such violations do not happen. In terms of intellectual property rights in Sri Lanka, in the teledrama industry, there is much that this country can do.

On the other hand, there is no growth in the taste of the local audience, as the programmes that are shown are extremely stereotypical. Then there is no growth in technology and innovation in the industry, there is no mechanism that facilitates such development. We should exchange knowledge and technology so that we can go forward.

Can you elaborate on how you entered the industry and the work done so far?

I began my career as a producer of television programmes. I joined the Rupavahini Corporation as one of its first producers in 1982. In 1992, I left the Corporation and worked at MTV as a programme manager for a short period of time. After that I established my own company-Bert Digital Audio Visual Production, which has been in operation for about eight years. We work as a production house by directly

connecting with private marketing companies. Our work primarily focuses on corporate and company profiles, which we were the first to introduce to the country. There is a demand for such productions in Sri Lanka, but it only became popular recently as many wanted to move away from print profiles and present their company using digital media.

We are able to build the image of company in a three to four minute digital profile, which they can use as a promotional tool as well. I do many profiles for the World Bank and also multinational companies in Sri Lanka. They always look for quality.

I produce television dramas once in a way. We also do TV commercials and documentaries. We have already done many documentaries for the World Bank and Unicef.

Future plans?
I hope we will see the development of a national policy in the near future. We need regulation. When we talk about an industry, it is not only a certain group of people that should benefit; it should be the entire industry.

Generally in other countries, they use the expertise of the independent producers, because such places have the best pool when it comes to creative individuals. Some say that creative people are already at the television stations, but I do not agree. Creativity is not copying someone and reproducing the same thing. If one channel shows a certain programme, tomorrow another channel also has a similar one. They have not identified creative people and they do not know how to make use of their skills and talent as well.

Some have stereotypical views that creative people are very difficult to work with; such views affect the industry in a negative manner. Many lack the proper knowledge and experience about the industry. These things have to change.

There should be a level playing field where everyone gets an opportunity to produce good quality programmes.


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