

HUDSON SAMARASINGHE THE VOICE OF THE SILENT



An eminent figure in Sri Lankan society, he has risen from humble beginnings to become the Chairman of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. This is his third tenure. He is responsible for the revival of the SLBC to its current glory. Popular for his outspoken and open radio programmes, Hudson Samarasinghe has transformed radio broadcasting in Sri Lanka. He is a person who has worked closely with four Presidents of this country and has been an elected Member of Parliament. He comes with a multitude of experiences both as a veteran journalist and politician. Hudson Samarasinghe spoke to Business Today about his life as a broadcaster, politician and simple citizen of Sri Lanka.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe

Photography By Sanka Sammana

Who is Hudson Samarasinghe?

The person you see is the true person. I am honest and straightforward. If I have something to say I will say it directly. I have not forgotten my past. It is only a person who remembers his past that can look into the future. We all have a past, either a good one or a sad one.

I was born in Peradeniya, in a Pol athu gey (hut with a thatched roof). During my childhood I thought that my family was the poorest family in the country. The rent of the house was only Rs 5. Actually the road leading to the house still exists. It is called Quarry road. I studied in a very small school in that area. I don't know why but the school is called the Bidingala Iskolay. We used to wear sarongs to school. Until I went to University I had not even worn a pair of shoes. There was such a gap between who I am now and then. I had to stop my education around grade 5. This was the norm in those days especially in poor families in the Kandy area. Due to financial constraints families found it difficult to send their children to school. While I was at home, Dr Mary H Ratnam, a prominent member of the Mahila Samithiya movement was introduced to me through a relative. I was very small at that time. She was living in a large estate near the Mahiya cemetery in Kandy. I was employed to help around the house. One day she asked me whether I was interested in completing my education. On hearing my reply she asked me to pack my bags when she was going to Colombo one day. Dr Mary H Ratnam took me to a school in Wellawatte. I was handed over to a Methodist priest by the name of Fr. Mendis, he was the brother of the famous historian S G Mendis. Until I arrived I did not know where she was taking me. I still remember very clearly, there was a boarding house, which was called the Bishop's House. The junior Bishop's House was for small children and this was where I was taken. I studied there till grade 8 as they stopped teaching at that stage. I later found that the place I had been residing was an orphanage. Thereafter I joined Arethusa College in Wellawatta; I was the only student to obtain eight Distinctions in the school for the Senior School Certificate examination. Subsequently I got the opportunity to study at a temple in Wellawatte. Ven. Iduruwe Uththarananda Thero, the Mahanayake of the Ramaya Nikaya resided at this temple. I studied Pali and Sanskrit. By the age of 18, I was able to go to University. I completed my degree by the age of 21 or 22. My teachers were the likes of Prof. Hemachandra Rai, Ven Yakkaduwe Pranyarama, Prof. Siri Sivali Ven. Walpola Rahula Thero and Prof Thilak Ratnakara, though I was a small person I had

the opportunity to learn from such great people.

In those days we used to search for employment in the Government Gazette. While waiting for my results, I tutored at the University, which was the norm at that time as there were not many qualified teachers in the country. I sent an application to the SLBC formerly known as the Ceylon Broadcasting Corporation. The salary was only Rs 525. I faced the interview. This was the first time I stepped into SLBC. Before that I hadn't even listened to the radio. Neither the orphanage nor the temple had a radio. At that time Neville Jayaweera was the Chairman/Director General of the SLBC. The selection panel consisted of about 15 eminent persons. Sugathapala Silva and Palitha Perera were also at the interview. However I was the only outsider selected to the post advertised. This is how I started my life as a radio broadcaster and media person. Since then I have been selected as the Chairman of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation three times. Governments from both parties have appointed me as the Chairman of the Corporation. Firstly, President Premadasa appointed me as the Chairman/Director General. Then while I was studying in the US, President Chandrika Kumaratunga requested me to come back to the country and head the State Broadcasting Corporation. Finally the current President, President Mahinda Rajapaksa selected me to lead the Corporation again.

I Was Born In Peradeniya, In A Pol Athu Gey. During My Childhood I Thought That My Family Was The Poorest Family In The Country. The Rent Of The House Was Only Rs 5.

If we sidestep a little bit and talk about your political career, you were a MP and you have worked very closely with the past Presidents as well as the incumbent President, can you tell us about your experiences?

I contested the seat for Colombo East. I don't have any relatives in Colombo, however I was able to enter Parliament representing the Colombo City from the Colombo East. At that time my fellow party men were Lalith Athulathmudali, M H Mohammed and Weerasinghe Mallawarachchi. I must say that I am proud that the people elected me as I had gained their confidence. I did not enter parliament through the National List. Yes, I worked with Presidents from both parties and I worked with them very closely.

If a person is determined and perseveres he can even become the President of this country. President Premadasa was such a person. When I was contesting the elections, I was named as "punchi Premadasa". I must say I won the elections because of that. Advertising is an amazing tool. I used this for my campaign. Even today I take whatever decisions need to be made. I am not scared to make

decisions. I stand by what I feel is right. I will not waiver and bend down to pressure. President Mahinda Rajapaksa is a person who grew up with the country. He has lived his young life in the village. So he understands the life, culture and importance of the village to the country. He is a very down to earth man. He is a product of this country. We were in Parliament at the same time. I can say that he is a straightforward person. If he has anything to say he will say it directly. That is essential in a leader. The same goes to the Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa, he is also very straightforward. President Mahinda Rajapaksa is a very good decision maker. Very good.....Even with the war, he has taken a very clear decision. He will not let this war ruin the country any further. Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa, has been very strong. I remember he told the BBC in an interview that in Sri Lanka there are two sides, one side supports the war and the other opposes it. He said people who are supporting the LTTE go ahead but the people who oppose the LTTE please stand with us. During the aftermath of 9/11 President Bush said the same thing.

I was also a Presidential candidate, during the election when Chandrika Kumaratunga and Sirima Dissanayaka contested. In some areas I was number three, in others I was number one. Even when I asked people not to vote for me they voted. This is the power of being in the media. If anyone asks me if I am going to get into politics again, I would truly say "yes" definitely. If they ask in which direction I'm going I will say I'm going to the parliament. This is because I feel that people like us need to be in the parliament. There are many who talk but the people who are educated do not voice their concerns. This is a problem. They are behaving like outsiders. If you see, in Sri Lanka, we have given the responsibility of the religion to the Clergy, Peace making to the Norwegians, fighting the war to the Military.

What are your views on the current strategy of the war?

We can definitely finish the war, but we can't eradicate the problem. Sri Lanka is a great country. The best thing about it is that anything grows on our soil. Therefore people will never have to starve. This is a very fortunate country. I don't think that the money that is being spent on the war is a waste because we need to eliminate the terrorist menace for our country to move forward. It is an investment for the future of this country. We will be able to utilise the soils in Mannar and Vavuniya. The soil belongs to the motherland and the motherland belongs to all of us. Imagine the paddy fields, the golden paddy. Now the entire region is infested with land mines. However when the harvest starts coming from these fields, we will be self sufficient. Even though we call Colombo a city the majority of it is still a village -

rural areas. That is a blessing. Even in China, Mao got the support of the villages that is where the heart of the nation is, we need to strengthen the village.

The end of the war is imminent, but it will take time to heal the wounds. The problem has been there for more than 30 years.

In 2006 when the war started again, I was in Killinochchi. A broadcaster is a person who is accepted by everyone. People need to know that you are not biased. The people in the North knew this about me, therefore they respected me.

There was a time when I was also a bit sceptical that the military would be able to capture Killinochchi, because the LTTE had fully established themselves there with banks, schools, police, traffic system and judiciary system. I feel that the LTTE underestimated the capabilities and strength of the Government and the Military. They never expected the Armed Forces to attack their stronghold. They thought that just as in 1996, they would be able to push the military back with a peace process. They were relying on the International community to come to their aid. They have lost everything.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa made very good decisions. He gave the leadership and the support that the military needed. The credit should also go to the Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa, he is a Vadamarachchi War Veteran. He has the support of the military. Army Commander, Lt. Gen. Sarath Fonseka is a person who understands the ground situation, the challenges and the terrain that the military has to face. Maj. Gen. Jagath Dias and Brig. Shavendra De Silva, are all with him. Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa's senior was the late Maj. Gen.

Kobbekaduwa. He was with well-trained military strategists. Prabakaran never thought that the war would intensify so quickly.

One day I met a man guarding one of the LTTE cemeteries. He had lived in Matara before the problems had started. I inquired from him how the situation was in Killinochchi, then he said there is a "Sinna Anduwa" and "Periya Anduwa". For example when a person gets married he received the certificate from the Periya Anduwa but the Sinna Anduwa would issue birth certificates. Even the people knew there were two administrative systems. Schools and hospitals were run by the Central Government. It is definitely a tale of two cities. We have to eradicate this violent situation in the country and bring peace and harmony to the country. I must say that when I retire and live in my old age my dream is to see peace in Sri Lanka.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa Made Very Good Decisions. He Gave The Leadership And The Support That The Military Needed. The Credit Should

Also Go To The Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa, He Is A Vadamarachchi War Veteran. He Has The Support Of The Military.

You have worked at SLBC throughout your career, as Chairman can you tell us what kind of changes you have made to the Corporation?

There was a time when the SLBC was in a dilapidated state, where the organisation couldn't even pay the employees salaries. It was like entering a cemetery. Look at it today, SLBC is full of life, everyone feels at home. There are no party politics here; everyone is an equal. Everyone works together. There were some anticipating the closure of the SLBC but we rose from the ashes. We have started anew – our path is different.

If you see the City FM studio complex – I was responsible for this development with the assistance of NHK Japan. I rebuilt the Ruhunu Sevaya, which was burnt down at one time. For the Tamil Service in Jaffna, we were not allowed to put up the antennas, the LTTE fired at us. This was when Maj. Gen. Kobbekaduwa and Brig. Wijaya Wimalaratne were alive. For two days we tried, finally through the military support we were able to raise the antennas. This is how we persevered. Though this is a Broadcasting Corporation it is like a war tank – each morning we have more than 10 services going on air. Unlike other stations we have to prepare programmes in different languages such as Sinhala, Tamil, English, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam. Then there is also the all India services. We broadcast to the Middle East as well. At times this place is like a jungle.

A few days ago we started a station in Kurunegala – Wayamba Handa. The Wayamba region is a hub, connecting people from all communities. Muslims, Tamils, Sinhala all live in this area – from one side there is Vavuniya and the other Mannar, everyone travels through Kurunegala. Thus we felt that a radio station for this region was of utmost importance. SLBC also launched a service by the name of "Pirai" for the Muslim people in Akkaraipattu.

There is a large number of radio stations that are huddled in Colombo, they spread good and bad both all over the country without considering the effect it has on the people. However I thought differently, each area has a culture that is unique to that area. For example if you take the Sath Korale the people there eat only rice, if you take Akkaraipattu yes they eat rice but they are Muslims. If you look at the North, there is a totally different culture. Sri Lanka is a small country but it is a network of different cultures. I felt that the values, culture and community, should be heard by everyone. I wanted to give them a space to speak. For instance, if you take upcountry dancing it doesn't suit the low country. The other day we had a traditional all night balli thovil in the South organised by the Ruhunu sevaya. Then

in Jaffna we held the Jaffna Star – Yal Panam Tharuwa. More than 100,000 people attended the function. We have established 8 radio services in 8 provinces; only one is remaining, which is Sabaragamuwa. We have a very large station in Puttalam. We have a shortwave station in Ekala. As I mentioned before we air the All India Hindi Service, All India Tamil Service, and Colombo International Radio Station. We have transmission stations around the island. I have to control all of this from this seat. During first tenure there was around 3,000 employees. I paid all their salaries and when I left at that time, this was in the 80s, I was able to deposit Rs 150 million in the bank as fixed deposits. By the time I joined the Corporation again, the financial situation was in dire straits. I'm not saying this is because of my talents, but people trust me.

You mentioned that SLBC has an extensive coverage, nationally and internationally. Thus the SLBC has a huge responsibility in ensuring that the news is accurate, as the Chairman how do you ensure the accuracy of the information?

In the end I'm also a human being. A human being can make mistakes sometimes. However I try to minimise this. Broadcasting is like a razor blade, if you use it properly you can shave your beard but if you don't then you cut yourself. Therefore you have to be really careful. On radio it is live and we have only a limited time, if you say something you can't take it back. In a newspaper at least you can put a correction. We have to play our game during the time that's given to us.

Sri Lanka Is A Small Country, But It Is A Network Of Different Cultures. I Felt That The Values, Culture And Community Should Be Heard By Everyone Through SLBC.

How did you balance your work between the private sector and State media without compromising ideals of each of these sectors?

When I was appointed again as the Chairman of the SLBC, I informed the President that I'm currently working for a private organisation and that I cannot abandon my work there immediately. Thus at one time in the morning I was working at the private radio station and at 11 am I would come here and work. As far as I know news neither belongs to the private sector nor the state sector. News is news. You can not divide the media into private and state – this is a political view. People want the truth. Every story has two sides and each side will see the story in a different way. As a broadcaster we have to give space to both sides to voice their opinions. I'm in office by 4 am. I have to get ready to be on air by 7 am. My show is only for 1 hour and during that time I have to discuss papers in all three languages. I have to

be aware of the news being aired on international channels such as Al Jazeera, CNN etc. It is not an easy task to do everyday. At 9.30 am I chair an open forum. Anyone can call, whether it be the UNP, UNFP or JVP. Anyone can call us I have no restrictions, they can reproach the Government or even criticise me. This is the only microphone that is open to the public to say whatever they want without fear. I must say that people trust me a lot. I have a personal dialogue with the people. People call me from America, Japan and Dubai. People listen to this programme regardless of the time of the day.

Even after you moved from the private sector to the state sector your programme has remained popular. All communities listen to your programme. In your opinion what is the reason behind your popularity?

Actually the programme format and content are my ideas. I created them. I started this programme from the radio station that was owned by former President Chandrika Kumaratunga. After I came here I started the programme at SLBC. The truth is I can't travel back and forth everyday. As a human being I need to have some rest. That is the 100% truth. I can't run two places. It is a big commitment, a gigantic task. I felt it was too much for my age as well. The other thing is I don't want to waste other people's time. If I am to evaluate something on the radio then I need to prepare for that. I have to gather all the news and information.

If there is something that needs to be discussed I will do that on the radio. I never think that this is the State media, whatever I have to discuss I will do that even if it's about the government. If you remember I once criticised the Health Ministry severely for the prescription fiasco where medicine was distributed to patients without prescriptions. That was a very dangerous situation. It was a matter of life and death. People appreciate the fact that there is a strong voice that will present the happenings in the country, their concerns. There are not many people who would do that. I don't even take a salary here.

Usually when there is an issue that needs to be addressed, I collect all my information and I somehow get the relevant person to come to the point. If that person doesn't comply then I will go to the next person. I will persevere till that person comes to the point.

I always say that SLBC is a public broadcasting service. That's one of the biggest changes I made. Usually the perception is that the SLBC is a state service, no it is a public service. President Mahinda Rajapaksa has given me his support to this venture. There has to be a space where the truth can be voiced. If the truth is spoken out, it will never harm any government but if you try to hide the truth then it

will tarnish the image of the government. Sri Lanka is a very small island. The truth can never be hidden. I am not practicing yellow journalism in the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. In the States, journalists were involved in yellow journalism. For example during elections the Washington Post will endorse one party and then the New York Times will support another party. In one way that is a good thing because then we know on which side they support, but what's happening in Sri Lanka? We don't know where the media stands.

Usually The Perception Is That SLBC Is A State Service, No It Is A Public Service. President Mahinda Rajapaksa Has Given Me His Fullest Support To This Venture.

What do you think the responsibility of the media is when covering the war?

Just a few days ago, I told the BBC that this is the State Broadcasting Corporation. Let me give you an example, on the morning news I reported that 5 soldiers were killed on the battle-front, then the BBC reports the same news and says that 50 soldiers were killed. This is unacceptable, how can an organisation distort the same news in such a manner? So I ask them, how did you get this information? They tell me that they got it from the satellite radio in Mullaitivu. The only people who have satellite radios in Mullaitivu are the LTTE. A few days ago they told me that Illantheriyan said that the LTTE killed 150 soldiers, that they destroyed armoured vehicles, and many soldiers were killed when the tank bunds were exploded etc with no solid sources. These are 100% lies. This is irresponsible reporting. What will happen when such news is reported to the public? It is the youth of the South that joins the military, when they hear such false news they will not join the Armed Forces, or the ones that join resort to desertion. You can't fight a war like this. If you take Britain, during World War II, whatever English broadcasts from Germany were jammed. Then take America, they used the Voice of America radio station to break up the Soviet Union. During the Gulf War, President George Bush Sr used the media to his advantage. The news that was shown to the public was actually a film. Look what happened to his son, he got slapped with a shoe, why? Because he tried to fight the war with the media. A number of reporters got killed in the process. There is a limit for the media when fighting a war. The role of the media is different during war. Thinking of the country first, I made a decision. I don't discriminate media organisations as black or white, national or international. I look at how they are reporting, how they do the job, whether they are damaging or harming the war

effort. Some journalists if there is an operation being planned, they inform everyone not only that the attack is imminent but also the route and logistics, this is unacceptable. We are publicising everything, there has to be a certain amount of discretion when reporting on war.

The media has to behave very responsibly, especially at this juncture of the war. To tell you the truth, in Sri Lanka the number of trained media personnel are very limited. Only a few have proper training. These days anyone who takes up a pen is the media. Some people even when they go to the hospital or go on the bus, they show the media pass. It has become a very serious issue. Even when they go to the visa office, they say we are from the media – we are being harassed. Then when they go abroad, they don't stop tarnishing the image of the country – they go further and say they are from the media, we are harassed, murdered etc. Thus spreading false reports all over the world. At SLBC I don't allow people to issue the media pass without my signature. Just the other day, an employee asked for a media pass, I inquired as to why he wants a media pass since he doesn't go out, then he says, "when I'm stopped at a check point I can show it to them!"

The BBC pulled out its services from the SLBC recently, but you were strong in your stance and stood up to them. How would you respond to this?

I was with President Premadasa for about 25 years. There are two things that he taught me. He always told me not to sit in the front row at a political meeting. I asked him why, then he told me that his father said that if someone higher than you comes you have to get up. Even today I don't sit in front. The second thing he told me is that don't take any decisions that you think you will have to change later. Think twice, thrice as long as it takes.

The BBC did broadcast that the Chairman of SLBC is a stray dog and that he should be tied. I let them broadcast that. I didn't lose my temper.

I Don't Discriminate Media Organisations As Black Or White, National Or International. I Look At How They Are Reporting And Whether They Are Damaging Or Harming The War Effort.

Has the BBC withdrawn completely?

Well I don't know. Actually we did not have a problem with the English service. It is the Sinhala and Tamil Services that we had the problem with. It is being done by Sinhalese and Tamils who have migrated to the UK. What they do is they call people here and without even verifying they broadcast the news and fill the time. They say

things that will tarnish the image for the country. Then what will happen to Sri Lanka? This doesn't happen at SLBC, not one news item goes without my approval. Firstly I check the material by myself in detail. I can speak Tamil as well. So I check everything.

Before you stood up to the BBC, I don't think there has been anyone before?

Actually I stood up to them once before. A person by the name of VasanthaRaja was the Chairman of Rupavahini at that time; he ended up being the spokesperson for the LTTE. He did a programme by the name of Kittugen Ahanna, ask from Kittu. Kittu was a LTTE leader. The British Government had given him an ultimatum to leave the country. What did our people do? They went to him and asked, "so what are you doing about peace in Sri Lanka?" Then he would reply and say I need to take bombs etc. There were a lot of problems here at that time. The thing was I was the Chairman of SLBC at that time too. I called VasanthaRaja and asked him to stop the programme. He did not stop, I was patient the second time as well and on the third I completely stopped the programme. The same issue arose. People were asking me why I stopped the BBC service from being broadcast here. They would argue that the BBC is a media organisation and an international organisation. That time I stopped it, this time they withdrew. I stood my ground. They remember this incident; it is something that happened through me.

The BBC is having issues with the British Government as well. They have transmissions in different foreign languages, which they do not understand. Now they are firing so many people. For people who leave Sri Lanka and go to the UK, it is a good job opportunity for them. As I mentioned earlier some of them don't even have proper qualification. You cannot run a media organisation like that. For them it's just a job. A journalist should be able to understand the current global economic crisis, how its effecting Sri Lanka, what's happening with inflation, then the green revolution, what's happening in Russia, Africa, what are the implications of the new American President, Barak Obama's stimulus package, Hilary Clinton's recent visit to England what happened there? Journalists need to stimulate their audience. Educated people have to enter this field. A journalist should have all the latest information at their fingertips.

The media in Sri Lanka, report petty political slogans such as the President said this and the Opposition leader replied to that. Such broadcasts do not develop an educated society. This is not news. Broadcasting news is also like a song, the people have to feel it in their hearts. For that to happen the broadcaster has to have a good reputation, regardless of the situation he would always present the accurate

facts from both sides. I always present the facts and I ask the people to think about it.

How have you streamlined SLBC to meet that demand?

Firstly I removed employees who have a negative attitude. Secondly I have sent a number of employees for training. I mean there is nothing else you can do actually. I'm sure you have heard that "you can feed a person, show them the way but ultimately it's also up to that person's abilities that will shape their lives". In Sinhala we call it pragnava, in pali pragna and in English we call this wisdom. You can't give that to a person. It's something you are born with. If you take certain news items, they write the stomach first, there is no head, and then at the end you find the head. Now lets say " Iran launched a satellite", what would our people report? They would start of saying the entire history of the country and then at the end mention the main news, which is that Iran launched a satellite. Sometimes it's really difficult to find what the news is. I have told my people not to write epics. As a broadcaster you have to always say where you are because people can't see you.

During Bill Clinton's tenure he sent American troops to Somalia, CNN recorded more than 30 mins of a brutal killing of a soldier captured by the Somalian terrorists, however what they showed the public was a edited version which was about 45 seconds. This had a very high impact on the people in the USA. It hit the people really hard. On the same day Bill Clinton sent the order to withdraw troops from Somalia. This is the power of the media. Most of the time we see cameramen recording for a long time, through that we are giving publicity to the terrorist, that is what Prabakaran wants.

The other day I read a discussion of former American Press Secretaries. They detail how certain military strategies are leaked from the President himself where he had confided in the journalist from a news paper and the next day it had been published. There is always a limit, a fine line that Leaders of a country and the media have to tread. There are certain things that shouldn't go into the newspapers. The media can be very dangerous if it's in the wrong hands. A journalist always needs to know the history of this country. Not just Sinhala history but the entire history. People need to know what has happened in the past.

They Call People In Sri Lanka And Without Even Verifying They Broadcast The News To Fill The Time. They Say Things That Will Tarnish The Image Of The Country. This Doesn't Happen At SLBC, Not One News Item Goes Without My Approval.

Don't you think the media made the LTTE strong?

Definitely, I must say that people are actually dwelling on the past, more like sleeping in the past. They always quote the Mahavamsa or Deepavansa. There is a tendency for people to think they are superior and degrade others. The mentality of the people needs to be changed. That is very important. Our past leaders have made a lot of mistakes. Thus today we are suffering with a terrorist problem. The policy of making Sinhala the official language in 24 hours was a very big mistake because currently there are people who can neither speak Sinhala or English properly. It is very difficult to learn a new language when you are older. A person can learn and be moulded when they are young. I have told this on the radio as well, I spent so much to learn English in the USA in order to complete my course. I feel the country needs to use English as a link language. There is no other option. If a person learns English, then there is peace in the country and he will also have a job.

Don't you think that the media has a very big responsibility in bringing communities together? How would you say SLBC is achieving this?

We have a very big responsibility in rebuilding peace and harmony in Sri Lanka. Firstly SLBC is not driven by money. As the national broadcaster it is our duty. We have a very big network covering the entire country. When we take each language we have 3 services in Sinhala - National, City FM and Commercial. Tamil, we have two services -National and Thentral (commercial) services and English - one channel. We also have our regional services - Kandy, Jaffna, Ruhuna, Wayamba, Uva. We play a very important and responsible role in restoring peace and harmony in the country. We can lead the way. We have actually initiated a few programmes in this direction.

We had a World Service. It was an excellent service in English. Radio is a vital medium of communication; it can change the perception and feelings of the people. In India if a person goes to buy a radio the first question he will ask is whether the radio will tune into Radio Ceylon. We earn sizable revenue from advertisements from India. India allows us to broadcast on their airwaves free of charge. Usually there is a long procedure to be able to broadcast in India. We have a short wave frequency in Trincomalee that we did broadcast with Germany but now it's solely ours. We can broadcast to anywhere in the world within minutes from this station. We are trying to start a service to South Korea, because there are many Sri Lankans living there. All Sri Lankans listen to our Middle East programme. Most of the time these people would send messages to their family and friends through the radio service. We bring people together. Our Tamil service can be heard in India. I mainly started this because many Tamil people in the country are separated, the mother

might be in India, the father in Mullaitivu and the children also in India but the family don't know the whereabouts of each other. Through our programmes we promote human ties. Some people don't like this. I really don't know why.

There are so many media institutions - print and electronic in Sri Lanka.

What do you think of the current standard of the Sri Lankan media?

There are more than 38 radio stations in the country. We have more than 10 TV stations. However, unfortunately we don't have good newspapers. There are about 6 or 8 national newspapers. Actually everyday in the morning I read the Hindu paper, which is an Indian newspaper. Fortunately we can access all the international media websites. However we can't rely on these websites anymore. Anybody can do or say anything - the news will go online without being verified. Some websites create rumours/gossip not news. They actually indulge in gossip. There is a danger because people are now writing news for money. If a person wants to tarnish a person's name he can just pay some money and get it done.

If you take radio stations, quantity wise I feel that it is satisfactory. However quality wise I feel there is lot more to be done. Most of the radio stations are playing songs that are not upto standard. Almost all radio stations are playing good quality Sinhala and Tamil songs illegally taken from the SLBC. I have actually appointed a committee to investigate how these songs are being released from SLBC without the approval of the Corporation. All artistes sign an agreement with us when they are recording their local songs. SLBC has a very good selection. For example we have a good selection of Pandit Amaradeva's songs that were recorded in these studios. The problem is there are so many pirated duplicates of these songs. Another thing is there are artistes who remake the songs according to the latest trend, which actually destroys the original song. A prime example is the Rangahala Than song. I filed a case because the original song belongs to SLBC and the Corporation won Rs 20 lakhs. The artiste and the music production company used the song without our permission.

Don't you think most of the Sri Lankan media - i.e. newspapers to teledramas are very negative?

Definitely. That is because these people are not well trained. I underwent training in Hamburg, Germany. They produce very good newscasters and they taught us how to perform each section in producing a news item. They separated it into sections; i.e. reporters collect the news, then it goes to the editors, then to the chief editor, director and then finally to the news anchor. However in Sri Lanka, there is only one

person who runs from one place to another. In most instances these people don't even know how to write news. They just write. You have to train the people, if not you cannot do this job. Another reason is that in Sri Lanka the media is monopolised by a very few people. You can see that the same people own the radio station, TV station as well the newspapers. Furthermore licences are given to people without considering their qualifications or suitability. These people think they can bring governments to power and bring them down as well. This is a very big mistake. Though SLBC is a state media, my policy is that we are not the governments "mouth piece". How can that happen? SLBC can't be the government watchdog. Outsiders should observe us and then criticise us. I will not be a guard dog.

How does SLBC support Sri Lankan artistes?

The other day I met the widow of the late Premasiri Khemadasa and we decided to pay a certain amount so that we can use his music. We also decided to give 50% of the profits. I think this is essential. We need to support the families of these eminent artistes. Another is the family of the late Ananda Samarakoon. In that way we have already started, we have signed an agreement with the families – legal agreements. I'm actually planning on paying royalty as well. Many of these artistes are very poor people. As an artist grows old they are rarely called for shows, but we need to help them, because we still listen to the songs that they have created. As a national broadcaster I feel it is our responsibility. Most of the older generations have recorded their songs at SLBC. I have to say that SLBC has the best selection of songs in the country. Even in India they don't have such a selection of Tamil and Hindi songs. That is another reason why Indians listen to us. We have Bengali, Kannada and Malayalam songs, this is a treasure trove.

SLBC is etched in history. Do you know that Queen Elizabeth visited these very studios? She addressed the Nation from SLBC. Then Jawaharlal Nehru also visited us. Many leaders visited these premises. At that time Radio Ceylon was very popular.

I Think I Have Reached A Point In My Life Where I Feel A Sense Of Fulfilment. But I'm Also Scared To Turn Back Because I Have Suffered So Much.

You are known as a person who is outspoken and courageous, most would say you are a controversial figure, what do you have to say about this?

I won't say I'm outspoken, but if I have the facts and sources and the correct time comes or when I meet the right person I will express my views. That means even in front of the leader of the country I will express my personal views with facts. Once

at Temple Trees, the President had a media conference. The other journalists would not let me talk. I waited for more than 45 minutes, these people were asking very trivial questions that should have been posed to the relevant ministers. Questions such as the price of potatoes, brinjals, onions and rice etc. I stood up and said "this is the President of the country, you need to ask him national questions, such as the current situation. There are more important things to ask the President of the country than the price of potatoes and onions." I had a very big argument with the others and afterwards, many people commended me for addressing the issue. In that way yes, I will agree with you I am outspoken.

As you know what you eat goes into your stomach, but when a person speaks he is saying what he is thinking – he is voicing what is in his mind. Therefore I always think before I speak. So much so I always think twice.

Future plans for SLBC?

In the 21st century a radio station cannot run without a TV station. I have already bought the lighting equipment. People have been asking me why and I don't tell them. With the arrival of lights people know that something is happening. They trust that I will do something good. However it will be something totally different. I mean if you watch TV it is full of trailers stating the teledrama schedules. If you take any household today, housewives are glued to the TV. TV has become like a cinema hall. In the end there is no difference between a Chairman of the TV station and the Managers of the Cinema. Both are showing films. This is not what the country needs. The country needs education as well as entertainment. We have to equip the people of this country with knowledge. We have to bring up a younger generation that knows what's happening in the world and has a wide knowledge of English. TV has a very big role to play.

I always tell the SLBC, I won't be here everyday – the person who replaces me has to be a good broadcaster. When I look back on my life, I can say that I'm truly happy. I don't think there is anything else that I can do considering my age as well. I think I have reached a point in my life where I feel a sense of fulfilment. But, I'm also scared to turn back because I have suffered so much. I remember I didn't even have a book to write on those days. I used to take the discarded cuttings from a place called Modern Printers in Nugegoda to write my notes in University because when I was staying at the temple there was no one to give me money. I was fortunate to complete my Postgraduate Degree at Howard University, Washington. Thus when I look back I am a person who has come a long way from a humble beginning.





