

ITN Projecting Through The Eyes Of The Nation



The Independent Television Network was the first TV station in Sri Lanka. It has grown since its inception to become one of the leading media institutions in the country. Having recently launched its English television and radio channels; Prime TV and Radio, ITN is now broadcasting in all three languages via six channels. With his determination locked on preserving and protecting Sri Lanka's unity, Anura Siriwardena, Chairman of ITN is hoisting the flag of ITN's fortitude, through the years.

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Photography by Menaka Aravinda

ITN was the first TV station in the country can you tell us the journey of ITN since its inception?

Yes, ITN was established on June 5, 1979. It first set sail as a private company. Subsequently, it was acquired by the government and became a government owned business unit; a GOBU, and from 1979 onwards it has been the pioneer television station in Sri Lanka. Thereafter in 1996, Lakhandu; a radio arm, was also setup.

I joined ITN on November 29, 2005, after President Rajapaksa came into power. There was a war going on at the time and the government wanted to move ahead after clearing grounds in Maruvil Aru. It was our duty to fulfill the needs of news coverage in the Eastern, Tamil speaking Province. We didn't have Tamil radio, therefore, we launched Vasantham FM in 2008.

ITN had a programme mix and although most of them were dominantly Sinhala, we also featured English and Tamil programmes. We found we needed to separate the languages to cater to the segments of people speaking them. Therefore, we have different language channels to cater to the people/communities. With Vasantham FM being 100% Tamil radio, we moved to Tamil TV as well, called Vasantham TV. It commenced this year.

ITN, Lakhanda, Vasantham FM and Vasantham TV are the channels that we feature. Since we have people/communities that speak all three languages, we thought to establish English media, as well. The President wanted us to serve the society in an equal manner and cater to all communities. For this reason we launched Prime Radio and the Prime TV. Now, we are a full-fledged media network with channels catering to all three languages.

In the recent times we have seen a change in ITN - programmes, news broadcasts etc, it has become the “must” watch channel in Sri Lanka, what are your thoughts on this?

ITN is a reputed television station and it has been a well-known name for decades. ITN had a number of existing programmes, we thought to make a change to this mix. We first identified our market and its needs. With this idea in mind, without compromising the culture and upsetting the society we made some changes; we changed the program mix to meet viewer needs. In fact, I should thank our viewers as we have a two-way communication arrangement and when we make programme modifications, we always communicate this to our viewers. When we do something good people come forward and acknowledge us; it is the same when our viewers are not satisfied, they notify us. We listen to our viewers, in addition, we listen to our resource personnel as well. One can say that the whole concept is product driven, on the contrary, we are a 100% market driven company. I should emphasize though that we don't give what ever the market says it needs. We first find out what people need and how we can satisfy them and if their need is up to standard and gives importance to the well being of the country. This is a government establishment; a government media institution, however, up till now, there has been no influence even from the President and line ministers. They know what we do here and they always encourage us.

We have a very dedicated, committed and motivated staff. When a task is given they work meticulously, unrestricted by time. I remember, when we wanted to setup Vasantham FM as soon as possible, even with the heavy rains in the mountains, our staff went ahead and fixed the transmitters. Within about a fortnight, the requested job was done. Their dedication is such, and I should thank my staff for their contribution. Even some visitors we had from Japan, saw the value of our workforce.

All of us work for a common purpose. In other organisations you can see various factions. I don't encourage the cultivation of political ideas amongst the workforce because when you have divisions of that sort, you can't hope for the productivity you want. I'm very happy about that.

During the war, ITN was with the military forces bringing to us the latest on the war front, can you tell us about this experience?

I only had to mention to our news department crew about covering the conflict and they were ready to go to the warfront. We selected a few and they were sent to the relevant areas. In fact, they knew the dangers they would face, however, it didn't stop them from going into the battlefields. They communicated first hand information about the battlefield to the masses. I feel Sri Lankans and even the others who watched our channels over the internet and other services all over the world, appreciated and thanked the crew. In return, we too, thanked them as an institution. Some of them were on contract basis, we made them permanent and they were compensated. We know that you can't put a value on services like that. It's pure dedication!

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There are many discussions where eminent personnel in the country get the opportunity to discuss matters of importance on TV. Can you tell us how ITN ensures that every aspect is covered and the truth goes out to the public?

The country is moving forward and developing further. In my opinion, we need, at this moment, to carry more positive news than making people frustrated. We want to make people happy, we want to increase people's productivity. If we always carry these negative stories, you might think, "What's the use of living here?" We are against that, we always think there is a bright future for us and should work together towards it and help in developing this country. That is the main theme behind almost all the programmes. Having that idea in our minds, we always motivate the entire nation and not just a certain organisation or a group of people.

We don't communicate everything that we receive as it is, that doesn't mean that we control the media but we know that in any part of the world you can't see the complete scene of coverage. It is only a myth. Even I know, that it is very difficult to see a 100% coverage. You always have to think about the country and its future when you carry a message forward. That's what we believe when we report something, when we feature programmes, we put our country first, then the organisation.

ITN also has its own Tamil and English channels. Could you tell why these channels were initiated and also about the many programmes that are featured on all three channels?

Tamil TV carries some local programmes, nonetheless, Tamil tele-dramas are not produced at ITN, however, almost all other programmes are produced by us. Many of the staff members of the Tamil channels consist of Tamil speaking people and know the real interests of the Tamil viewers. Therefore, we have planned the program mix accordingly.

The English channel is a new addition. It has only been around for a fortnight. It is a truly Sri Lankan-English channel. As we do for Vasantham TV, we generate most of the local programmes other than English songs, dramas and movies. We observed the English channels available and how can we promote it; we found that it is good to have more local shows, rather than just featuring programmes imported from other countries. Now, we recruit school leavers who have a good base in the English language to work as presenters. In that sense also we perform a service by extending our hands to people.

Lakshanda is the oldest channel in Sinhala and is available island wide. Vasantham FM, which commenced in 2008, has coverage in Colombo, East, North Central and Wayamba. Very soon we will cover Jaffna- work is in progress as we speak. In a few months time Vasantham FM will be available in the North and within the next six months we hope to cover the entire island.

Prime radio, which is now a frequency in Colombo, Kandy and Galle, will be transmitted in Jaffna as well as in other cities and we hope to have an island wide

coverage. We are moving step by step, this is a government organisation and we completely depend on our organisation's finances, each and every cent spent to feature the new channels were borne by ITN. We are proud of that.

As a leading broadcaster, ITN has an immense responsibility, giving out the truth and also bringing communities together, can you elaborate on this?

We always respect the truth and are dedicated to promoting ethnic harmony. We want to show that to the world as an example. That's why these two channels were established within the recent past. We know there won't be any terrorist resurgence in the future, because communication can play a major role amongst these communities. In many instances misunderstandings occurred because of a communication gap, we should have a proper network to eliminate this gap. We are committed to serving this purpose.

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After 30 turbulent years, it is time to get back on track. We should unite and work together to develop this country because of the enormous amount of resources that is still untouched and this should encourage and motivate people to look ahead and develop. I believe that this will be one of the most prominent and prosperous countries in the region. The President has already started a number of projects to develop this country, for example; the infrastructure is being improved. Projects, which were discontinued, like Norochchalai and Upper Kothmale, is now, work in progress. Although we develop this country in the technical matters we should not limit the country's agricultural potential. This is a beautiful country and people are very nice, and this will help us strengthen our unity. ITN communicates this message to the masses. I believe that this is our prime duty!

What are your thoughts on the coming Presidential election?

The Presidential election is on the brink and our people, I know, want a developed and prosperous country, if so, we have to continue on this path of progress. Our President has a vision to carry this country forward, he is proving that he can do it with his achievements so far. He needs our cooperation. We should give him the

opportunity to work and show the world that we are a proud and prosperous country, which can stand on its own.

A 'leader' should have a number of qualities; wisdom, empathy, honesty, determination, bravery, generosity. He possesses all of these qualities and much more. President Rajapaksa has years of experience in the political field; he knows the pulse of the public and will deliver to the expectations of his people. Therefore, I kindly request every citizen of this country, to select the right person. That person is President Mahinda Rajapaksa.

Mr Siriwardena, can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

I attained my first degree in Bioscience at the University of Kelaniya. Thereafter, I studied mass communications and after graduation I became a teacher, my first profession. Subsequently, I joined a newspaper company, Upali. I'm grateful to Upali Newspapers as I developed my journalistic abilities from them and am always thankful to the people of that company and others who have helped in my professional development. It was always my dream to become a journalist.

I began pursuing studies in the management field at the Postgraduate Institute of Management of the Sri Jayawardenepura University where I later secured my MBA. I thought to become a management consultant and that is when I left Upali Newspapers. I did some marketing and advertising consultancy work for a number of companies and around the same time, I met President Mahinda Rajapaksa on personal grounds when he was a Minister. From that time on, I have been a supporter. I became the media consultant to him when he was Opposition Leader. I was also a consultant to the Prime Minister and when he became President he asked me to join ITN. That's how I changed my career. I feel that the practical and theoretical knowledge was of great help to develop this institution; whatever I do here, I do in a scientific way. Decisions are taken with careful consideration and rationally and with that, I believe any organisation can excel. It doesn't matter whether it is a government or private organisation, you can develop, but you have to have a vision- there should be a good corporate plan.

What strategic plans does ITN have in place to promote all its channels?

We have six channels. First we want to make every channel strong in the market for the particular segment it serves. We want to become the market leader and we want to enjoy the highest market share. The other thing is, we may come up with new channels to cater to different needs. We want to make this a significant focal point, not only in this country, but in the region as well. That's our expectation! I trust that we'll make a name in the region.

Final thoughts?

I wish this country all the prosperity and success in striving to be a beautiful and resourceful one. The society has to work together and I'm very confident that the President and his people will succeed in this endeavour.