

RENOUNCING GREED



More than sixty years ago, B A Semaneris Appuhamy, a humble businessman in the Homagama area worked with a vision to uplift the standard of living of the common man in his locale. In 1946, he built a hospital on 5 acres of his own land and donated it to the then Governor of Ceylon, Sir Henry Mason Moore to provide free healthcare to the people of his village.

Today, his youngest son B A Mahipala has formed the Bamunu Arachchi Foundation and he is untiringly taking forward the mission that was initiated by his father; uplifting the standard of life of the common man. Recently, the

Bamunu Arachchi Foundation donated to the Government of Sri Lanka a new Out Patients Division and a Special Clinical Division at the Homagama Base Hospital built at the cost of Rs 100 Million. Chairman of the Bamunu Arachchi Foundation, B A Mahipala shares his thoughts on this social service with Thilini Kahandawaarachchi of Business Today.

Let me start by asking you, could you tell us about the history of your relationship with the Homagama Base Hospital?

That requires me to relate the story from the very beginning. My father was born in the year 1895 in the Homagama area. He was just an ordinary man but due to his entrepreneurial nature he could develop his businesses which he started by selling betel leaves and went on to acquire tea estates etc. and he was the owner of the then well known High Level Bus Company.

We are a Buddhist family, brought up with Buddhist values and based on Buddhist philosophy, so my father believed in acquiring wealth in accordance to our religion as well as distributing wealth. He wanted to do something for the people of the area, and that was the beginning of the Homagama Base Hospital. It was in the 1940's and the people of the village have also been involved in this project through a shramadana (community service) to build the hospital. It was built on 5 acres of his land, which he donated to the hospital. Considering that it was built to that standard those days, it was indeed a modern building.

Those days, when someone did something of this stature they usually received a title and politicians were nation lovers; they used their wealth to build the nation. Therefore, the then Governor wanted to confer a title on my father, but my father refused. It is difficult to find people like that now. He could have built a money charging private hospital, but he did not; he built the hospital for the people. He did not want to make it a business. Poor people have to sell whatever they have when someone in the family falls ill. Therefore, he donated the hospital that he built to the Government to serve the common people. At that time he was probably the only person who made this kind of a donation. That was in the year 1946, and the hospital was donated on February 16, 1946.

Then in the early 1980's during the time when Mr Gamini Jayasooriya was the Health Minister, the Homagama hospital wanted another 2 to 3 acres for their administrative services and we donated that. They wanted to pay but we did not accept it.

A few years ago the Homagama hospital authorities got in touch with me and informed me of the need of a paediatric unit for the hospital. When I was getting the drawings done for this unit, my niece Dr. Suhashini Perera who is the Director of Policy Analysis and Development at the Ministry of Healthcare and Nutrition suggested that we do a master plan. Since 1946, most of the buildings at the Homagama Hospital have been constructed on an ad hoc basis. There are about 800 patients who come to the Homagama hospital everyday, but the facilities at the OPD are inadequate to accommodate all these people who come there. They have to stand in the sun and the rain when they need to receive healthcare. Taking note of all these, a master plan was prepared with the help of the Central Engineering Consultancy Bureau (CECB).

That is our relationship with the Homagama hospital. In addition to that, I have been involved in many projects in the Homagama area, helping temples, and hospitals etc.

Capitalists Should Not Be Too Greedy. I Have Stopped Somewhere.

Tell us a little bit about yourself and your field?

I was born in 1947, and I am the youngest in my family. When I was just six months old my father passed away, so I never really knew him. I started my education at St. Thomas' Prep School at Colpetty, and later at St Thomas' College Gurutalawa and Mt Lavinia before entering University of Ceylon, Peradeniya to study Engineering. After graduation, I worked at Ceylon Plywoods and later at Insurance Corporation of Sri Lanka for a short period before proceeding to the UK for further studies. Due to the untimely death of my eldest brother in 1974, I returned to Sri Lanka in 1975 and worked at Walker & Sons till 1978 and then started my own business.

Over the years we have been involved in various businesses ranging from apparel manufacturing, packaging, apparel servicing, freight forwarding and Information Technology. We were the first to make latex gloves (examination gloves) in Sri Lanka at our factory in Hanwella which created more employment for the males because the garment factories provided employment mainly for females. During the time of former President Premadasa, we were able to set up more factories in Dehiattakandiya, Ranna, Dikwella, Pitigala and Homagama. Recently we acquired a factory in Kithulgala. My policy is that I should never let down my banks and I should never over trade. Because if I over trade, there would always be someone starving because of my overtrading.

When was the Bamunu Arachchi Foundation formed? With what purpose?

The Bamunu Arachchi Foundation was formed in 2006. I could have done this project on my own, but I wanted to get my family involved, that's why we formed the Bamunu Arachchi Foundation. On April 9, 2007, the 59th Death Anniversary of my late father, fifteen of his grandchildren and great grandchildren laid the foundation stones to start the "Ran Mehewara" Project. The beauty of this is that one day, at least some of my late father's grandchildren and great grandchildren will be involved in these kind of activities and continue the social service he started almost sixty years ago.

Could you tell us about the "Ran Mehewara" Project?

As I said, the master plan was drawn by the CECB and the Phase 1 Stage 1 was a 28,000 square feet, three storey building which houses the Out Patients and a Special Clinical Division. There are two bed lifts in the building and I am happy to say that it has better standards and comforts for people than many private hospitals. Most of the facilities are of world class standard.

On the day we laid the foundation, I told the invitees that I want to open this hospital on February 16, 2009. The date and time were already fixed, and here I have to mention that I am thankful to President Mahinda Rajapaksa and the ministers who graced the event even though the time was already fixed for the opening a long time ago. I also have to mention that the people who worked on this project were very dedicated. I wanted them to put their full effort into this as this was for the public. Had it been for my personal use, they could have taken their time, but when you do something for the people, you should put your heart and soul into it, and those who were involved in the "Ran Mehawara" Project also had the heart to do that.

Is there a second stage to this Project?

Yes, we have laid the foundation for a 200 bed-building project. Sampath Bank helped us out by giving ventilators and now more and more people are coming forward to help us with our project.

I Had Many Projects But I Gave Up Part Of My Greed.

There are so many rural hospitals in the country. Why did you select the Homagama Base Hospital?

The hospitals in and around Colombo such as the Kalubowila Hospital are very crowded; especially when injured soldiers are brought for treatment. It is because

of the soldiers in the North and the East that we can live in peace here. Therefore, if the hospitals in the suburbs are developed the hospitals in Colombo will be less congested. I believe that we should do our part, and we have to invest for the country. Though there might not be any tangible return, the return is in your mind- the satisfaction that you get out of these kind of projects.

There are 41 base hospitals in this country, and they need to be developed. Why doesn't the business community do something for our country? Develop a master plan and do something for the country, I can help them out with their ideas.

This project was a massive investment. What was your inspiration?

I consider that health is wealth and wealth is not health. Healthcare and education are of primary importance in any country. You can have a country, but if the people in the country do not have access to good healthcare and education, there is no future for such a country.

All of us have hearts; the poor man's heart is no different to the rich man's. But only some can afford medical services available in the country. The fact remains that you cannot discriminate between healthcare between the rich and the poor. After all, all of them are people. I think my late father must have realised that as way back as 1946 for him to build and donate the Homagama hospital for the people of the area.

In countries such as New Zealand, state governments have leased out regional airports and those funds are used to build hospitals for people. We should also have a mission and a vision. Our vision is to create a model hospital and the mission is to have the best hospital in Sri Lanka and then in Asia. I am optimistic that we might reach there one day.

As the Consulate of Madagascar, I represent Madagascar in Sri Lanka. Their per capita income is about US\$200-300. I had a factory in the outskirts of Antananarivo, the capital city of Madagascar. If compared with Sri Lanka, here we have many hospitals around the Capital, but in Madagascar, there is nothing. Therefore, while I was there, I helped them paint the hospitals and develop them because I believe that I should do this for humanity. In Sri Lanka, we have reached a certain level, so we have to go forward from there.

What is your message to the entrepreneurs of this country?

Initially I did not want publicity to this project, but later on I wanted to give publicity. That's why I invited many people in the Sri Lankan business community to the inauguration of the new building at the Homagama hospital. My message is

that once you have given your children their education, you do not have to give them everything. You still earn money and what do you do with that wealth? Put your resources for a community project, do something for the country.

Do not forget that we are in Sri Lanka, we are not in a developed country; there is such a lot that we can do for our country. The soldiers in the North and the East are sacrificing their lives and limbs for the country, what do we do here? We should do our part too. That's why I want to give publicity.

I wanted to send a message across to the business community and it was a good eye opener for many business people and they learnt a lot. Entrepreneurs do a lot of business here and there, but I believe that they should have a limit. One should not be too greedy and those who do well should be generous and share their wealth with the less fortunate in our society. I believe that if you over trade that would risk others. For example, pensioners invest their money in various institutions and if you lose it that is a major risk. I believe that whatever business you do, you should do it the proper way without hurting other businesses and other people. You should have business ethics.

My message to the business community of this country is, do not be greedy. Capitalists should not be too greedy. I have stopped somewhere. I had many projects but I gave up part of my greed. Please come and see what I have done, if I could do this, why can't the others? Make your money wisely, do a community project. I am not the richest guy, nor the poorest, so if I can do this Rs 100 million project, at my level, there are about 800-900 people who are richer than me in this country, they can also do their part for our country. In Sri Lanka there are many places in need of these facilities. You have to help all these people; all of them are Sri Lankan. Once the situation gets better in the North and the East, I would like to go there and do something as well.



