

The Safest Bank

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Jayaraja Chandrasekera, Chairman, National Savings Bank

Jayaraja Chandrasekera, Chairman, National Savings Bank (NSB) has taken the helm to steer the key state-sector savings bank towards modernization and expansion. As a senior banking professional, he reiterated his commitment to use his many years of experience as a banker in the private sector to take necessary policy decisions and to introduce an organizational culture that demonstrates unity and loyalty.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe and Jennifer Paldano
Goonewardena. **Photography** Mahesh Bandara and Menaka Aravinda

What are your plans for NSB having been appointed as Chairman in 2019?

I have been the Chairman of NSB only for a few months. My immediate plan for the Bank, is to expand its reach as I observed that it is necessary to accelerate the process of increasing the footprint of NSB. As a first step, we have already planned to establish ten new branches. Going by my experience as a professional banker with over four decades of hands on experience, I have observed that selective branch expansion brings positive results. Despite the many commercial banks in operation, I believe that National Savings Bank has a pivotal place as the country's largest and the safest single bank catering to personal clients, and we want to theme on these strengths, in our expansion Drive.

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We have also identified the necessity to have appropriate technology to cater to the dynamic and fast changing requirements and needs of today's client segments who are becoming increasingly tech-savvy and demanding digital banking products and services to match their lifestyle requirements. After a rigorous and lengthy process of extremely transparent technical and procurement evaluations, we received approval from a Cabinet Approved Committee to procure a new IT System and have now onboarded a very reputed IT service provider for a state-of-the-art core banking package, which will definitely drive the Bank to new heights in the Industry.

Can you speak about your journey given that you are from the banking industry and have immense experience?

I had the good fortune of having one of the greatest Bankers of our generation, Mr Rienzie T Wijetilleke, former Managing Director and Chairman of the Hatton National Bank, as a role model, mentor, guide and superior, for a considerable part of my career. He transformed the way Hatton National Bank did business by making it a bank for the common man, whilst driving technology advancement parallelly. He encouraged the introduction of novel banking products, which captured the imagination of the masses. Pride of place was given to develop the branch banking system and through it, the small and medium scale entrepreneurs. Sections of rural society who were not earlier considered bankable, were fostered under his Gami Pubuduwa scheme whilst HNB school banking units were established to promote

savings among the young and also to create long-term brand loyalty to HNB. These are some of the very valuable and enriching experiences that I have learnt in my journey of four decades in the banking industry

How would you incorporate your experiencesn to the functioning of NSB?

A banker's life is certainly not a bed of roses. It can be an extremely trying and testing experience. A heavy responsibility lies on your head. But that does not mean you cannot enjoy your career. It can be very enjoyable indeed.

Firstly, you have to always remember that integrity of the highest order is required of you as a banker and that your obligation is to the bank and bank alone.

Secondly, you should be prepared to give your best to the bank and be prepared to serve it as duty demands. As a banker, I served in several parts of the country sometimes during very difficult and dangerous periods in our history. When I was transferred to distant branches far away from home, I accepted those transfers as part of my job without any protest as it was on such terms that I was recruited. Once I was a Branch Manager in an outstation branch in the late 1980's during a period we had a civil unrest in the South. The entire town was deserted, and I was confined to my quarters without being able to go to the nearby rest house or a restaurant to have my meals. On many occasions, I had to survive on very frugal meals. But I accepted all that as part of the challenge. It is through such experiences and sacrifices that I progressed in my career. Thirdly, you should be bold enough to innovate and provide solutions and superior products and services. Although, outwardly we may appear to many as only a savings bank, we nevertheless have a resource level that none can match, and we can invent many new products that we can cross sell and increase our customer base. I would actively encourage ideas for new savings and personal credit products from my staff that can benefit the Bank as well as the people of this country, as a whole. In my previous workplace, most of the 'winner' products came into existence due to innovative suggestions from the staff. Now that we will have the added advantage of a new core banking system, I hope our very talented staff will make sure of their innovative skills by leveraging on this capability.

Another aspect that I wish to emphasize very strongly to my entire team from the top to bottom, is the need to keep our Bank free from frauds, especially cyber crimes. We are custodians of the savings of the people and we need to ensure their trust in us, to protect their hard-earned savings, and always remain undisputed.

We will be installing state-of-the-art system security to pre-empt computer frauds and also create a culture of risk consciousness among our staff through a series of training programs.

I am a firm believer in people. As the Chairman of NSB, I remain accessible to all and do not discriminate against anyone on political, religious or ethnic grounds. I strive to make my team as content as possible as I believe that our strength lies in our unity. I am happy over the high sense of loyalty displayed by all members of the NSB team and the co-operation extended by them to me so far, which is vital for all my initiatives for NSB and with their support I want to take NSB to greater heights. Our staff are our biggest strength and biggest asset. They are multi-faceted in skills and have many talents outside banking, especially in sports, entertainment and social work. The NSB Buddhist Association took the first initiative to offer the entire collection, which they made for their Annual Vesak Bhakthi Geetha Program, to His Eminence Malcom Cardinal Ranjith towards the welfare of the victims.

I was made aware that we have talented musicians and skilled sports people among our staff. I intend showcasing their talent by organizing internal talent shows and sports tournaments with the assistance of my top management, to further encourage them.

Another aspect on which I want to focus my attention, is on training. Properly trained staff are a must in any service organization. I will take major measures in consultation with my top management to further improve training facilities and provide opportunities for professional training, both locally as well as with reputed overseas training organizations.

I Believe Our Banking System Is Well Regulated And Supervised By The Central Bank. It Has Been Able To Sustain Several Shocks Over The Years, Thanks To The Regulator's Initiatives.

Today we have a very good loans scheme called Enterprise Sri Lanka, an initiative of the Hon Prime Minister, which we must implement to support local entrepreneurs. There is also provision for housing loans for newly married couples to buy a house, under this scheme, at affordable installments. The interest rate is also very attractive for borrowers.

We have shortly planned a mobile program in the Kurunegala District to promote Enterprise Sri Lanka loans. I will be personally going to the villages with the NSB team, which is an experience I have brought from my previous bank, in the promotional drives.

In general, what are your thoughts on the Sri Lankan banking system?

I believe our banking system is well regulated and supervised by the Central Bank. It has been able to sustain several shocks over the years, thanks to the regulator's initiatives. There is a growing need for capital enhancement in the banking sector, and some of the smaller commercial banks may face pressure on growth prospectives unless these requirements are met. Bank credit is showing a higher degree of infection at present due to several factors local as well as external. Personally, I feel that some form of consolidation of banks must take place at this juncture to stabilize the system as well as improve market share and channel distribution. It is also extremely important for banks to take utmost steps to safeguard their IT systems from vulnerability and hacking attempts, which are increasing.



Can you speak about the current consumer behavior in this environment?

Despite some claims that consumer behavior is negative, I personally do not agree. I find that the quality of consumer spending has improved and increased. A new consumer behavior culture has emerged, and general living standards have improved. Look at the number of privately owned vehicles and mobile phone usage. Speaking for the NSB, our savings levels have improved. The public sector and pensioners' purchasing power has increased with the significant revisions in their emoluments.

As the only state sector savings bank in the country, what more can we expect from NSB?

I can say that we are the only specialized savings bank in Sri Lanka. It is considered the safest Bank with which to save as all deposits are guaranteed. We are the only bank in the entire country to enjoy a 'AAA' for 17 consecutive years.

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NSB has been ably managed by very competent management and boards since its inception and has fulfilled the aspirations of the people of Sri Lanka. In the future, as we introduce a new IT system we expect to upgrade our services to provide faster, smarter and novel tech based services on par with any other commercial bank, and offer attractive and affordable new products for a multitude of purposes. NSB will also assist small scale entrepreneurs under Government sponsored schemes like Enterprise Sri Lanka as part of its contribution towards entrepreneur development efforts