

Think Positive

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Dudley Sirisena, Chairman Araliya Group of Companies has made considerable achievements in all spheres of business, which he has built up on his own. He is proud to have established Asia's largest state-of-the-art rice storage facility, thus doing a great service to the country. He has initiated many other novel concepts in the agricultural sector as well. Dudley Sirisena has created history yet again by being the only individual to reach a total of over 1,000-star class rooms in hospitality with two new properties to be opened in October this year. Dudley Sirisena works with a conviction to guarantee that all his commercial endeavours provide a service to the country. He believes it is essential for everyone to think positive, thereby ensuring the country and its people reach their destined potential.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe
Photography Menaka Aravinda

Since our previous interview you have made great strides in rice production. Can you elaborate on this?

Yes, we completed the massive silo project, which I believe to be the largest in Asia. The entire process of cleaning, boiling and the conversion of paddy to rice is done in an automated environment. Most of our warehouses will become vacant when we complete shifting all operations to the new premises. Therefore, we are planning to build a state-of-the-art multimedia centre and meeting room facilities to encourage educational programmes for children, thus providing them the opportunity to learn from this project. We invite everyone to visit and explore the paddy silo system to understand this reality and also to realise who I am.

The rice silo project is a never before seen venture in Sri Lanka, and it is located in Polonnaruwa. This is of great value to the people of this country. For example, in the past the quantity of broken rice would be 15-20 per cent of the total rice production. Thus, there is a considerable reduction in the quantities of rice available for human consumption. But now, through the new silo system we ensure that the rice is maintained at the highest

quality. We are able to control the temperature and environment within the silo storage facility.

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In the past, we used bio-degradable gunny bags to store rice, which was later changed to plastic containers. Today, plastic is the main cause for environmental pollution. Due to the silo, we do not need to use gunny bags or plastic containers for storage. Furthermore, the infestation of pests such as mites while rice is in storage, had resulted in large quantities of rice going to waste. We are able to control the environment within the silos, as such nothing happens to the rice. Generally, when mites damage the rice it cannot be quantified. At times the increased price of rice was due to shortages created by these factors. With the modern silo storage facility, we can detect any loss in quantities because we weigh the rice before storing and again when the rice is being sent out to the consumer. Therefore, we are able to detect if there is any loss in quantity. It is because we take such measures that we are able to take our business forward.

I believe I have done a great service to this country by establishing this silo facility. From what I understand and have seen overseas, it is not wrong to say that Araliya Rice Mills in Polonnaruwa is the largest rice storage facility in Asia. People may question this, stating that there are other larger rice producing nations such as India, Thailand, Myanmar and Vietnam. It is through the combination of the storage volumes of the old and new facilities that Araliya Rice Mills becomes the largest rice storage facility in Asia. Though paddy is grown in other countries, they generally do not harvest or work the fields twice a year like we do in Sri Lanka; therefore they do not require such large storage facilities.

In our island we are blessed with consecutive rains every six months to the rice growing areas on the two sides of the country. Our day is divided equally, as we have 12-hours of daytime and 12-hours of night-time. We have areas with cold temperatures, but we do not reach sub-zero temperatures. There are dry zones in the country, but we do not have any deserts. In a country such as ours there needs to be a better planned economic direction and strategy, to ensure that we develop and reach our maximum potential.

The Government needs to take into consideration the amount of work that a businessman

must do in order to complete a project that is of benefit to the country. The reason I voice concern is because with the depreciation of the rupee and fluctuation in foreign currency, a project cannot be completed within the estimated cost determined at the beginning. I was required to import materials from Spain for the project, and we experienced a two-fold increase in cost; one factor was the increase in foreign currency and the other was increases in material cost. Simultaneously, there was also a rapid increase in taxes. Despite these factors, the fact that I was able to complete the project on time as a businessman was a great achievement. If another person or an emerging entrepreneur wishes to attempt a similar project one day, there needs to be a proper mechanism in place to make sure that they do not face the same difficulties that I faced. There needs to be a more systematic approach.

The Government Needs To Take Into Consideration The Amount Of Work That A Businessman Must Do In Order To Complete A Project That Is Of Benefit To The Country. The Reason I Voice Concern Is Because With The Depreciation Of The Rupee And Fluctuation In Foreign Currency, A Project Cannot Be Completed Within The Estimated Cost Determined At The Beginning.

I cannot do this everyday and it should not be my sole responsibility either. If only one person has the capacity to do things, then automatically the rest of the society crumbles. Politicians need to understand this. People used to speak about me negatively, however it has reduced significantly today. I had to face many challenges due to political reasons. My only wrong-doing is that I am Maithripala Sirisena's brother. If not there would be no issues.

From the time I was young, I used to watch my mother processing rice from paddy. She would always try her best to produce full grain rice and not broken rice. When I was in school, I would collect half of the paddy and sell it. With the money I earned, I would do various things. Therefore, I have been involved in rice production and trade since my childhood. In everything I do today, I believe my mother has always been my strength. Our father provided us with all our needs.

I have not forgotten my beginnings; when we started we only had 25 stacks of paddy, and we cut only one paddy sack at the auspicious time. I did not even have money to purchase the second sack. From 65kg of paddy, we generated 40kg of rice. In my first mill, I did not

have adequate funds to even build the boundary wall. I used to work at the Threshing Floor (kamatha) and thrush the paddy myself. I would sweep the place and collect paddy, along with my staff. On the Medirigiriya-Higurakgoda road, buses travel daily and the villagers have all seen me working. Today, we produce over 500,000 kg of rice. That is Dudley. We did not force people to consume our rice, instead we offered them a high quality product. In every single business that I am engaged in, we are number one.

You have also taken steps to establish a fertiliser business. Can you elaborate on the reasons for this?

My aim is to share my knowledge with the people of Sri Lanka especially the farmers. I decided to venture into fertiliser manufacturing because a significant problem the agricultural sector faces is that the same variety of fertiliser is delivered to all parts of the island, be it Jaffna, Vavuniya, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Batticaloa, Ampara, Hambantota, Kurunegala or Kandy. The Ministries including Agriculture and Finance, various ministers and advisors are keeping quiet. How can they justify the same type of fertiliser being used across the country? It is common knowledge that soil texture and conditions vary by location. This is the main reason behind my motivation to start a fertiliser manufacturing plant. I decided to venture into the manufacturing of fertiliser, only after testing the soil throughout the country. We will be manufacturing different fertilisers to suit various soil types. Moreover, the fertiliser we produce will be specifically for each crop as well. That is for example there will be special fertiliser for paddy, tea, rubber and coconut.

I am a businessman who has emerged from an agrarian background. I am a strong businessman, but my enterprises have also been successful due to the hard work of the farmers. I have advised my son as well as my daughter who is living overseas, that we owe our success to the farmers, and therefore we have to ensure that we take care of them and also that their lives are uplifted. Through my rice mills, I am also providing a commercial service to the consumers of Sri Lanka.

I Am A Businessman Who Has Emerged From An Agrarian Background. I Am A Strong Businessman, But My Enterprises Have Also Been Successful Due To The Hard Work Of The Farmers.

The reason why I am particularly interested in the fertiliser venture is to educate the farmer through our proposed Agriculture Service Centre. This is essential for our country. The income from the two harvesting seasons, is insufficient for the farmer over the course of 12 months. They need an alternate source of income. Through the Agriculture Service Centre, we will educate the farmers on other livelihood opportunities for the non-paddy seasons. We will teach them about growing fruits and vegetables, as well as animal husbandry. We need to provide solutions according to each region. Our aim is to also connect the farmer and entrepreneur through the Agriculture Service Centre. In addition to providing farmers alternate sources of income, we can also increase their income by increasing the efficiency of their paddy farming processes. We can show them how to be cost effective.

We travelled to the Philippines and China, where we toured the factories and plantations that are producing and using the fertiliser. Before we commenced work on the Agriculture Service Centre, we did a thorough study.

Our next project is a collaboration between a Swiss company, a Chinese company and the Araliya Group. Globally the demand for rice is increasing, especially with the reduction in the consumption of wheat flour. This too has increased the price of rice. We are also reviewing plans to produce value added rice flour based food to be introduced to the market. That is our next venture.

Together with village agriculture and farming societies, we are also considering the development of facilities and refrigerators for the storage of vegetables, fruits, value added food and rice. We have witnessed a drastic increase in the price of vegetables, which can be avoided with proper storage facilities.

As I owe my success to farmers, I will do my utmost to support the farming community. They will be the backdrop for all my future projects.

In terms of the hospitality sector, you are introducing new concepts. Why did you decide to enter this sector?

In October this year, I will be opening two new properties; Araliya Unawatuna Beach Hotel

and Araliya Red, Nuwara Eliya. By the end of this year I will be the only individual who owns properties with a total of over 1,000-star class rooms. Araliya is a leading name in this sector as well. Araliya Unawatuna Beach Hotel will be a seven-star hotel and Araliya Red, Nuwara Eliya will be a three- star hotel. In 2018, we opened a five-star hotel, previously a four-star hotel and a three-star hotel. We also have four villas in Nuwara Eliya consisting of four to five rooms each.

Sudu Araliya is a 104-room property that was opened on June 8, 2000. I had purchased it in 1998. Since, within a span of 18 years, I have been able to increase the total number of rooms throughout my properties to over 1,000. I am only Senior School Certificate qualified but I believe that whenever one ventures into a business, they will also be able to assess whether they have the ability or skills required for that particular business. Why did I venture into the hospitality sector? It is simple. A hotel is a home at a more advanced level. A home has to be aesthetically pleasing and warm hospitality is a must. The interiors should be beautiful, comfortably furnished and there should be a well-maintained garden. Delicious and nutritious food should be served. When a visitor enters a home it must be clean. As such, my knowledge was sufficient for me to venture into the hospitality sector. Having served in the Air Force, I need everything to be clean, neat and tidy.

In October This Year, I Will Be Opening Two New Properties; Araliya Unawatuna Beach Hotel And Araliya Red, Nuwara Eliya. By The End Of This Year I Will Be The Only Individual Who Owns Properties With A Total Of Over 1,000-Star Class Rooms.

The construction of Araliya Green City in Nuwara Eliya was a record for Sri Lanka. It is a 192 room five-star hotel with a shopping centre, restaurants, a heated swimming pool, gym, banquet hall and all other facilities. It was built by the Araliya Group's construction and engineering companies; I was the contractor as well as the consultant. Araliya Unawatuna Beach Hotel will be completed with 304 rooms. It has a beach club and a swimming pool that extends to the sea. This is a new concept for Sri Lanka, as I have only seen such a property in Bali. The beach club is 280 feet long, 72 feet wide and has 525 seats. There will be 24-hour music, food and beverages, a night club, karaoke and many other exciting features. We will maintain strict discipline and standards. The clientele will be restricted by price as this will be a high-end property. We will provide maximum security, which is the priority.

I have more than 5,000 staff members working in the entire Araliya Group. By the end of this year, with the opening of the two hotels and new developments in the agriculture sector, the number of staff will exceed 7,000.

What are your thoughts on the entrepreneurial environment in Sri Lanka?

Private entrepreneurs who have grown through tireless work are always affected by the political situation. For example, if a Government is formed by a party that he does not support, then the businessman finds it difficult to get anything done, and at times challenges are posed to his business. This should not be the case. How can a country develop within such a climate? Political patronage for businesses are not conducive for the growth of the economy. It is not necessary.

Everything that I have earned has been reinvested in the country and all I have earned and own is in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan businessmen have ventured out of the country because of political pressures or due to the operating environment created by politicians over the years.

I travelled to Indonesia a few months ago. At that time, I learned that five Sri Lankan businessmen had invested millions of US dollars in Indonesia. There are Sri Lankans investing in power plants in Sierra Leone and micro finance projects in countries such as Cambodia. Do you think their investments will stop there? Politicians of Sri Lanka must think about the future of the country, our children and grandchildren. Our main resource is our people. Despite having a wonderful country with a multitude of resources, we are moving towards disaster.

Why do Sri Lankan businesses venture overseas? It is not because we are a developed country, it is due to issues such as political stability, labour shortages, high taxes and the unavailability of raw materials. There must be a balance, to ensure businessmen and investors decide to remain in the country. Then, Sri Lankans will experience the benefits.

I do not have secretaries or advisors, and neither do I use laptops or tabs; everything is by memory. I make all the calculations and check the progress; there must always be growth

and I do not expect any less. However, political, economic and climatic conditions affect the business. That needs to be understood. The responsibility of the Government in those instances is to change their strategies accordingly, similar to a train changing its tracks.

The focus should not be on providing free meals and making false promises to win elections. The nation cannot be built in that manner. In any developed country, it is the private sector that is in the forefront. They are directly linked with the lives of the people. If the business community fails, then society will collapse. A majority of the businesses in Sri Lanka are not performing well in this present environment. The Government must formulate a proper framework to scaffold the growth of the private sector.

Today, I have chartered engineers, chartered accountants and auditors working under my purview. Once you start making an income, then you are able to acquire the services of qualified personnel who have the knowledge you do not have. You do not need to study everything. I am able to venture into any business today because I have practical knowledge. In every business venture, 60 per cent of the operational knowledge required is the same, it is basic knowledge. Only 40 per cent changes. A businessman does not need to know everything, but they should know how to acquire and manage their knowledge according to the requirements of the business.

If Someone Asks Me Why I Am Speaking Out Now, I Say To Them That I Have Reached The Position I Am At Through Great Personal Strength And I Stand Strong.

We need foreign exchange to develop this country. There is no other country in the world that has the strategic geographical location that Sri Lanka possesses. We are in the centre of all maritime routes. We are surrounded by the ocean and its resources. Despite being able to fish all year round, we still import fish. We have the most suitable environment and atmosphere for tourism. We can reach any part of the country within a day. If all the highways are in place, then travel times will be much shorter. We should also ensure that all communities live in harmony without any misunderstandings. The country was devastated by a 30-year long conflict and we cannot turn back. It is through harmony, that the country can move forward. A peaceful and secure environment is essential for the growth of businesses and the economy in general.

What can you tell us about your experiences?

I have developed to reach the position in which I am today, because my companies have continuously maintained quality and high standards. I challenge anyone who accuses me of monetarily benefiting through politics to come forward. Many have a problem with me because I am Maithirpala Sirisena's brother. Someday, when the Government changes there may be inquiries on me. I can assure you that on that day I will publicise all my assets and savings, and face any investigations. I am not afraid and nor am I afraid of losing anything. However, no one will be able to destroy me because I have not done any wrong.

If someone asks me why I am speaking out now, I say to them that I have reached the position I am at through great personal strength and I stand strong. I am not afraid. It took me 58 years to reach this position.

In terms of Araliya Lands, there are many property companies today, we entered this sector much later after we had strengthened our position in our other businesses. We never purchased small lands, as we develop and sell properties with large acreage such ten acre or 50 acre plots. However, I do not agree with this as it is now time to stop selling lands in blocks, and instead high rise buildings should be constructed. Many trees are being felled to clear the land, which is a waste and a crime against our environment. We do not have any regulations to safeguard our environment. I am literally saying that measures need to be taken so that my land business is closed. This should apply to everyone in this sector as well. With my money, I will build houses that will benefit society while ensuring the conservation of the environment. My aim is to develop a process so that I can work for the people. If we do not protect the environment, then it is we who will ultimately lose out. In the same way, if our society falls then we will all falter.

Everything That I Have Learnt And All That I Have Achieved Are Through My Own Experiences...The Younger Generation Should Always Forge Ahead With Determination And Have Positive Thoughts.

It is of great importance to develop the village. Through my commercial endeavours, I am supporting the farmer and the rural economy. By generating dollars, I am supporting the economy. I do not have a single account or assets overseas. I have invested everything in

this country. Therefore, my earnings are not mine alone, it is ours. At the end of the day, I cannot take the money and go, and there are limits to which I can eat, drink or dress. Everyone needs to think about the country and its people, and provide support in emerging areas of need.

As a self-made man who has reached great heights in terms of building a socially conscious business, what is your advice to the younger generation?

Everything that I have learnt and all that I have achieved are through my own experiences. My advice, especially the youth, is that all religions provide the same advice and teachings. I am a Buddhist and my wife is a Catholic. Every religion states that jealousy, envy, anger and hatred are a result of engaging in negative activities. This is stipulated in the five precepts of Buddhism as well. It is in our minds that we store any negative thoughts. And it is our memory that is required to help us remember things. We need a clear mind to study, engage in business and to live well. Therefore, the mind is where we must foster good thoughts, where we think about the important things in life. A person can never move forward with thoughts of jealousy, envy, anger and hatred in their minds. This is advice from my own experience. When you have bad and good thoughts together in your head, then automatically, the good thoughts become bad thoughts. We must completely remove negative thoughts from our mind and heart, and focus on filling our minds with happiness, positive thoughts and knowledge. Thereby, all problems will be solved.

The country and Government need to work together to address the many issues faced by the people. All aspects of Sri Lanka need to be considered carefully and developed in a systematic manner. Politicians should stop thinking about their personal agendas and they should instead work towards the betterment of the people who elected them into power.

The younger generation should always forge ahead with determination and have positive thoughts, which will in turn ensure they will succeed in any field of their choice.







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