Recalling the Rise of Sri Lanka’s Small Screen

Posted on

The halcyon days of television in Sri Lanka were forty years ago. Precisely the

golden era of television on the island. It was a big idea that began with baby steps that turned into a journey of a thousand miles, a faithful journey taken by women and men dedicated to giving Sri Lankans the experience of television. Ajita Kadirgamar, one of the members of the team that joined the State-run television station in its foundational years, writes about its history in the book, ‘The First 20 Years – How Rupavahini’s Founding Generation Shaped Television in Sri Lanka’. There are numerous stories from those early days of the small screen. Personal stories. The trials and tribulations. The book is like a behind-the-scenes account of what went into making Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation in 1982 and after.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

An outright gift from Japan, SLRC started with two studios, an office space, and a Master Control Room. It didn’t even have its own bank account. The Set Department was sparse, save for a few bed covers, alternating between a carpet, a seat cover, and more. Most resources were reused imaginatively. Wooden blocks would change color as their roles as studio props changed from one to another. Amid scarce resources, recycling was the norm, and improvising and ingenuity served many purposes. That was the reality of the country’s top State-run television station forty years ago. So, some were nostalgic when the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC) marked forty years in February 2022. They were the pioneering generation of the country’s foremost national television station. Ajita Kadirgamar was one of them. In 2021, she embarked on writing a book on those early years of television in Sri Lanka, which she describes as the golden years when people of integrity led the institution. Her project was ambitious and formidable. Forty years is a long time. Much water has flown under the bridge, and Ajita needed help connecting with pioneering team members. When she reached out, her idea was endorsed overwhelmingly by her former colleagues, who considered her the ideal candidate to fulfill the task on their behalf. They re-banded and reconnected in the process, an opportunity to take pride in their contribution to national television’s growth, a journey filled with nostalgia and fond memories.

Stories unfold as people connect

Forty years later, some of her team members were no more, and she had to rely on a few existing contacts to expand her connections to other pioneering team members, some outside Sri Lanka. Ajita expected little in return when she sent emails explaining her project. But, the response was immense. This was the

opportunity to tell a forgotten story about the country’s television history. The new face of television entertainment has bulldozed and buried a vital narrative that helped shape the future. It was important to stamp the identities of individuals who were the best in their field at the time, who were willing to cut corners and make sacrifices to help grow the country’s burgeoning television landscape.

As Ajita expanded her list of contacts, she found that there were others equally keen to have the Rupavahini story published. A group of former colleagues in the Engineering Division led by Rukmin Wijemanne had begun compiling their stories and memories and were ecstatic with Ajita’s project, gladly sharing their documents.

As people started connecting and writing to her, some would send a paragraph of their memories. Others would send ten or twenty pages. Given the circumstances of 2021, Ajita’s information-gathering exercises were confined to emails and online research, with limited access to face-to-face meetings and library research. However, she was lucky to receive immense support from individuals who had access to archival materials like reports from Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) surveys on locations for towers, which they had carefully produced as reports that included other project estimations. Such information had yet to be digitized, making it even more challenging for the writer to commit them to the computer. But it was all worthwhile as it marked the beginning of new relationships. New stories. It was a beautiful coming together of individuals who could reflect and tell their stories. It was a sharing of memories and spaces. Amid limitations, they had to improvise. But they were willing to give their best with the little given. That is what makes the story so enriching. Here was a group of people who built Sri Lanka’s most prominent media infrastructure from scratch. They didn’t demand heavy paychecks but had a deep sense of duty to their mission, pride for being among the pioneers who laid the groundwork, the foundation, leaving an example and many lessons for the generation that followed who serve Rupavahini with so much more at their disposal.

Fifty-six chapters in seven hundred pages tell the extent to which Ajita has worked on the project and the massive amount of information she has received from her former colleagues. Ajita keeps the language simple and tries to retain people’s exact words so that she does justice to the pioneers’ stories and allows their voices to ring through the book.

Ajita Kadirgamar during the 80s.

Compering Sawasangeetha 4th anniversary in 1985.

The first twenty years and Ajita’s story

Ajita’s book focuses on the first twenty years of SLRC as they were headed by strong individuals who dared safeguard the institution’s integrity, which declined

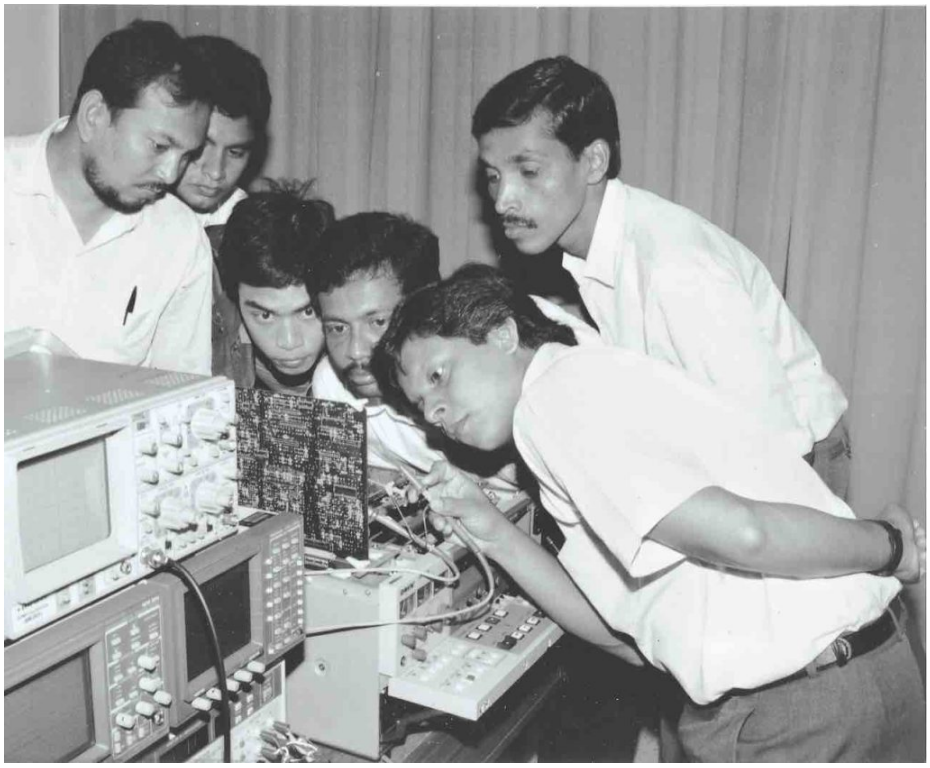
after two decades. She remembers its first chairman, M J Perera, described in the book as the Father of Rupavahini. He was a man of stature, drawn from the country’s civil service, who commanded respect and managed to keep politics and political interference out of the national television station. He was an academic with a powerful character and of great breed who bore an excellent record in the civil service. As its first chairman, he rendered his professionalism and discipline to setting up SLRC. She calls him a rock who navigated those early years with tremendous dedication. Eventually, as such strong leadership declined, politics and competition dislodged Rupavahini as the mainstay in electronic media, but talent was core at the state-run television station.

Ajita joined SLRC in August 1982 as a Production Assistant in the Western Music Unit, eventually rising to the post of Producer, after which she moved to the newsroom. Having grown up in Europe, Ajita’s Sinhala fluency needed improvement; it was almost non-existent. A few years into her career at Rupavahini, the grapevine began spinning stories about Ajita’s status. There were whispers that she was a foreigner. Amid these goings on, M J Perera kept encouraging Ajita to improve her command of Sinhala and resolve issues about her status, which was receiving much talk time among colleagues. To everyone’s disbelief, in 1985, Ajita forfeited her British passport, deciding to make Sri Lanka her home and media her career. Those close to her thought she was out of her mind as the country was plunging deeper into violence following the 1983 ethnic riots. However, her decision helped her overcome a huge administrative hurdle and allowed her to continue at SLRC.

Ajita eventually moved out of SLRC as a full-time employee, continuing to freelance for several institutions. She joined the private sector in Sri Lanka and moved to the USA through her employer, where she lived for ten years and returned in 2013, once again giving up the green card in favor of a life in Sri Lanka. Ajita has continued to work in media. She has returned to the corporate world as the co-founder of AQCELLOR, an ecosystem for startups and entrepreneurs.

> Today, she is determined to realize her project for herself and the many individuals who were part of a pioneering journey, looking forward to their stories being published.

Ajita & Sharmini – pioneers of Business Matters in the 90s.



Technical training for TV engineering staff in Colombo.

A space for all their stories

There are plentiful stories. The chapters cover all the units in Rupavahini. Even if their stories were small, they still contributed to the whole. From laying the foundation for a national television station, the adventures during training to stories from significant events such as elections and ethnic violence to the end of the golden era are recorded in the book. One interesting story about its beginnings that is undoubtedly extraordinary is the fact that no one thought the television station had to have a bank account to run its operations and the money for daily functioning. The Director of Finance had to borrow 50,000 rupees from the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation to open an account for Rupavahini, walking to the Bank of Ceylon at Independence Square to open the national television station’s first bank account. There are interesting stories from the commercial division dealing with multiple parties in the business world trying to bribe their way into buying air time for adverts when Rupavahini was the only leading channel with visibility and reach in Sri Lanka.

In the Newsroom, they had to make three copies of a news script that were eventually filed and stored. If an event was covered by a Sinhala reporter, the story had to be translated and typed into English. They would be called into the studio at short notice to interview people with no background or context, and all that they had was to hurriedly scribble down some notes and the questions. They had to consult people to get correct name pronunciations. Very early on, the commercial division had introduced a code of conduct barring certain commercials, such as commercials with children, milk products, sanitary products, and contraceptives, with deep rules on what could be shown and how, if ever, they were allowed to air an advert.

The pioneering team members received the best training from German and Canadian experts and overseas training in Japan and Malaysia, setting a solid skill base for the growing television station. Although resources inside the studios were scarce, Ajita said she could recall many fond memories. She calls them the best years in media when life was good in Sri Lanka. She worked with some of the best in Sri Lanka, Richard de Zoysa, Noeline Honter, Ravi John, and Sharmini Serasinghe, with whom she hosted Business Matters for seven years. She credits Dhamma Jagoda for putting her before the camera and speaks of his ability to pick talent and cultivate people.

Crowdfunding

Ajita had planned to publish the book in time for the fortieth anniversary of SLRC in February 2022, but soaring prices prevented her from achieving her goal. But today, she is determined to realize her project for herself and the many individuals who were part of a pioneering journey, looking forward to their stories being published. During her wait to get the book printed, many of her former colleagues mentioned in the book passed away, meaning they would not see their names in the book. And that is one reason Ajita will pursue the book’s publication without further delay. She has decided to Crowdfund the book through TribeFunds, hoping to raise one and a half million rupees to bring the book to print by February 2024. Her mission is to place a significant era of the country’s television history in print so that it serves as archival material. It will be an ode to those who spent their careers shaping the institution to what it is today. In today’s crowded media landscape, the beginnings and struggles of SLRC are forgotten and not known to the youth. As Ajita recalls, many individuals who honed their skills through Rupavahini subsequently lent their expertise to establish and run private television stations in the country, and several of those early personnel who will retire from SLRC soon have a lot left to give to the industry. After all, when everyone likes to tell their stories of hard work and sacrifice, why not tell of those who have done so silently for the small screen, never to be picked up by anyone until Ajita felt they deserved a space in the country’s television history.

The first group of staff to be trained at RTM, Malaysia in 1981.