

LIFE AND TIMES AT EKALA TRANSMITTING STATION

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I had 3 months and 3 days left to exit my teens before I was recruited by Radio Ceylon as a Junior Technical Assistant in training through Employment Exchange at Negombo. I was posted to Ekala Transmitting Station where at the workshop I made my debut to become a technician under **Mr. Noel Gunasekera**. His instructions for me was to be familiar with the tools and their use.

Before long I was assigned shift duties where the evening shift ends the following day and we had to snatch a few hours of sleep on a camp bed in the main hall. My mother was concerned of the fact that I had to sleep amongst fellow members. She was aware of my slogan about the sarong, which is a thing that you wear around the waist going to bed and find out around the neck when getting up. She quickly stitched me Pajamas. One day it happened that after getting up I switched on the filaments on all the transmitters and went for a wash. Coming back I found all the filaments switched off. And the Patriarch **Mr. Nissanka P. Meegama**, the OIC shift puffing at his crooked pipe and waiting for me at the Console Desk. He had a piece of advice for me, "You should be properly dressed before you start up for the day," for which I sheepishly retorted, "I am better dressed than you are," as he was dressed in a sarong and a short sleeved vest (Maze Banian). He shot back, "Not at all. You should be in the dress you reported for duty." Surely dress has nothing to do with filaments. But he had a message for this rookie, "**Respect the job you are doing.**" It is still etched in my heart.

On another day one of the colleagues occupying the dormitory entered the canteen kitchen in bear body to fetch a cup of tea. He was promptly sent back by a senior officer for not being properly dressed.

We had a Residential Engineer, **Mr. Wallopillai**, occupying the Bungalow in the premises, which is now being used as an Admin Office. At times, he used to visit his office or main hall but before coming he used to convey a message to the OIC of his intended visit.

This practice took me back to my school days at Maris Stella. The Brother Principal used to stroll along the corridor daily on his inspection rounds. He once remarked that he was wearing leather sold shoes purposely in order to send a signal that he is on his rounds. Apparently Mr. Wallopillai was in the same mould as the Rev. Brother. This was the breed of gentlemen and officers at the helm. Those days Ekala was not just a working place but an Institution. Two score years later with the advent of the Superintending Engineer every aspect of that Institution became awry. One example of it was his unannounced visit to the station which was more like a raid on Kasippu den.

The TAs at Ekalawere no angels. They had one frailty. They were adherents of Bacchus. They always were waiting for an occasion to celebrate, mother-in-law may be the most hated person but her birthday was celebrated. The common feature with the shift staff was to collect Rs. 2 each and six of them had a bottle of arrack, lemonade, salmon and potatoes as 'bites'. The work went on as scheduled and when there was a break-down, everybody was at it repairing. The hallmark at Ekala was their camaraderie.

Mr. Noel Gunasekera was not only a top notch Electronic Engineer but also a keen agriculturist. He had a plot of papaws in the vicinity of the canteen bearing profusely. He had a problem of protecting his produce from being stolen. There was a staff of about 20 personnel of different categories working in the night. And it was suspected that some of

Jayasekera suggested that as a trial to put up a poster in Sinhala saying that the fruits of one of the trees are poisoned. It was displayed prominently. This triggered an idea for a man with three nuggets and a wiser of the Lals to have a joke on the whole issue. They put up an additional poster with equal prominence with the words that the fruits of another tree are poisoned.

Mr. Gunasekera saw this poster in the morning and we saw the reincarnation of Frankenstein in him. He reached for the biggest 'Manna' knife available in the kitchen and with one stroke he felled all the trees. What a destruction it was. Fruits of labour and pain destroyed without any remorse. A joke on a wrong frequency. For days to come the usually vibrant canteen was akin to Barney Raymonds Funeral Parlour.

As OIC shift, we had an officer anxiously waiting to go down under. This caused him sleepless nights. And maybe for us to share his insomnia condition he wanted all on duty to be up by 0500 in the morning. He enforced it by having the main hall light up with all the 100 watt lamps, the intensity of that light was enough to conduct a carom tournament. This action deprived us of at least ½ of much needed sleep. We decided on a ploy to thwart his actions. On one night, we had all beds arranged in a row like in a hospital ward and slept. By 0430 he went for his wash. And the signal was given to snoring others to be ready for action. Sharp at 0500 hours the lights came on and sooner the lights came on, they were switched off, all were lying on beds as they were delivered by the Midwife. The modest of us did bear only the two poles while there was no bar for others to attempt the pole vault.

The second night he quipped to me, "Sleep is an essential thing. Isn't it?" for which I said, "You should know better."

There is an unwritten history about Ekala Transmitting Station. It was initially put up by the British Admiralty for the entertainment of forces on South East Asia Command. After the end of the war, Sir Oliver Gunatilleke successfully negotiated for its possession by the Government of Ceylon. It is said that these assets were bequeathed to us for a token of Rs. 10/=. We came into possession of the Marconi 100 Kw Transmitter which was called the Pride of Asia. It is through this transmitter that the surrender procedure of Japan was transmitted to General Yamamoto. At a discussion TA's Union had with the Minister of State Dr. AnandaTissa de Alwis in the presence of Dr. SarathAmunugama it was mentioned that Marconi Radio offered a new transmitter in exchange for our Pride of Asia. But it was turned down for sentimental reasons. Now 30 years later this transmitter is unserviceable now due to a fault of its high tension transformer. Before long it will go under the hammer because the copper and brass in it is worth a fortune.

Is it possible for us to get the necessary repairs done at least through the Presidential Fund?