

HISTORY OF BROADCASTING IN SRI LANKA

by Rukmin Wijemanna



On the 12th Dec 1901, Guglielmo Marconi transmitted three dots of the morse code across the Atlantic, opening up the world of communications that it is today. With this epoch making event wireless communications using morse code became quite common until 1908 when H J Round of Wireless Telegraph Company (founded by Guglielmo Marconi) was able to transmit speech over a distance of 50 miles. Quality of voice transmission was improved when in 1913 the triode was developed.

In Britain the first advertised program by Dame Nillie Melba was broadcast on the 15th Jan 1920. In 1922 Wireless Telegraph Co. (later to be called Marconi Company) was allowed by the PMG to operate a broadcast transmitter, limited to 250 watts

Three countries commenced regular radio broadcasting three years after Britain which began in 1922. These countries were Japan, Peru and Ceylon. A 250 watt transmitter was built by a few engineers in the then Central Telegraph Office making use of some components from ship to shore radio apparatus. The engineers who were responsible were Messrs E Harper, A Nadarasa, W E de Silva and B Wijetilleke. Music from a gramophone was transmitted by placing a microphone in front of it and this took place in the CTO building

When it comes to the history of broadcasting, Ceylon plays a very important role alongside the United States of America, Great Britain and Germany. Edward Harper who came to Ceylon as Chief Engineer of the Telegraph Office in 1921, was the first person to actively promote broadcasting in Ceylon

On Feb 22nd 1924 the first relay from an outside venue took place. The event was a musical show held at the YMCA premises in Fort, on the occasion of the opening of its new building and auditorium. Operating on 800 meters, the transmission was demonstrated as an experiment. On the 27th June the Speeches of H E the Governor and the President of the Engineering Association of Ceylon were broadcast at the annual general meeting. Gramophone music, news etc were then transmitted from time to time, about two or three times a week, and on the 16th of Dec 1925 a regular broadcast service , on a new transmitter was inaugurated by the Governor in a special broadcast. *the station was called Colombo Radio with the call sign 'Colombo Calling.'*

This was confirmed in the report of the Special Committee on Broadcasting in Ceylon 1941 issued as a sessional paper in 1941 in which it was stated “..... Ceylon is the first of the Crown colonies to provide a broadcasting service.....”.

Harper also founded the Ceylon Wireless Club together with British and Ceylonese radio enthusiasts in the city of Colombo. These were exciting times where radio in South Asia was concerned. Many regard Edward Harper as 'the Father of Broadcasting in Ceylon.'

In 1926 a studio was opened at the University College to improve sound quality and “ comfort of the artistes. On the 11th Nov 1927, the address of the Prince of Wales at the Albert hall Memorial Festival, was relayed for the first time. Although there were fading and the received signal was weak, audience reaction was very encouraging

By Dec 1927, the broadcasting equipment was shifted to the Torrington Square, carrying every item connected with broadcasting under one roof. April 1928 marked the first “bana” (Buddhist sermon) broadcast in April and to date it remains a regular feature. In May 1928, the Radio Club of Ceylon and South India (former Colombo Radio Society) appealed for funds to provide receiving sets to the various hospitals and other charitable institutions in Ceylon. The Colombo Radio Society was founded in 1922 and was renamed the Radio Club of Ceylon and South India in 1923. The following were Founder members, Messrs L Mackey, M S Rockwood, C A Hudson, E J Holsinger, R F Dias and J S Dinwid

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A 2kW medium wave transmitter was introduced in 1930 and in 1937 a 5 kW designed by a Sri Lankan engineer, Mr Nadarasa, and a transmission room was declared open on the 6th June by Major J L Kotalawela, Minister of Transport and Works.

1940 - The appointment of a Special Commission with Sir Kandiah Vaithianathan, as chairman, to report on all aspects of broadcasting.

The number of licences in Ceylon reached 10,000

When the World War II commenced, the broadcasting station at the Torrington Square had to be shifted to “The Bower”- a private house on Cota Road on the 3rd Sept 1942, since the Royal Airforce moved into the Race Course, which had been converted to an air-strip.

During World War II the radio station operations were taken over by the allied forces who operated Radio SEAC from Colombo. The station was handed over to the Government of Ceylon after World War II.

Wartime Radio in Ceylon

Lord Louis Mountbatten moved the RADIO SEAC operations from New Delhi first to Kandy and then to Colombo during World War II. This was Ceylon's first ever wartime radio station and it played a vital role from 1944 - 1946.

Radio SEAC played a vital role during World War II broadcasting for 18-20 hours on the 19 meter band at 15.120 mhz. A powerful shortwave transmitter was set up in Ekala, the announcers operated from the studios in Colombo.

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The construction of the present building at the Torrington Square commenced in 1947 and was completed in 1949., With a studio complex of ten studios including an auditorium and three

production studios and three Continuity studios for English, Sinhala and Tamil built by the renowned British architect Wynn Jones.

All ten studios were equipped with Marconi consoles which really stood the test of time till the 1990's. The testimony that the acoustics of these studios are to this day within acceptable limits shows the high standard of engineering of that era.

The South East Asia Command radio station in Ceylon was transferred to the Govt of Ceylon, which included a 7 1/2kW and a 100kW transmitters at Ekala. Construction of this station started in 1941 and was commissioned in 1943/4 with a 100kW Marconi transmitter which is still in use This transmitting station was used by the forces to broadcast to SE Asia through a studio set up at 191, Turret Road. After the broadcasting station came under the purview of the Dept Of Broadcasting, the station was shifted to the Torrington Square on the 1st Jan 1950. In the same year the commercial broadcasting service, under Mr Clifford Dodd was inaugurated. Radio licenses grew to 20,000. Broadcasting in three languages was also started in 1950 under the Director Generalship of Mr John Lampson, the first Head of the new Dept. Mr.Fletcher was the first chief Engineer of Radio Ceylon

It was the second of two transmitters that were shipped to Ceylon during the war.The first shipment was sunk by a German torpedo off the coast and now lies beneath the Indian ocean. Radio SEAC (South east asia command) continued till 1949 when it was taken over by Radio Ceylon. The number of licenses had reached 27,000.

On the 5th Aug 1952, the first Sri Lankan Director General , Mr M J Perera, the present Chairman of SLRC Sri Lanka Rupavahini [TV] Corporation) was appointed and the Chief Engineer at the time was Mr N S Wickramasinghe. The Engineers and Technical officers of Radio Ceylon comprised mostly those of Radio SEAC seconded for service at Radio Ceylon. To name a few: Mr.R.E.H.Perera, Mr.L.E.Tillekeratna,Mr.Freddie Gomez,Mr. Noel Goonesekera, Mr.A.F.M.Perera, Mr.K.M.C.Jayawardana,Mr.Tudor Perera,Mr.Gerald Holsinger, Mr.Block, and Mr.C.deSilva.

The Voice of America Receiving station was commissioned in 1955 at Seeduwa, though the transmitting facility was in use from the 15th April 1953

The Medium wave transmission of Radio Ceylon was from the telecommunication facility at Welikade on using a 10Kw transmitters

A new transmitting station was commissioned in 1959 at Diyagama which still transmits on medium wave to the western province and Installation at Torrington square of six AWA, FM transmitters each having a output power of 100 watts as a pilot FM (mono) project for the city of Colombo, and as a programme feed to Ekala and Diyagama transmitting stations replacing the underground cable. Another in Kandy in 1960 on an experimental basis.

1964- A Training school for Technical and Programme staff was established at Torrington square premises with aid given by the British Council. Mr. John Hunt was in charge of the technical section and Mr. Stuart Wavell in charge of the programme Section.

In 1965 an experimental station was installed in Anuradhapura. VHF was introduced in 1962 as a program link between studio center in Colombo and the transmitting stations at Ekala and

Diyagama.

On the 4th Jan 1962, the technical staff in the Dept of Broadcasting (Radio Ceylon) created history by being the first in a broadcasting station to go on strike. They went on strike in sympathy with the harbour workers and it continued for a month until 8 engineers who were arrested for alleged sabotage were released.

1965- A VHF relay station was established at Uda Radella by Mr.David Buell who was Engineer Transmitters. Programmes were received from Colombo on VHF

The Hulugalle commission report in 1965 recommended that the Dept of Broadcasting be made a corporation and in 1966 the relevant Act was approved in Parliament. On the 5th Jan 1967 Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, as it is known today was formed, with Mr Neville Jayaweera as the first Chairman and the Director General of the corporation. MR. N.S.Wickkramasinghe was the 1st chief engineer. When Sri Lanka became a republic in 1972 the station underwent yet another name change as the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC)

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1969-Phase two and three of the above project covered Ampara,Mahiyangana, Ratnapura and Kandy.

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1969- FM transmitting station constructed at Ensalwatte ,Deniyaya under the West German aid programme and made operational to feed Weeraketiya MW transmitting station. Programmes received from Colombo via Uda Radella

Transmitters broadcasting programmes in English, Sinhala and Tamil languages and were heard throughout Sri Lanka till the advent island wide FM broadcasting in the late 1970's which to a great extent replaced MW broadcasting for convenience and quality. The programme feed to these regional transmitters was very conveniently relayed from the UDA Radella transmitting facility. It also became a linking and relay point for outside broadcasts from various parts of the country.

A training Institute headed by Mr Stewart Wavell (from the BBC) was inaugurated in 1970, where training classes for program and technical staff were held. That being the first time organised training was conducted in broadcasting in Sri Lanka.

The period 1971- 1977 witnessed the following developments and the appointment of Mr D Buell as the Director Engineering who first joined Radio Ceylon as a technical assistant in 1948.

1971 Mr. Lal Herath who was from the OTS , joined SLBC and was appointed Superintending Engineer Transmitters, while Mr.R.E.H.Perera was appointed Superintending Engineer Studios.

1975- An experimental FM Stereo broadcast to cover the Colombo district in addition to the pilot project for the city was initiated by Mr. David Buell from the VHF room in Colombo. Fm receivers were few at that time but nevertheless reception reports received were many. On the basis of these reports two 1Kw transmitters were installed at Colombo and Radella to provide a FM service to Colombo and the Central province as a pilot project

A Micro wave transmission to relay programmes to the Ekala SW station and Diyagama MW station was inaugurated in preparation for the non aligned conference that was to follow.

1975- A regional MW station called Rajarata Sevaya was inaugurated receiving its programmes via Uda Radella. Later it was upgraded to a full fledge FM broadcast station with studios in the 1980's.

After 1977 there were several advancements in broadcasting. Regional studios were setup at Matara, Kandy and Jaffna, to promote more public participation and to produce more programs of regional relevance

1978 - A feasibility survey was initiated by the government and the Japanese government, through SLBC to study the possibility of introducing an all island TV project. The study was a success and the Japanese government offered Sri Lanka a National TV station. Mr.David Buell (DDGE) was in charge

In Dec 1978, conducted experimental broadcasting in FM Stereo with some modified equipment. The response from the listeners was so encouraging the SLBC decided to purchase the necessary equipment for a regular stereo broadcast and in 1984 this service was inaugurated

Phase III (the last of the medium wave expansion projects) which included transmitters at Kantalai, Mahiyangana, Ambewela and Ratnapura). An additional VHF transmitter at Karagathenna
1979- while on a FS survey at Pidurutalagala Mr Buell fell ill and passed away.As Mr. Lal Herath S.E. was on no pay leave on an assignment in the UAE, Mr.Rukmin Wijemanne was appointed as DDGE to fill the void created by the demise of Mr. Buell.

1981- Ruhunu Sevaya of SLBC inaugurated at Matara

1981- Mr.Rukmin Wijemanne moved over to the National TV and Mr. Palman was appointed DDGE.

1983- A Mahaweli Community Radio with the auspices of the Danish Government was inaugurated at Girundarakotte, Mahailupalama and later at Kotmale to educate the farmers on modern cultivation methods to obtain higher yields. The head office was in Kandy.

Deuteschwelle (Radio Germany) in the mean time negotiated with the Sri Lanka Govt. to set up a regional relay station in Sri Lanka. The proposal was approved and the work commenced in

Nilaweli, Trincomalee. The site was an old building which the BBC built for a transmitting station during the war and abandoned. The phase I of this project included two 300 kW, a 250 kW short wave transmitters and a 600 kW medium wave transmitter.

1983- A Regional station “Mahanuwara Sevaya” complete with studios was established in Kandy

1983- Also saw the foundation being laid for another FM station to cover the North Central Province and the Eastern Province at Karagahatenne in the Matale district.

1984- Mr.Lionel Pinto was appointed as DDGE

1986- Karagahatenne FM Transmitting station made operational using 1KW transmitters.

1990- A 2Kw. FM transmitter and a studio was established within the precincts of the army camp at Palaly to provide music and news to the residents of Jaffna and to the service personal in the peninsula. Messer’s Upali Jayasinhe and Tilak Ranasinghe assisted by Manikdiwela and Bamunusinghe pioneered this project

1992- Under a grant from the Japanese government plans were drawn to establish a new studio complex, Auditorium and Control room in the SLBC premises. It was also proposed to install new FM STEREO transmitters to cover the Colombo District and reequip the Outside Broadcast section and provide an OB transmission bus.

1992- Mr. LAL Herath appointed as Addl. DDGE.

1992- A pilot project was launched at Hunnasgiriya to provide FM coverage to Kandy.

1993- The new studio complex and FM transmitters under the grant from the government of Japan was declared open by President D.B.Wijetunge.

1993- New studio complex for Ruhunu sevaya was declared open by the Chairman of S.L.B.C. Mr. Kumara Abeysinghe.

1994- A new FM transmitting station to cover the southern province and the NCP was established and inaugurated by the Minister of Broadcasting and information Mr. Tyrone Fernando.

1997- A FM transmission station to partly cover the South and the entire Colombo district was established at Yatiyantota.

1997- The FM station at Hunnasgiriya was made operational with seven transmitters

2002- A Digital Micro wave project was initiated to replace the existing VHF programme feed. The base station was at Yatiyantota linking Karagahatenne, Hunnasgiriya, Nayabedde thru Kikiliyamana. The programme feed was fed from Colombo to Yatiyantota base station. The equipment was provided by Moseley Electronics, USA.

2005 December 5th Sri Lanka celebrated eighty years in broadcasting, a historic landmark in the world of broadcasting.

2007January 5th Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation celebrated forty years as a public

broadcasting corporation