

Sri Lanka FIRST!*

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Outline

- My story
- Creating technology in Sri Lanka
- My advice to diaspora

My professional story

- 1967-84
- 1985: Coming to America
- 1985 – 1994: BS/MS (Kent State), PhD (Purdue)
- **1988 – 1995**: Helping Sri Lanka's e-infra: SLNet, soc.culture.sri-lanka, LAcNet
- 1997: IBM Research
- 2001: Returning to Sri Lanka
- **2003**: Starting Lanka Software Foundation
- **2005**: Starting WSO2
- **2007**: Joining the army
- **2013**: Started WorkInSriLanka
- 2017: Switched roles in WSO2
- **2018+**: LSF v2: Building software to run a country

lanka.laf.in.us



Starting LSF: Why open source?

- Create, not just consume technology
- Levels the playing field
 - Anyone with capability can compete, lead and challenge
- Issues
 - What problem do you work on?
 - How do you fund it?
 - How do you monetize it?

SIDA report on open source for developing countries



JANUARY 2004 • SANJIVA WEERAWARANA • JIVAKA WEERATUNGA

Open Source in Developing Countries



<https://www.sida.se/Svenska/Publikationer-och-bilder/publikationer/2004/januari/open-source-in-developing-countries/>

LSF Structure

- Jivaka Weeratunge
- Nobody to meetings
- Trustees of LSF: proof of not about making money
 - Indrajith Coomaraswamy (Governor, CBSL), Saman Amarasinghe (MIT), Paul Ratnayake (leading lawyer), Kumar Wickramasinghe (IBM Fellow, now Prof. at UCSC), Prof. VK Samaranayake (IT father in Sri Lanka, now diseased) ...
- Board members
 - Prof. Rohan Samarajiva (now Chair ICTA), major IT corporates (Virtusa, John Keells, hSenid, ..), universities (Colombo, Moratuwa)
- Technical leadership: me (then IBM Research)

2003: Lanka Software Foundation

- Apache
 - Axis2
 - Sandesha
 - Neethi
 - Kandula
 - BSF
- Sahana – spun off Sahana Software Foundation, 501c(3) corp
- Ninithi
- Karsha

Result: By ~2007, more Sri Lankans were committers in Apache than from any country other than the US. There were *none* from India.

WSO2

- Started in 2005 with 12 people
 - Coming off LSF's Axis2 project – Jivaka was a key contributor to starting
- Raised \$45M venture capital (Intel, Quest, Cisco, Toba Capital, Pacific Controls) with difficulty and luck
- Now 500 employees with offices in Sri Lanka (Colombo & Jaffna), London, New York, Mountain View, Sao Paulo and Sydney
- \$30M revenue with \$25M ARR growing at 55% YoY & profitable
- #1 open source integration vendor, #7 integration vendor
- Hiring 90 people globally this year, expecting to keep growing
- 450 customers including Fidelity, eBay, Concur, BNY Mellon, TfL, ..
- All R&D, marketing, 75% sales/presales, most leadership out of Sri Lanka

Joining the army

- My father was in the army for 25 years
- I was in US Army ROTC as an undergrad at Kent State for a bit
 - Went to class once a week in uniform 😊
- Joined in 2007 as unpaid volunteer officer into R&D part
 - As Lt Col based on education level via direct enlistment scheme
 - But couldn't serve due to various reasons and was on leave
- Re-joined in 2014 and now IT advisor
 - Digitally transforming Sri Lanka army

Work In Sri Lanka

- Huge momentum after the war for Sri Lanka
- Volunteer group to help anyone who wanted to relocate to Sri Lanka
- Website, conference, meetups
 - <https://web.archive.org/web/20170702104219/http://workinsrilanka.lk:80/>
- Now defunct
 - No momentum ☹️

Back to technical work in WSO2

- Quit as WSO2 CEO in 2017 September
- Now working on Ballerina, a new, cloud native programming language
 - Designed to be how we program for the next 25 years

Creating technology from Sri Lanka

Not a sh**hole country!

- Our glass is half full, not half empty!
 - We have our problems, but we're great (too)!
 - (Greatness need not be exclusive.)
- NO:
 - Extreme poverty
 - Bad roads
 - Bad healthcare
 - Bad education
 - Corrupt politicians (I wish)
- We still lose great people to other countries for economic reasons
 - For education is ok – WSO2 has had ~100 leave for PhDs in CS; more than 50 have completed (and 3 have come back)

No corruption, unless you're corrupt!

- Corruption is a two-way street
- (Software) technology creation does not need any approvals
 - Computer, Internet connection, brains, passion, hard work
- 13+ years of running WSO2
 - ZERO, absolutely ZERO, corruption – requested or given!

People

- Do you know that (on a percentage basis) more Sri Lankans are in IT than in India?
- Technology creation doesn't need many people!
 - E.g. WSO2 has only ~300 engineers; world's #1 open source integration company
 - E.g. Ballerina – core language team is like 10, total team < 100
 - Ballerina is aimed at being the Java replacement
 - (And people are amazed that a company can invest 100 people on something; huh??)
- Sri Lankans are education (& certification) crazy

Software market is always up for grabs

- Silicon valley people are busy making useless stuff
 - Extreme example: Juicero
- Tech is always changing
- \$100M investment can make Sri Lanka enterprise leader
 - How? Invest into the future platform drivers and don't worry about ships that have sailed already
 - Today: blockchain, kubernetes, ..
 - That's where there's money to be made, not in making useless apps for people to waste time on for dopamine hits (and for ads to make you buy things you don't need)

Think global, not LK

- Don't try to make money off of LK govt
 - We need to stop spending Rs. 6B on building ridiculous systems like the tax system (which now needs another Rs. 4B worth of fixes and cannot be done by Sri Lankans) (6B is close to \$40M)
 - Build for LK govt and take it to 100s of other countries
- Use Sri Lanka as a test market and go after other markets
 - Small size
 - Give it free

My advice to diaspora

Advice about advice

- Just because you live in a “better” country it does not make you an expert
- Do something instead of giving advice!
- Mano Sekaram: “Ideas are cheap, execution is not”
 - Mano is a returnee from AU in the 90s, CEO of 99X, chair of Lankan Angel Network, past chair of SLASSCOM, grand poobah of IT industry, awesome human being



Start a business in Sri Lanka

- Your advantage: you are in the market; you should be able to feel the pain better than those of us who are not
- Don't get work and do it for less in Sri Lanka
 - Plenty of people doing that
 - Modern day intellectual pimping
- Find a co-founder and build a product business
 - Move if you want, but don't need to

Share the wealth!

- Tech companies are not for robber barons
- Give EVERY employee stock options, not just your cousin who's managing
 - ~27% of WSO2 is owned by employees
- Tech companies, when they have a hit, can create a lot of wealth for a lot of people – don't deprive it

Don't make it racial

- Sri Lanka has a multi-thousand year history of racial divisions
 - We are a nation of many races
- Cannot be “fixed” in one generation
 - Strong, long cultural traditions take time to change, unless you think the US approach in the middle east is a way to solve problems
- Remember: Food is more important than freedom
 - See my blog: Politics and the continuity theorem
 - <https://medium.com/@sanjiva.weerawarana/politics-and-the-continuity-theorem-3ad02d232eec>



This is not your parents' Sri Lanka: visit!

- We have
 - Tall buildings (LOTS)
 - Malls
 - Roads
 - Spas (but not dog spas, yet)
 - Traffic
 - Crappy politicians who treat the country like their play thing
- Don't try to justify your living outside of Sri Lanka by saying "oh it sucks over there"
 - Its TOTALLY fine to live where you want to live!
 - We do have storms once in a way, but no Stormy Daniels

Keep your money in Sri Lanka!

- LK banks give ~4% for USD CDs
 - How much does your US bank give you?
- Don't worry; Sri Lanka has problems but we won't disintegrate
 - Guaranteed because of dysfunctional parliament, cabinet and leadership!
 - Don't put it all; move \$10k tomorrow .. or maybe \$1000/month
- Yes, you can take your money out
 - Inward Investment Account

Help make it better: R&D, Entrepreneurship

- Prof. Louiqa Raschid, UMD College Park
 - LSF Karsha project
- Prof. Saman Amarasinghe, MIT
 - GSL
- Dr. Pasad Kulatunge, Sweden
 - Solid waste project, electric vehicle conversions

4Axis Solutions

- 13 million downloads of Drawing Desk
 - Casual drawing product
 - 10,000 downloads a day
 - Top rated app for iPad in US/UK stores
- Started in 2012 as 3rd year students at Univ of Moratuwa IT faculty; now 14 people
- No funding, profitable
 - Angel investment by Saman
- Registered in Singapore
- Going after Adobe



Dumindu Harsha



No money for nothing (and ..)

- Don't just send money for living!
 - I'm not a fan of Universal Basic Income
- No one should go hungry or homeless
 - But everything else needs to be for self-improvement and empowerment, not handouts
- Buy them a 3-wheeler if nothing else and make them pay it back

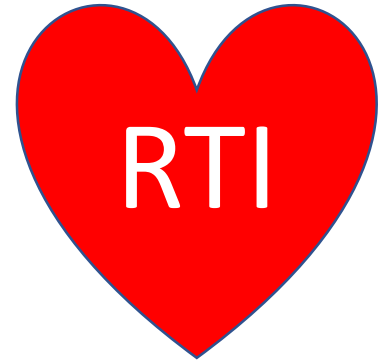
Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.

Educate someone

- Did you know that the part time Bachelors in CS program at Informatics Institute of Technology only costs ~Rs. 25,000 month for 5 years?
 - Yeah, that's just like \$160/month right now (and soon less ☹)
 - Do well & WSO2 will hire at Rs. 175,000 / month (current rate, will go up)
- Get your cousin in Sri Lanka to give that person an internship for that period so they have a living wage while you fund their education
- Second chance education – don't allow ALs to end their world

Help build software to run the country

- Digital identity
- Email / chat / ..
- Issue tracking, ala change.org
- National org chart
 - Map of government with layers of useful information
- National data archive
- Remote voting for 2M disenfranchised
- Helping govt orgs build software right
 - Volunteer architecture team
- Helping govt orgs be more digitally safe
 - Volunteer whitehat hacker team



Join the giving pledge in Sri Lanka

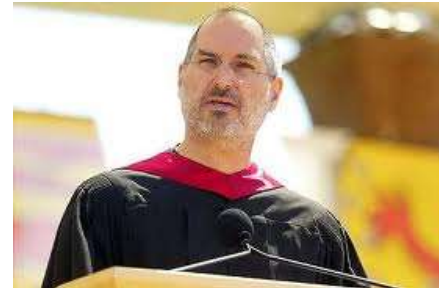
- I'm starting it in Sri Lanka
 - And of course I will commit 50% of everything I have to philanthropy (focused on fixing the country)
- You aren't taking your wealth with you when you hit EOL
 - And really don't spoil the kids so much .. they need to have room to create value, for self satisfaction and impact the world in their own way

Summary

- Sri Lanka is not utopia
 - Is the US? No place is.
- Technology, in particular software, is an easy market to go after
 - Open source makes it accessible to anyone, including Sri Lanka
- Govt policy consistency is a major issue
 - WSO2 is not a Sri Lanka registered company, similar to most companies
- Sri Lanka's glass is half full, not half empty!



You can't connect the dots looking forward you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something: your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever. Because believing that the dots will connect down the road will give you the confidence to follow your heart, even when it leads you off the well worn path.



Questions?

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