

## INTRODUCTION

India has invaded South Asia through their cultural productions such as soap opera and Bollywood films. With the arrival of private TV networks like Zee-TV, STAR Plus, the modern, primarily entertainment-driven, sensationalist Indian soap operas have become popular not only in India, but in other countries as well (Gokulsing, 2004). In Sri Lanka for instance, with the introduction of Sinhala-dubbed Indian soap operas, especially from the 1990's by *Sirasa*, one of the country's privately owned television channels, the 20 year old local tele-drama industry is in an insurmountable and disastrous situation.

In Sri Lanka, by 2008, there were 21 analog television networks: 6 state owned and 15 privately owned, 10 privately owned satellite networks and 4 State-owned pay television networks. According to the National Media Survey conducted by the Lanka Market Research Bureau Limited<sup>1</sup> (LMRB), the estimated number of TV receivers in 2007 was 12.6 million, a significant number because (except in the Northern province), according to the Department of Census and Statistics (2006) the population of Sri Lanka by the end of 2006 was 18.3 million. From the inception of TV channel broadcast in Sri Lanka, tele-dramas with one or more major plots, depicting only a single hero or heroine, have been a popular genre among the Sri Lankan television programs and TV viewers. These programs have been on the air during the prime time.

The tele-drama *Dimuthu Muthu*, directed by Mr. D.B.Nihalsingha was telecast from 19th January 1983 on *Rupavahini*, the state owned television corporation. It was considered to be the first tele-drama in the Sri Lankan tele-drama industry (Sugathadasa, 2007). It was very popular in the country. From then onwards millions of Sri Lankans habitually watched various types of tele-dramas daily on the state – owned *Rupavahini*. Usually at 8.30 pm, which was considered a prime time in Sri Lanka, the *Rupavahini* Corporation was able to maintain its monopoly of weekly TV tele-dramas from 1983 till about the end of 1990. However, this changed drastically, when other private TV channels were given licenses to operate in Sri Lanka by the government. Local tele-dramas as well as Sinhala-dubbed Indian tele-dramas and soap operas from the mid 1990s, have started to invade living rooms in Sri Lanka. In the mid 1990s, *Sirasa TV*, a private television channel in Sri Lanka introduced the first Sinhala-dubbed Indian soap opera, "Shanthi" to the local television viewers. It became immensely popular among Sri Lankans. In 2008, four serials, namely *Mahagedara*, *Praveena*, *Wasuda* and *Kawya*, were broadcast daily on *Sirasa*, from 8.00pm to 10.00pm, which gradually became the prime time according to Television charts. These two hours were named by *Sirasa TV* as "*Sirasa TV Ran Depaya*" (The Golden Two hours of *Sirasa TV* channel). However, these four Indian Sri Lankan soap operas, were produced and/or directed by Indians. Unlike the Sri Lankan tele-dramas that telecast once a week, these serials were telecast on all five days of the week, and they became greatly popular among local TV viewers. Consequently, all other TV channels in Sri Lanka were also compelled to telecast tele-dramas incorporating features of Indian soap operas.

Obviously, as a result of the above situation, most Sri Lankan tele-drama directors faced immense problems. They were unable to find a TV channel to telecast their own productions.

Both Sri Lankan and Indian directors are now (2008) producing many tele-dramas in serial format containing 300 to 500 episodes, and incorporating of many features of soap operas.. They need to be aired daily, because of the demand for such tele-dramas by TV channels and the immense popularity of serial dramas among viewers. However, many local artistes and enlightened people in the country tend to believe that today's tele-dramas, namely, Indian soap operas and their local re-creations are just imitations, and other local tele-dramas, are also of very low quality. According to reports it seems that, there have been 340 Sinhala tele-dramas that have not found air time or are unable to find sponsorship in Sri Lanka. Therefore, it can be said that the whole tele-drama industry in the country is in a precarious and vulnerable condition.

As a solution to this unstable situation, on 29<sup>th</sup> June 2006, the Sri Lankan government's President Mahinda Rajapaksha, in his additional capacity as the finance minister, introduced a controversial and strict Tele-drama, Film and Commercial Levy by publishing an "Extraordinary Gazette No. 1451/16" under the Finance Act No. 11 of 2006. Accordingly, the telecast of imported tele-dramas, films and commercials filmed or made outside Sri Lanka, dubbed in Sinhala or English would cost Rs.90, 000.00 per 30 minutes, and un-dubbed, subtitled foreign tele-dramas and films would be levied a fee of Rs.75, 000 per 30 minutes.

However, that attempt was deemed a failure because the *Sirasa TV* channel continued to telecast *Ran Depaya* (Golden Two Hours) with two Sinhala dubbed Hindi soap operas and two Sinhala re-creations of Indian serials produced by Indians. Because of their higher viewership ratings, other TV channels which telecast daily serials too have not abandoned telecasting them. Therefore, the local tele-drama industry is facing a seriously, insurmountable and critical crisis which needs a radical solution.

## **RESEARCH FOCUS**

As mentioned in the title and also in the abstract of this paper, the main objective of this study is to find out reasons why Sri Lankan television viewers like soap operas with special reference to Indian soap operas, as a case study.

In the present study, after an extensive literature review, it was assumed that local television viewers watch more long running serials than tele-dramas and female viewers are more interested in watching soaps than males. Further, it was also assumed that males in general watch Indian soap operas more than locally made Indian Tamil and Hindi serials that use local actors, and their peer groups. They are more likely to watch the same soap operas and tele-dramas. Another assumption of this research was that the soap opera and tele-drama viewing behaviours of the TV viewers are influenced by their demographic qualities like ethnicity, age, gender, educational level, and experiences.