

A thing of
beauty is
a joy forever...

HMT watches hold a special
place in the hearts of Indian and
foreign horology enthusiasts

BY NEHA S. BAJPAI

PHOTOS: BHANU PRAKASH CHANDRA

It was a momentous day for me. I had just passed out of school and my father rewarded me with ₹120 to buy my first wristwatch. Those days, watches were earned, not bought on a whim. So, the next morning, I dashed to the HMT showroom at 6am and queued up for four hours to get my watch. It is still a prized possession," says P. Jayapalan, who has been working with HMT Watches in Bengaluru for over 30 years. "I joined the company's after-sales department soon after graduation—a dream come true. It is really unfortunate that my career here would soon end with the last few batches of HMT watches."

After a long, sustained period of de-

cline and desolation, the Union government announced the closure of HMT Watches in 2014.

HMT had dominated the Indian watch market till the 1980s. Promoted by the likes of Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Madhavrao Scindia and Kapil Dev, there was a time when nine out of every ten watches sold in India were HMTs. Since its inception in 1961, HMT has rolled out a record 10 crore pieces.

A fancy Japanese collaboration with Citizen and *desi* twists to designs made it one of India's most successful indigenous brands. The proud "Timekeeper to the Nation", however, failed to keep up with the changing times.



The HMT White Pilot Limited Edition watch

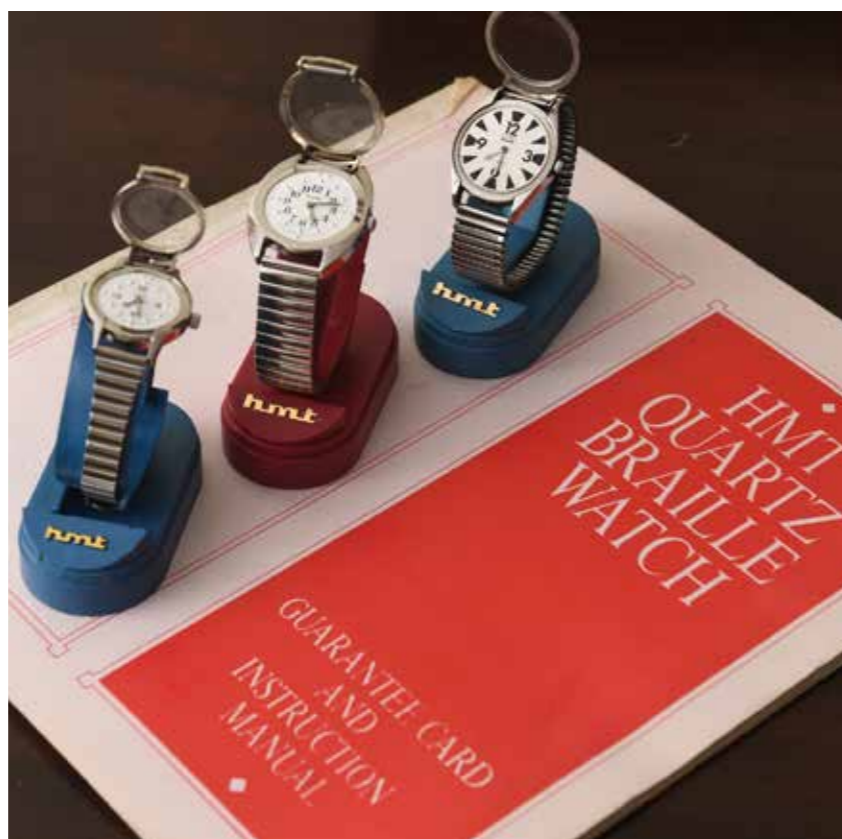
As the quartz era dawned upon the global watch industry, HMT took the plunge in 1981. That was a blunder. Indians had not yet warmed up to the idea of the relatively expensive quartz watches and still appreciated the sturdy, dependable mechanical timepieces from HMT.

And just as the company decided on a U-turn to its tried and tested mechanical-only strategy, the market opened up for competitors to flourish. By the mid-1980s, import restrictions were lifted, quartz watches got cheaper, and Titan took the scene by storm.

HMT resisted the quartz fever till 1991. When it finally came out with a range of economical quartz watches, it was too late. Titan's stylish range of reasonably priced watches almost killed HMT. In 1994, while HMT posted a loss of ₹90 crore, Titan notched a profit of about ₹20 crore.

Like most traditional public-sector

HMT's
Braille
watches



Prashant Pandey with his collection of HMT watches



"I THINK IT IS A SHAME THAT HMT WATCHES HAS BEEN SHUT DOWN. WITH THE RIGHT MARKETING, IT COULD HAVE FOUND A PLACE IN THE MODERN WATCH WORLD."

FRANZ MATTES

enterprises, HMT moved at its sluggish best. Its last 20 years were agonisingly slow. And that sealed its fate, with the brand posting a loss of about ₹242 crore in 2013.

Since then, HMT has been clearing its inventory. "We have stopped distribution, and collected the stocks from the three factories in Ranibagh [Uttarakhand], Tumkur [Karnataka] and Srinagar [Jammu and Kashmir]," says Jayapalan. "Almost 50 per cent of our current sales are online, while the rest goes out from the Bengaluru unit. The stocks should last another year."

News about HMT being taken off the ventilator upset many old-timers and young fans alike. And, in the market, the love for HMT watches soared—overall sales almost doubled.

"We used to sell five to ten HMT watches a month. Over the past two years, the numbers have shot up tremendously," says Zubair Memon, owner of Popular Watch Company in Pune. "We are now selling 50 to 60 pieces a month. Even though the company hiked the prices soon after the closure announcement, the watches have been doing very well. I have clients from south India who visit my store just for the HMTs."

From hardcore HMT fans to people who never bothered about watches to global collectors, HMT is receiving attention like never before. Nostalgia seems to have given the dying icon a booster shot.

The unprecedented demand for

Franz Mattes, a sales and marketing professional from Germany, has been blogging on HMT. He is seen here sporting his favourite HMT watch—the Pilot



popular models such as the Pilot, Jawan, Janata, Rajat, Sona and Kanchan led to prices going up by almost 50 per cent.

"We have a long waiting-list for the Pilot's watch, and there are people who are willing to pay as much as ₹5,000 for a desired model [many of the popular models, including Pilot, were priced between ₹1,000 and ₹2,000]," says Memon. "Unfortunately, this craze is being exploited by unauthorised dealers."

Four years ago, Prashant Pandey, a Bengaluru-based HR professional set out on an HMT quest. He scouted every nook and cranny in the country and brought home a collection of over 1,000 HMTs fit for a museum!

"The beauty about HMT is that what is not collectible is often collectible. My earliest memory of an HMT watch is of my grandfather, who took great pride in wearing one until his death," says Pandey. "A few years ago, I was passing by the HMT Bhavan



The HMT Skeleton is priced at ₹10,000



Members of the HMT watch collectors' group in Bengaluru

in a week's time, and I finally bought my first Pilot for ₹650."

Pandey's passion for HMT brought him in touch with like-minded followers of the brand in India and abroad. In August 2013, he started an HMT collectors' group on Facebook. It is now one of the most popular online platforms for the brand.

"We started with a small group of about 10 enthusiasts. It has been a heartening experience, as we have managed to not just survive but thrive over the past three years," says Pandey. "Today, the group has over 1,200 members from across the world. We evaluate the members' profiles every few months and retain only those who are serious about HMT watches. We meet in Bengaluru twice a month to discuss a variety of subjects—from trends to latest acquisitions to concerns about fake HMTs and more."

HMT, in its heydays, represented Indian ethos like no other brand. Almost every celebration in middle-class homes of the 1970s was marked by an HMT watch—there was 'Kanchan', which was called the "dowry watch"; 'Jawan', 'Sainik', 'Rakshak', and 'Pilot' for soldiers and toughies; 'Sona', the thinnest dress watch for ladies; and, of course, 'Janata', favoured by the politicians and public figures.

"Kanchan was a must on every dowry list, and people, in fact, would plan marriages based on the availability of this model. We would send postcards to alert clients about its availability," says Memon. "Those days, even post offices had counters selling HMT watches. Be it graduation or retirement, the company made watches for all occasions."

It was this old-world charm of HMT that attracted Mike Perl, a former librarian based in Walmer, England. "It was a chance discovery," he says. "I saw it in one of the listings and fell for it. I like old things and buying an HMT is like buying an antique, that, too, in perfect condition."

The charm, he says, lies in the fact

and somehow it brought back all the memories. I started exploring HMT watches on the internet and figured out that the Pilot had a huge fan-following. I wanted one desperately, but it was not available anywhere. Finally, I was told a piece was available at the HMT Bhavan. I made a dash for it, but it got sold right in front of my eyes. The manager promised to arrange a piece for me



A rare Doctor's watch with a hand-wound movement and a quartz Nurse watch



Puranjay Mohan, 16, is one of the youngest members of the HMT watch collectors' group



The HMT Excel and Taurus are considered must-haves for a collector



that the brand has kept time for generations of Indians. "Following the history of its many models is particularly interesting for someone outside India," says Perl. "Last autumn, I did an awful amount of research on the brand and now I have about 40 HMTs. My dearest piece is a white Pilot with blue hands, bought for 20 pounds."

HMT has awakened Perl's interest in rare mechanical watches. Besides an Omega from the 1960s, his collection includes a few Seikos and some timepieces from the Hyderabad-based Allwyn.

"I have to admit, the HMTs have overtaken them. The prices make economic sense if the watches are bought in India and the quality is certainly better than the budget watches made in the UK," says Perl, who has bought an HMT for as cheap as four pounds. "I have bought almost all my watches from Indian sellers. The brand does not supply abroad, but a lot of people who appreciate old-fashioned, classic watches love HMT. You could have a nicer, quicker collection by spending more money on HMTs sold through a parallel online industry, but a part of my interest in this brand is that one need not pay a silly price for the products."

Interestingly, HMT fans abroad have not limited their interest to collecting timepieces. There are a few loyalists who are making sure the brand is well-

recognised globally.

Germany-based Franz Mattes discovered HMT in 2007 and has been blogging about it with great enthusiasm. "I run several watch websites and a forum for German watches. In 2007, a member of this forum who worked for Siemens in India told me about HMT watches, especially the 'Pilot' since I liked military watches," recalls Mattes, who bought 50 Pilots from the factory in Bengaluru for his collector friends

in Germany. "The watch seemed to have preserved time. The size, the mechanical hand-winding movement, the curved dial and acrylic glass are typical features of watches from the 1960s."

He notes that many companies, especially from Switzerland, are selling mechanical watches as a luxury product. But, he believes, they are nowhere close to these robust watches from the 1960s.

Mattes is an ardent follower of the

The HMT factory in Bengaluru



“FOLLOWING THE HISTORY OF MANY HMT MODELS IS PARTICULARLY INTERESTING FOR PEOPLE OUTSIDE INDIA”

MIKE PERL

HMT collectors’ group on Facebook, and has been doing his bit to keep the brand going. “In the Watchuseek forum, there is a project to build the last series of watches based on HMT movements by former HMT employees. I have ordered all the colours in this series and am eagerly looking forward to them.”

Most HMT collectors say its robust watch movements are comparable to those from Russia, Switzerland and Japan. However, it is the vast range of designs and variations that keeps them hooked to these watches. The Janata, for instance, went through several variations—dial colour, metal, typeface, etc—between 1961 and 1982.

Many of the brand’s popular models were named after the common man—Vijay, Prashanth, Rohit, Nutan, Sujata—and there was a Braille watch, too. “The most fascinating aspect about collecting HMTs is the sheer numbers that the company made for each of its model. Nobody has a definite list,” says Ithichanda Ponappa, 38, who has over 1,100 HMTs in his collection. “The company has made over 1000-plus models in five decades. One discovery leads you to another, and it keeps going. You cannot get to the end of discovering this brand, as many aspects of its production are not documented.”

Ponappa’s association with HMT goes a long way back in time. His father was an employee of the company, and he got his first HMT at age 16. “The Excel, Taurus and Leo are the ultimate watches for an HMT collector. I have been yearning for the Leo,” he says. “My wish-list also includes a Ja-

nata with a transparent caseback, made exclusively for the Japanese market. Finding a way to get them to India is tough. The price is almost four times the watches in India.”

The craze for this retro-chic brand has captured the imagination of some teenagers, too. Puranjay Mohan, 16, is a keen follower of the collectors’ group on Facebook.

“A watchmaking video online caught my fascination, and I fell in love with escapements, column wheels and all the tiny components that make me-



The HMT Rakhee was released in two versions—a regular wristwatch and a pendant watch

England-based Mike Perl loves HMT’s old-world charm and robustness



Photo: Ascension Montego

chanical watches,” says Mohan, who has mastered the art of repairing mechanical watches. “I was never interested in collecting watches. I just wanted to disassemble and reassemble timepieces. My father owned a dozen watches from HMT, Seiko and Favre Leuba. I bought some tools and took apart my grandfather’s HMT Rohit. It was thrilling. I would haunt watch repair shops and request the technicians to teach me, but no one helped me initially. I then started observing an old technician at a watch shop during weekends. He gradually started giving me two-three watches to service, and that got me going.”

While the government is planning an HMT museum in Bengaluru, watch freaks have given the brand a fresh lease of life with special orders and intense online discussions. Three years ago, Uttarakhand-based Prateek Shujanaya floated the idea of a customised HMT Pilot on an online forum, and collectors lapped it up. He then asked friends at HMT to realise the order and soon there was a barrage of requests for the special pieces.

“What we made is known as the HMT White Pilot Limited Edition watch. It has a textured white dial and blue hands,” says Shujanaya. “The initial run of 500 watches came with ‘White Pilot Limited Edition of 500’ etched on the caseback, in English and Hindi. This edition has become a hit in the collectors’ circuit. It fetches a whole lot more than it was initially sold for. And, as more people get into collecting HMT watches, the prices would go only northwards. It was such a success that HMT went on to release the watch in the open market.”

That reminds one of Mattes’s observation: “I think it is a shame that HMT Watches has been shut down. With the right marketing, the brand could have found a place in the modern watch world, where buyers and collectors seek real stories and history.”



Ithichanda Ponappa of Bengaluru has over 1,100 HMTs, including pocketwatches