

Janathawata Welawa Dakwanno: The Time Keepers To The Nation



Having moved steadily forward beyond an eventful 75 years, Wimaladharm Brothers has effectively maintained their reputation as the 'Time Keepers to the Nation'. Asoka Wimaladharm, Chairman and Shantha Wimaladharm, Managing Director, share their thoughts on the progress of the Company through the years and the aspirations for a successful future.

By Kamalika Jayathilaka | Photography Menaka Aravinda

As a leading watch Importer and Distributor in Sri Lanka, which was established in the 1930s, can you take us to its beginning, of how the company came to be and the journey so far?

It was my father the late Deshabandu W A Wimaladharma who founded the Company in 1936. He had been fascinated with watches and clocks even when he was very young. He must have been in his early 20s when he came to Colombo from Galle. When Sri Lanka was still Ceylon and was governed by the British he had first started a trading business. He worked with a relative for about few years obtaining the training required for various aspects.

After some time my father started importing watches and clocks and later went into consumer durables as well. He purchased some wall clocks first and wrist watches particularly from Switzerland. However, he had started with a small amount of money. But he did not borrow from anyone.

It was a daunting task for him, because for a young entrepreneur from outside Colombo to start in the capital city was rather difficult. His first shop was in the First Cross Street, Colombo and from there onwards he moved to Main Street and then to Front Street. In 1938 he opened an outlet in Kandy. Soon afterwards he visited India and gathered the expertise and a wealth of experience in the watch industry.

From 1936 onwards even though we have been importing other products our main line has been watches and clocks. Then World War II started and it was a very difficult era for businesses in Colombo. He went through these difficult times and after the war ended he started importing watches from Japan as well as France, Switzerland and Europe.

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In the early and late 50s there were industrial exhibitions in Sri Lanka and many other trade stalls and trade exhibitions during that time and particularly when D S Senanayake was Prime Minister there were many trade exhibitions, and businesses were asked to come for the exhibition.

In the Colombo Plan Exhibition in 1952 my father built a clock tower which became very popular. This was when the Company attached itself with the slogan 'Time Keepers to the Nation' and in Sinhala *Janathawata welawa dakwanno*.

In 1955, he started W A Wimaladharma & Company Limited by his name. It was the first time a limited liability company was formed. Subsequently, we opened a branch in the same name. That name does not exist any more. In 1956, at yet another grand exhibition held at the Race course he had won the first place for his stall.

In 1958 we took over the showroom at Front Street. It was a major turning point. Most of the imports at that time were from Europe and very few from Japan.

How did Wimaladharma Brothers progress thereafter?

During the British era Sri Lanka was a primary producer and was exporting tea, rubber, coconut and spices. We were not involved in manufacturing. But after independence the climate changed.

The ensuing Sri Lankan Government wanted to manufacture and they encouraged certain entrepreneurs and businessmen in Colombo to venture into manufacturing. The Government that prevailed during the 60s placed more prominence on manufacturing. Therefore, many imports were curtailed due to exchange reasons and lack of money. This way, industries were encouraged in Sri Lanka.

With this, in the 1960s we started manufacturing clocks in Sri Lanka with a fully equipped factory in Ratmalana. In 1961 we celebrated our silver jubilee on a grand scale. By 1964 we had started manufacturing the movements, cases, dials and everything else. We were basically having imports as well as manufacturing during the early and late 60s up to the 70s.

In 1978 and thereafter the economic policies and government policies changed again and economic liberalisation was introduced. As a result, we went into more imports, trade and the wholesale business as well. We started importing watches also from Japan instead of Europe because in Europe the products were getting more expensive and the technology of watches and the clocks had changed. We therefore progressed from mostly mechanical watches at the time to battery operated watches and clocks. Most of the battery operated watch makers were in

Japan. Therefore, we also moved to Japan. By then we had many Japanese and Swiss agents, which was where our trade line mainly was.

Since liberalisation, importation was not free. Therefore, after the late 1970s assembling plants had to close down gradually as we could not survive in importing parts and assembling them in Sri Lanka. That was not productive.

In 1986 we formed Wimaladharma Brothers (Pvt) Ltd an incorporated company. In 1989 we opened our Liberty Plaza branch and in 1991, a branch at Majestic City Complex. These could be considered one of our main achievements up to that point.

In 2010 clocks and watches were allowed to be imported Duty and VAT free. Since we were importing directly and legally, we gained through this and were able to double our earnings.

We started as a very small company. But along the way, as a watch importer and dealer we have worked with many reputed international and particularly Swiss agents that have helped us build the reputation of our company and maintain the slogan 'Time Keepers to the Nation'. As a result, we have experienced steady progress.

Wimaladharma is a name associated with its own style and statement. Would you like to elaborate on some of the significant products and services on offer?

About 18 years ago we tied up with a very significant international company called Seiko. It is probably the largest watch company in the world in terms of making very high quality and technologically advanced watches. They are also the inventors of the battery watch that we are using today. Seiko had confidence in us when we started importing. Initially it was very difficult because they had very high expectations and tough targets. But gradually we started to satisfy them and then we managed to become one of their distributors. Seiko is still the largest or the most prestigious watch company in terms of volume and technology.

Other than Seiko we also have Swiss watches like Roamer, brands such as Casio, Q&Q, and Orient. We just imported another new brand called Oris, which is also a Swiss watch, a high quality and elegant one. we also have certain German and also Japanese brands like Casio, which is very popular among the younger

clientele. It is a very highly advanced electronic watch which has many electronic as well as certain other additional functions. For instance, today a watch is not just a watch but also serves other purposes.

Many functions in watches other than the time attract mainly the young people. Casio has many such functions. We have a range of mechanical watches too. We have automatic watches to Quartz and a whole range of other inexpensive watches.

You opened a state-of-the-art Seiko watch and clock service centre in Colombo. Can you briefly explain the significance?

We opened the Seiko Service Centre last year. This Centre offers customers a state-of-the-art, service facility. The centre features watch measurement, repair, testing and cleaning equipment from Switzerland, Germany and Japan. These are supplemented by equipment and watch related tools provided by Seiko. The service is strengthened by the expertise, know-how and experience of its technical staff who have also been trained by Seiko.

The Seiko Centre has the equipment and technical knowhow to test any kind of watch, mechanical or otherwise. What we have is a fully fledged service centre where any type of repair or testing can be done.

As a leading watch and clock dealer how important is technical know-how and training of staff?

Technical know-how is very important. Watch repairing is a very intricate job. Not many people would be able to do this. The movement and parts of a watch are very small and delicate that you have to handle it very carefully. You must have very precise tools. Therefore, acquiring and training technicians can be rather challenging.

The watches have a very complicated mechanism. Then when it come to certain watches special training is required. We have to make sure that the technicians understand how to repair these. We train our technicians for this. Some of them are trained here first and sent to a few other places for this. Some are sent to Hong Kong to the Southeast Asia Distribution Centre for further training. Apart from this we also get down material, manuals and guidance with regards to watch repairs.

How do you keep up to date in international standards in a globalised world?

The technology worldwide has changed from mechanical to electronic and electronic to digital even with regards to clocks. Today GPS technology has come into watches. There are certain clocks that work on atomic energy.

We also recently launched the very latest watch by Seiko called 'Astron'. With accuracy of one second every 100,000 years, it is the world's first solar powered GPS (Global Positioning System) watch. With its state-of-the-art technology, wherever you go the watch time will automatically adjust itself. This is a breakthrough product in watches. This is going to be the future watch.

What are your aspirations for the future of the company?

We have realised that there is still great potential in the Sri Lankan market for watch wearers. There are still many of those who do not wear a watch but would like to. Therefore, the watch market is always growing and the clock market as well because every household should have a clock.

Sometimes people like to have two or three watches and if you are involved in outdoor sports you may want a watch with related functions. To meet this demand we feel that we have to have more outlets opening in Colombo and the suburbs, so that people would have more access to buy good quality watches. We hope to open a new outlet at Crescat Boulevard Shopping Centre and revamp the Front Street showroom.

We have three sales outlets and we hope to open another one in Colombo and we have many dealers island wide. For example there is a chance that we could expand in the North, East and certain parts of the North-West. There is certainly the potential to increase more outlets.

Any final thoughts?

Last year we celebrated our 75th year. Moving ahead our aim is to take Wimaladharma Brothers - 'The Time Keepers to the Nation' - into every household. We produce and sell clocks that everyone could afford. It starts from an affordable price and very high quality watches also. We want to penetrate this market to grow into more for the affordable market where there is the masses.





