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For decades, this humble car has accommodated entire joint families with pets, exhausted travellers with tonnes of luggage, classic car enthusiasts and (yeah, how can we forget?) the not-so-humble neta. It was recently voted the best taxi in the world. But isn't the loveable 'Amby' so much more than that? Anu Prabhakar finds out

Brand Ambassador

VINTAGE VS CLASSIC

According to international car clubs, models manufactured before 1939 are referred to as 'vintage' and those manufactured between 1940-60 are called 'classic', says Ravi Bhoze, member of the Flat Classic Cars Club of India. Under this scale, old models of the Ambassador car fall in the 'classics' category. Certain auto clubs even have a special entry for Indian-manufactured cars in rallies across the country. This spot is dominated by the Hindustan Ambassador, Standard Herald and Fiat.

KARMA KABS

About 10 years ago, self-styled lifestyle guru Tobias Moss imported a fleet of Ambassador cars to the UK and started a service called 'Karma Kabs' in London. The cars, decorated with marigolds and Indian motifs, are hired out for weddings and special occasions. Besides weddings, Karma Kabs have featured in the videos for Keane and Lily Allen. Famous people who have been driven in the Karma Kabs include Mick Jagger, Sienna Miller, Sade Frost and Kate Moss.



Advertising agencies ASP and Creative Communications in Kolkata did most of the Ambassador's advertisements, explains KV Sidhar. "The initial ads were much more functional where they used to show the car and explain its features in bullet points."

When Susan Mathen celebrates her first wedding anniversary in November this year, she may flip through the pages of her wedding album for nostalgia's sake. And when she does, besides the usual suspects — ecstatic relatives and red-faced babies — grinning out at her, two Ambassador cars, one black and the other white, will peek out from every other photograph. This is no happy accident. While planning her wedding at the 510-year-old St Francis Church in Fort Kochi, Mathen and her husband were sure they wanted to hold a simple wedding, sans flashy cars and decorations. "We chose this church because my parents-in-law got married here. On their wedding day, my mother-in-law arrived in a white ambassador, and my father-in-law in a black one. We both liked the idea and decided it would be quirky." This decision came despite her uncles offering her the services of their BMW and Mercedes cars for her wedding.

Parked inside the premises of the church, a well-known heritage site, the cars attracted many curious Japanese and Korean tourists. "I was shocked when I came out of the church and saw tourists standing near the cars, fascinated," laughs Susan, 29, a brand strategy planner at advertising agency JWT in Bangalore.

HAPPY AMBY MEMORIES

For a car that is seen so proudly Indian, the Ambassador has strong British origins. It is the result of collaboration between India's Hindustan Motors (HM) and Morris Motors in Oxford, UK. The Morris 10 was the first model to be assembled and rolled out as Hindustan 10 at Port Okha in Gujarat, just before independence.

The Ambassador's earlier models, based on the Morris Oxford II series, were called the Hindustan Landmaster. Starting 1957, when technology to produce the Morris Oxford III series was transferred to India, the car was renamed the Ambassador.

Decades ago, a car was a luxury and the middle class rarely got to own one. The earliest Ambassadors in India were either owned by the government, well-off relatives or by taxi operators. But children of the '70s and '80s will agree that the 'Amby' made many childhoods, first driving lessons, secret rendezvous and long-distance family trips memorable.

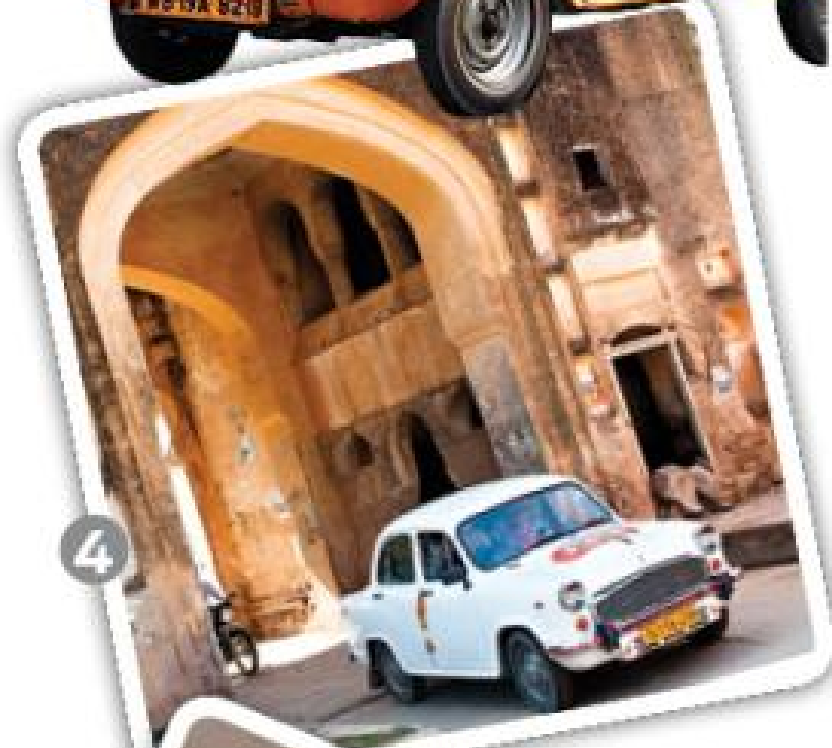
While visiting the 'Ambassador Landmaster fans, Aficionados and Owners Club of India' page on Facebook, one can be excused for wondering whether 'Ambassadors' and 'Landmasters' are actually just codenames for Mita Kunis and Bradley Cooper. 'Beauty', 'classic' and 'elegant' are words used to comment on pictures of the cars. The page's enthusiastic moderator, Dr Anjan Chatterjee, 57, calls the Ambassador a fortress on wheels. His love for the car is nothing short of infectious.

The Nagpur-based officer, who works for the Geographical Survey of India, owns a 1955 Landmaster. "This is the original model, where all the parts were imported and assembled in India. It's 99 per cent UK," he says. On his trips outside Nagpur, Chatterjee keeps out an eye out for spare parts, like parking lights, that don't come by easily.

When compared to the Rat, the other popular car of those times, the Ambassador was seen as roomy and perfect for long-distance family trips, says KV Sidhar, aka 'Pops', national creative director of advertising agency Leo Burnett. "Rat was seen as cramped, individualistic and for love birds as seen in those classic Amol Palekar Hindi movies," chuckles Sidhar, who owned an Amby for a couple of years. "While in Hyderabad, we had a diet in Munnar. I used to love going on long drives in my Ambassador there. It was never like a client meeting but more like a picnic. I took the agency guys with me and we used to stop, smoke and drink," he remembers fondly.

MORE THAN A TAXI

Now with BBC magazine Top Gear ranking the 'Amby' as the world's best taxi, even as die-hard fans are indignant at the fact that the Amby should only be remembered as a taxi, others feel the car needs



no further validation of its iconic status.

However, newspapers, magazines and car-enthusiasts have written several obituaries of the Amby, questioning its ability to withstand the onslaught of sleeker 21st century cars. Privately-owned Ambys are a rare sight today even though they are found in large numbers as taxis or VIP vehicles. But there are still die-hard fans of the car, young and old, who are hooked for life.

Delhi-based lawyer Pooja Dodd is one of them. Given that there are more luxurious cars in the market, why does Dodd still choose the Amby? "It's sturdy and I don't have to worry about taking it anywhere unlike other fancy cars," she says.

Dodd owns a four-year-old white Amby but has done the interiors up in shocking pink to reflect her style. "I have people turn and look at me, to see if I am really driving," she laughs. "When I take my car to Khan Market, the security guard recognises me," she says. She adds that the VIP look of her car has managed to get her into malls without the mandatory security check.

Dodd is not alone in referring to the car's sturdiness. "...If I was going to have a road accident, I would prefer to be in an Ambassador. Plus you get a much better view out of the big windows," laughs UK-born Mumbai resident Julia Smith. Last September, Smith spent 10 days in the safe confines of the Amby when she and her husband participated in the Ambassador Car Rally, traversing the Kochi-Munnar-Kunoor-Ooty-Mysore circuit, covering 1,200km.

Her compatriot, Peter Gerstrom, 58, took his first ride in the Amby in 1979 while being ferried from the international airport to South Mumbai. The roomy ride stuck with him.

Back home in London, Gerstrom drives a Porsche Cayenne to work daily. On weekends, he chooses between his classic Jaguars. So when he decided to participate in the Classic India 2013 rally, where 15 cars drove 4,000km in 28 days across the states of Delhi, Gujarat and Rajasthan, what car did Gerstrom pick?

The Ambassador. "I knew immediately that it was going to be a faithful companion on the rally and not let me down," he says.

It's the hard outer shell that makes the car so sturdy, says Nitin Dosa, president of the Vintage and Classic Club of India. "You can bang it and still nothing will go wrong," he says.

And then there's Alexandre Le Beuan, a Frenchman who owns a travel agency, Shanti Travel, in Delhi. He owns a purple Ambassador and offers Ambassador trips to young clients who want the 'Indian experience'. "My Amby is 11 years old. I feel when foreigners in an Amby stop for chai in a village, it makes it easier to mingle," he says, vowing to never sell his car.

ROAR BACK TO LIFE

But not everyone is a fan. "It wasn't an easy car to drive and it hasn't changed. Calling it the best taxi in the world is stretching it a bit. It is not phenomenal, reliable or well built when compared to something like the Toyota Corolla, which I think is the best taxi," says Hormazd Sorabjee, editor, Autocar India magazine. "I think the Ambassador has lived past its sell-by date."

It is possible that the Ambassador has delayed in reinventing itself. Ujjam Bose, MD & CEO, Hindustan Motors Ltd, does not shy away from admitting that HM may have been sitting ducks by allowing other car companies to beat it. "We should have been aggressive," he says. According to figures provided by HM, it sold 534 Ambassadors in April as against the 280 units sold in the same month last year. And now with HM receiving approval for its BS IV-compliant diesel engine, Bose is upbeat about the car's prospects. "There was a sales increase of 11 per cent last year when compared on a year on year basis. This year, 20 per cent increase in sales has been budgeted."

HM also manufactures vehicles like the Mitsubishi Lancer, Cedia and Pajero. But Bose admits that there is a special attachment to the Ambassador. "It is always at the back of our minds, it is the nation's pride."

(With inputs from Yolande D' Mello)
p.p.r@dnaindia.com, @prabhakar_anu

- 1 Dr Anjan Chatterjee's 1955 Landmaster
- 2 & 3 The Ambassador at the Karma-Enduro rally
- 4 Ambassador taxi in Kolkata
- 5 Pooja Dodd in her Amby that's decorated in pink
- 6 Frenchman Alexandre Le Beuan's purple Amby
- 7 Susan Mathen's white Ambassador wedding car