



Elderly Ambassador gets a facelift

New look could revive fortunes of ailing Indian icon

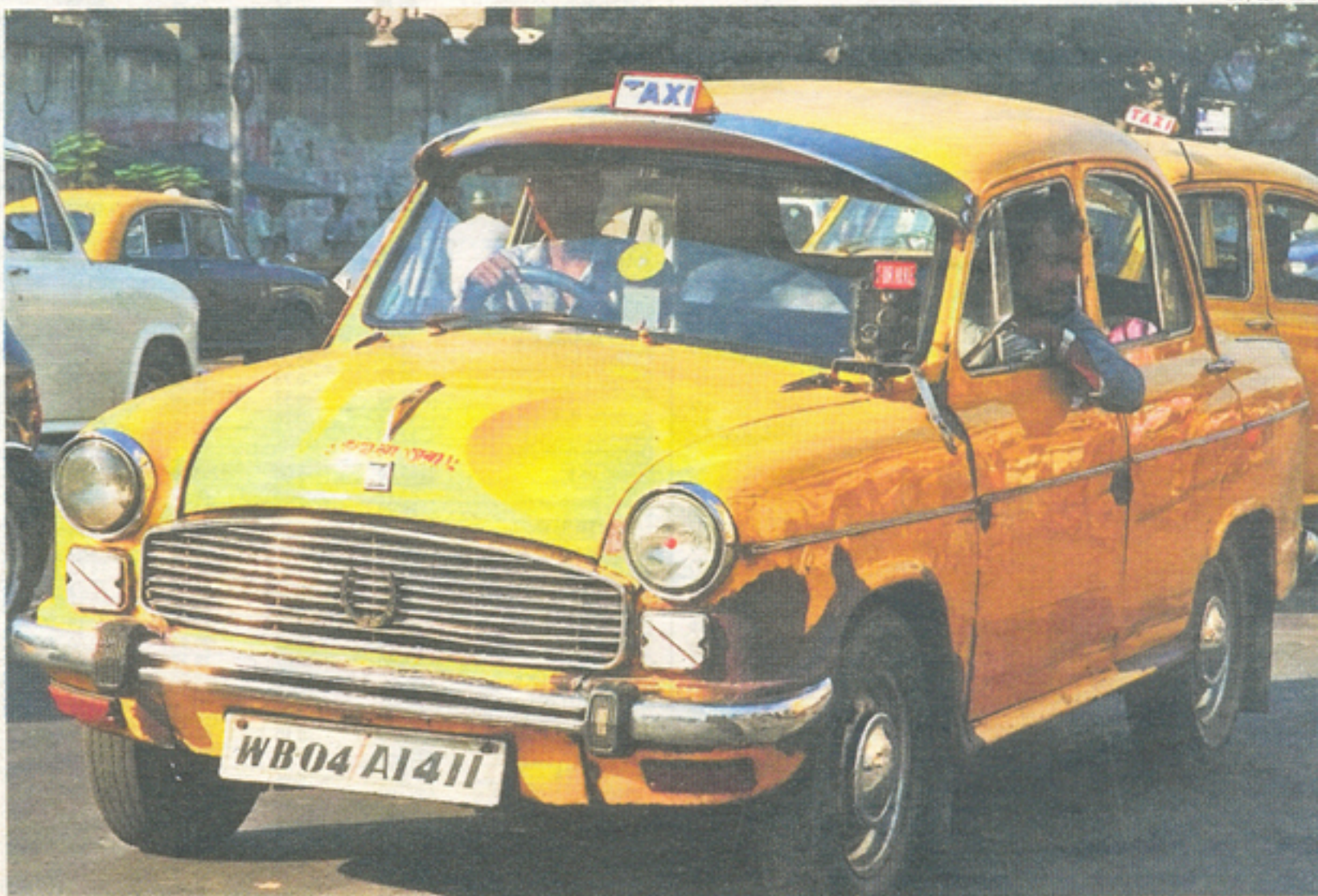
Robin Pagnamenta Mumbai

India's iconic Ambassador car is to get a Mini-style makeover, a revamp that will, it is hoped, carry one of the defining symbols of India's cities for six decades much further into the 21st century.

Its manufacturer Hindustan Motors wants to breathe new life into the brand, which is based on the Morris Oxford and has been made in India without interruption since 1948.

"We are looking at several new variants, all of which will look significantly different," Manoj Jah, the managing director of India's oldest carmaker, said. The revamped Ambassador, including a more powerful engine, smoother body shape, integrated tail lights and a range of modern touches including a state-of-the-art stereo system, had become essential because Indian motorists had grown tired of the car's old-fashioned styling.

"The design has not changed significantly since the 1950s. People



Based on the old Morris Oxford, the Hindustan Ambassador is still a favourite of taxi drivers and Indian dignitaries

2.6m

Numbers of cars sold in India in 2009

Source: Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers

like to see and experience new things and in India there is a familiarity [with the Ambassador] that breeds contempt."

Cold, commercial reality is another motivation. Annual sales of Hindustan Ambassadors, which can be bought for about 485,000 rupees (£6,500) on the sub-continent, have collapsed to between 7,000 and 8,000 cars a year, down from 30,000 in the early 1990s, as Indians have switched to newer models and foreign brands such as Toyota, Honda, Volkswagen and Ford.

The Ambassador's sales figures make for particularly grim reading when compared with the rest of India's car industry. Across the country, car sales rose by more than 30 per cent in 2010 to 1.87 million, up from 1.43 million in 2009, supported by the country's fast-growing middle class. Once a proud symbol of the nation's car industry, Ambassadors have shrivelled to less than 0.5 per cent of the market.

Nevertheless, with the new model

Oh! Calcutta!

Behind the story Robin Pagnamenta

It was once known as the Morris Oxford but there is only one town left on Earth that can truly lay claim to being the home of the Hindustan Ambassador: Calcutta.

Swarms of them, mostly painted in the yellow and blue livery of the local taxi cabs, bounce along the sweltering streets of India's third-largest city, easily outnumbering any other vehicle.

Clambering into the back of India's most famous car feels a bit like jumping on to a trampoline, but the Ambassador, with its prodigious suspension, makes driving down the most pot-holed back street feel, if not exactly

smooth, then at least no worse than a series of dull jolts. It has a roomy rear seat and plenty of ground clearance, a plus when the Hooghly River floods during monsoon rains.

Yet travelling at more than 45mph can feel distinctly uncomfortable, while braking seems to take forever — an alarming prospect in a city where cows and goats wander the roads, munching on rubbish, and traffic rules are interpreted selectively.

Nevertheless, with the windows down and bhangra blasting from the radio, there can be no better place to watch the streets of Calcutta whizz by.

due to enter production at Hindustan Motor's plant in Uttapara, near Calcutta, in a year's time, lovers of the classic Ambassador look mounted a passionate defence of the car yesterday.

"The design might be 50 years old but it is a virtually indestructible car," said David Darrell, owner of Merli Garages in Llanwrda, Carmarthen shire, and a British specialist in Hindustan Motors. He imported Ambassadors to Britain until 18 months ago, when stringent new European safety rules forced him to stop. "It's a very, very good car and extremely roomy."

Rajiv Saxena, general manager at Hindustan Motors, said that Indian MPs and generals still preferred to travel by Ambassador for purely practical reasons. "Only the Ambassador can take you through ditches and ponds and rocky terrain," he said. "It is the best-suited car for India's roads."