



THE IMMORTAL ROAD KING

I am delighted but not surprised to learn that the sturdy Ambassador has outdone taxis from Britain, America, Germany and several other countries to be declared the world's best taxi. This is the opinion of the prestigious Top Gear Global Programme at Beaulieu Museum in Britain, one of the world's leading motor museums; so it's a verdict which demands respect. I am delighted because I have always been an ardent admirer of the Ambassador. I feel disloyal that for some years now my partner has not allowed me to buy one, and envious on the sadly rare occasions when I see the latest model, so much sleeker than any Ambassador I owned. I am not surprised because I have driven and ridden in Ambassadors over hundreds of thousands of kilometres in all seasons, in every part of India, often on roads which present a challenge to bullock carts, so I know how sturdy and adaptable the Ambassador is.

The Top Gear Programme has found the Ambassador to be "virtually indestructible". Once I did my best to destroy an Ambassador after dark by ramming it into a tractor that had no lights. To my amazement, in spite of a massive dent in the front of the car, the engine continued to run. When I opened the bonnet I found that the fan had crushed the radiator. Trusting in the Ambassador's hardiness I decided to risk damaging the engine permanently and limp to the nearest village where I knew there would be an odds-on chance of finding an Ambassador mechanic. I was not disappointed, but there was a problem—the radiator needed welding and that was beyond the mechanic's competence. Like a good Ambassador man he was not to be defeated. He levered the fan and the radiator apart with a crowbar, and then poured water laced with *haldi* (turmeric) into the radiator explaining it would gum up the holes, and said that should get you to the nearest sizeable town. I did.

I always found the Ambassador remarkably reliable, in spite of appearances sometimes. When I was the BBC correspondent in Delhi we had a taxi stand outside our office. All the taxis, if I remember right, were Ambassadors and well past their sell-by date. Often visitors from the BBC in London would set off in them with considerable trepidation. Seeing the taxis' apparently dilapidated condition they were reluctant to accept my assurances that they would reach their destination, but

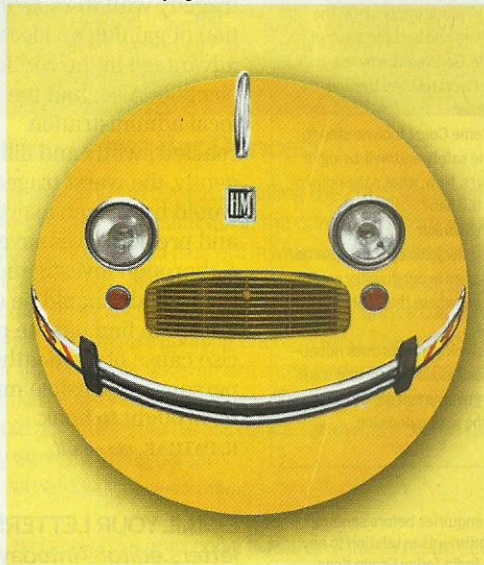
they always got there. Sadly, the Ambassadors and indeed the whole taxi rank have gone.

My longest ride in an Ambassador taxi was from Kolkata to Delhi, recording material for a BBC radio programme about the drive. Fond as I was of Ambassadors I did know that they were not entirely immune from breakdowns, especially when as old as our vehicle, so I did hope that we might break down to add a colourful episode to the programme. Just as we were about to cross the bridge over the river Son in Bihar there was a dreadful clanging, which sounded as though part of the innards of the Ambassador had dropped down and were dragging along the road. Our driver just muttered "front number plate" and clanged across the bridge. We got out the other side to find the driver was right. He tied the number plate on with a string and we went on our way. That was the nearest we came to a breakdown in our gallant Ambassador.

In addition to indestructibility, and the high clearance, which enables the Ambassador to reach the places other vehicles can't, they are particularly capacious. This is because the original British Morris Oxford series III, the forefather of the Ambassador, bequeathed a monocoque chassis. This apparently means the body and the chassis are one and the same thing. I can't claim to understand the engineering significance of this but I do know that the carrying capacity of the Ambassador is the stuff of legend. I have

read a report of the winner of a competition—to see how many people could ride in an Ambassador—squashing 27 passengers into his vehicle. I find that difficult to believe but I have often seen Ambassador taxis with far more passengers crammed into them than the law allows, and far more than the depressingly ordinary small cars now replacing Ambassador taxis can carry. So let's hope that now that the Ambassador has been recognised as the world's best taxi it will regain its number one position among the taxis of India. That will ensure that the car mass produced for the longest number of years in the world, once known as the King of Indian roads, is still to be seen bowling along those roads. I say bowling because the curvaceous Ambassador always reminds me of a bowler hat on wheels.

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