



**The Mobile Republic
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Old is gold. Ask her fans, as the grande dame of Indian cars, the Amby, turns 50.

Stodgy, clumsy, ugly—these are some of the favoured epithets used to describe an enduring symbol of India's ill-fated flirtation with socialism: the Ambassador car. But critics of the lumbering Amby need to watch their words. As the car that began its journey by rolling out of the Uttarpara plant in Bengal's Hooghly district in 1957 celebrates its golden jubilee this year, it is transforming itself into a new symbol of retro chic.

On its 50th birthday, the Ambassador looks snazzier than before—the recently launched Ambassador Avigo's special features include a new minimalist dashboard, a sun roof, a writing desk for the rear left side passenger, leather-trimmed seats, a reading lamp, a powerful AC, a state-of-the-art Kenwood stereo, grille and chrome trimmings, new bumpers and a better exhaust system to reduce noise.

"This was the car I wanted all my life," says one fan. He sold off his Honda City to realise his boyhood dream.

The Ambassador Grand, too, has been jazzed up with new features.

They do not, however, alter the overall look of a car that appeals to its diehard fans for the very stodginess that its critics decry. These are fans who couldn't care less that the Ambassador has undergone little engine upgradations over the years and that its share of the passenger car market has plummeted to a mere three per cent, from more than 70 per cent till the early '90s. They simply refuse to get seduced by the sleeker, more stylish and more fuel-efficient international brands that currently dominate the market.

Among these fans are celebrities like musician Ravi Shankar and fashion designer Manish Arora. "Panditji (Ravi Shankar) only travels in an Ambassador whenever he's here. He finds it comfortable, roomy and easy to get in and out of. He also likes it because it's an Indian car that is part of our recent history," Anshuman Pandey, an associate at The Ravi Shankar Centre in Delhi, told Outlook.

Arora, who owns a black Ambassador—his first and only car—loves it for being "very Indian, comfortable, roomy, happy and sociable". He regrets that a lot of Indians don't appreciate the advantages of the Ambassador. Arora's passion for the car extends into his professional life—he has been commissioned to decorate its interiors and the exterior for an upcoming Discovery Channel programme.

Other fans speak up for the car, too. Sanghamitra Mitra Kalita, a journalist, and her painter-husband Nitin Mukul, both born and brought up in the United States, migrated to India last year and mulled a lot of car possibilities. "We nearly bought a Maruti Esteem. But it just didn't feel right. One evening, it suddenly occurred to us that the car we wanted—a sturdy, reliable, roomy, comfortable car—was staring at us in the face: the Ambassador," says Sanghamitra. The duo placed an order and the car was finally delivered to them in early March this year.

"We've painted it purple and though my husband drives it, I love travelling in it," enthuses Delhi-based Sanghamitra, who used to drive a Nissan Maxima in the US. Apart from the space and safety factors, the couple also chose the car because they wanted to go out of town on weekends and felt it was the best choice for Indian roads.

Recalls Ranjan Ghosh Dastidar, a Calcutta-based executive with an FMCG giant, "When I was a kid, my family did not own an automobile. I used to see people driving an Ambassador and always dreamt of owning one. But somehow, that dream never materialised even though I started earning well and moved up the corporate ladder." Ten years ago, Ranjan became a car-owner, with the purchase of a Maruti 800, and went on to buy fancier cars. But when he saw a promo for the Ambassador Avigo, he decided to sell off his Honda City and realise his dream.

"I now know this is what I've wanted all my life," says Ranjan, four months after he's been driving it. "It's sturdy, safe, comfortable and very appealing."



Of the 15,000 Ambassadors rolled out every year, about 1,500, or 10 per cent, are bought by such enthusiasts. The rest go to taxi and tour companies (65 per cent), to the government (20 per cent), which continues to regard the white Ambassador as a symbol of power (India has been governed from the backseat of one, it is often said); and the remaining 5 per cent are exported.

"It is easy to run down the car, but had it been as bad as many pronounce it to be, why would even 1,500 people buy it for private use?" argues Soni Shrivastav of the C.K. Birla group, which owns Hindustan Motors, the car's maker.

Shrivastav confirms that any move to change the Ambassador's inimitable look is likely to backfire, since stodginess—call it stateliness, if you will—has become its USP. "Many people have warned us against changing the shape of the car. They like it as it is," she says. "We'll continue to cater to the niche segment—the politicians and bureaucrats and those who love the car, perhaps because it holds a nostalgic value for them."

Industry experts attest to that—the Ambassador, they say, will survive, but only in particular segments. Its price, which ranges from Rs 3.5 lakh to Rs 5.5 lakh, depending on models and features, is not a deterrent. And there are other attractions for niche buyers—this is the only Indian car that can be bullet-proofed. It is also the only Indian car that comes in petrol, diesel, CNG and LPG versions. And the only Asian car to have made it to the Smithsonian Institute.

Critics of the car are quick to say that is where it really belongs—in the museum, not on the roads. No way, the fans would say.