

Envoy for all seasons



Long before the modern, sleek and high-powered vehicles hit the Indian roads one car that ruled the hearts and minds of "aam Hindustani" was, and still is, the Ambassador. For more than half a century the car, lovingly called 'Amby', has marked its presence in almost every nook and corner of the country's urban and rural landscape. It has come to occupy an indelible part of every adult Indian's childhood memories.

Originally a take-off from the Morris Oxford, the Ambassador was produced by the country's first automobile plant ~ Hindustan Motors (HM) ~ at Uttarpara near Kolkata and has been in production since 1957-58. Notwithstanding its British origins, the Ambassador has acquired a true Indian character, perceived to be best suited to the harsh Indian terrain. The political/official class also lent their patronage. But of late our 'netas' have begun to switch over to the luxury SUVs.

In 2002 the then prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee used an armour-plated BMW for security reasons. However, some prominent politicians like Mrs Sonia Gandhi, continued with their Ambassador.

That the car despite its seemingly inelegant, stout looks and technical drawbacks could catch the fancy of a regular list of clients speaks for its indispensability. Interestingly, despite the car's declining popularity among automobile aficionados, the Ambassador has been striving hard to keep pace with the times. Some say Hindustan Motors' aversion to any kind of modification in its basic design has been its undoing. But things might be changing soon for there are plans for an open hood, modern-look version. But those who remember the Ambassador as part of their growing up never tire of singing its praises.

The Ambassador has gone through many ups and downs. The series production began in 1958. In the 1960s, the car underwent a frontal facelift with a closely chequered grill and was named the Ambassador Mark II. In 1975 the same grill and a much bigger frontal facelift was turned out and christened the Mark III. The Mark IV was the last of the "marks". The car was later renamed Ambassador Nova.

The car currently has both 75 bhp petrol engine and a 80 bhp (59.8 kW) Isuzu turbo-charged and inter-cooled diesel engine. It was briefly imported to the United Kingdom in 1993 but the venture was not a commercial success. Despite that, it has again been made available in the UK.

After its long "monopoly", the Ambassador began to run into rough weather by the late 1980s. Sales dropped as the Maruti era dawned. Exports were the only way out. But the success has been limited. Whatever be the ultimate fate of the Ambassador in its several avatars one thing is for sure ~ it is going to be around for a long time to come.

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