

At 65, Amby is still the stud on Indian roads

POWER PACKED The Ambassador, the first car made in India, continues to fascinate Delhiites

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Pooja Dodd draws curious looks on the streets whenever she takes out her Ambassador.

The Delhi-based lawyer's gleaming white car is, at times, allowed entry into city malls by guards without a security check, thanks to its VIP looks. "A lot of people are surprised to see a woman driving an Ambassador. I love my Amby (it has a hot pink interior), its aesthetics, its sturdiness and its retro look," says Dodd who bought the car in 2009.

French national Alex Le Beuan, who runs Shanti Travel in Okhla, expresses similar sentiments about his purple Ambassador: "I have been driving an Ambassador since I came to India nine years back. For me, the Ambassador is an integral part of India experience."

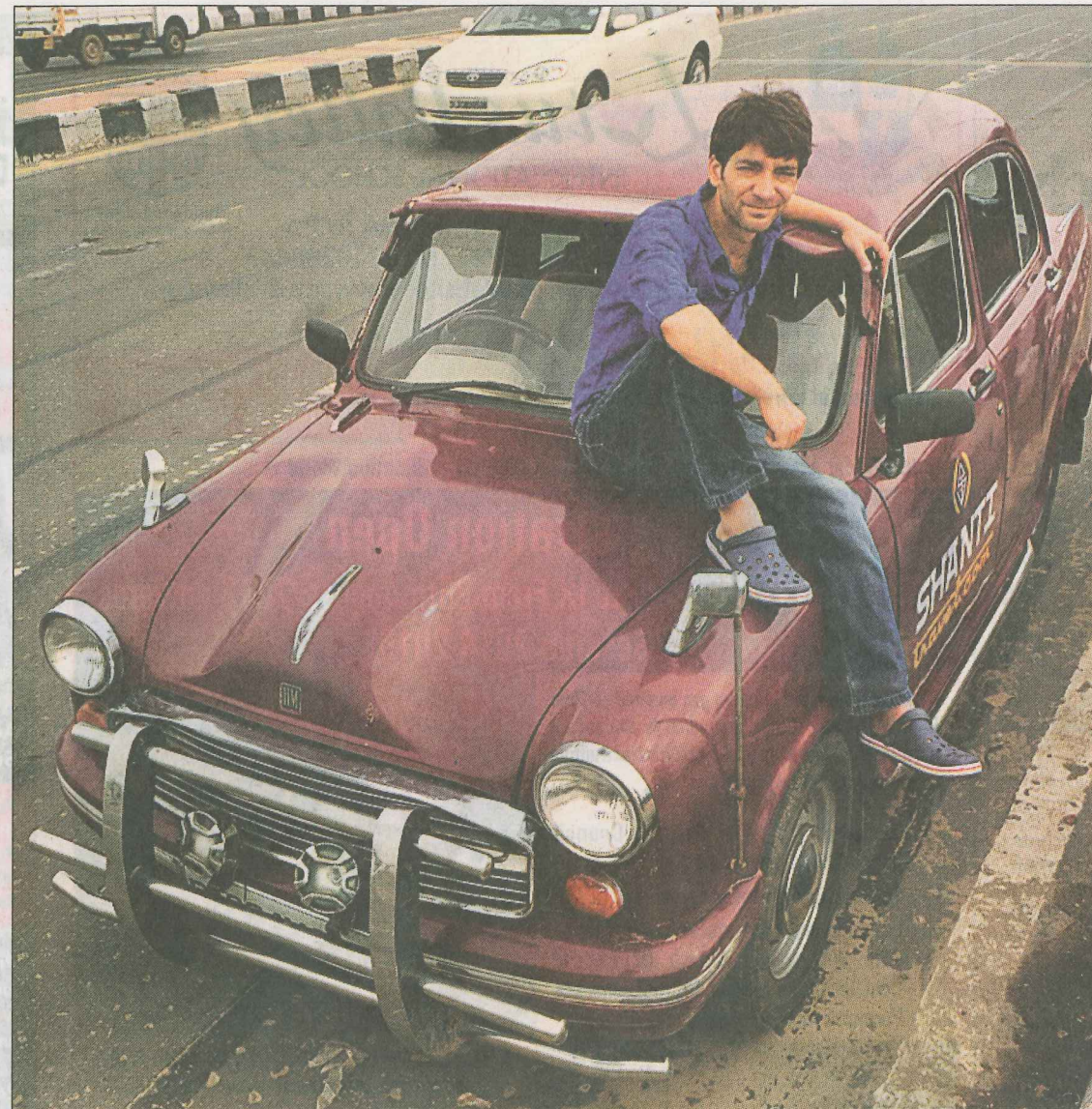
The Capital has many people like Dodd and Alex who swear by their Ambassador cars; there is even an active Ambassador and Landmaster Fans, Aficionados and Owners Club of India on Facebook.

Last month, the Ambassador was

voted world's best taxi by BBC's Top Gear show, which described it as 'virtually indestructible'. The Amby, as it is affectionately called by those who love the car, beat famed rivals such as German E-Class Mercedes Benz, Mexican Volkswagen Beetle, and the famous London black cab, among others.

The first car to be manufactured in India, the Ambassador is perhaps the world's oldest surviving mass-produced car. Based on the Oxford Morris model 10, it first took shape in 1948 as 'Hindustan 10'; the car was rebranded Ambassador in 1958. "Its robust built, high ground elevation, easy maintenance and spacious interiors and boot make it the most suitable car for India. The fact that it managed to race ahead of the world's most formidable and reputed taxis is a matter of pride. Ambassador is indeed real India's real car," says Uttam Bose, managing director, Hindustan Motors (HM), the company that manufactures the car.

Currently, the company manufactures 6,000 Ambassadors every year at its Uttarpara plant in West Bengal — and about 30% is bought by the government. The car's popularity peaked in the 1960s and 70s when the



French national Alex Le Beuan has been driving an Ambassador for nine years now.

HT PHOTOS: VIPIN KUMAR AND MOHD ZAKIR

company produced about 16,000 and 20,000 units, respectively. And at one point, the production hit a figure of 30,000 units annually.

"In those days it was a matter of status to own an Ambassador. It became a favourite with ministers and officialdom because it was the first Made in India car, and hence became a strong national icon. In fact, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru travelled only in an Ambassador and his colleagues took the cue," says Pran Neville, 90, an author and former diplomat. Neville says the car's biggest competitor those days was the Fiat, which was considered 'more handy'. "But the Ambassador, which cost ₹12,000 in the 1960s, enjoyed higher social status."

Delhi-based filmmaker A Ghosh, who owns about 18 Morris (including a 1950 Morris Minor) Landmaster and Ambassador cars, says the car's success lies in its 'reassuring quality'. He should know, after all, he has taken sev-

eral long journeys, including one from Kanyakumari to Delhi — almost 3,500 km — in a 1957 Landmaster.

"We completed the journey without a hitch," says Ghosh, who was recently invited by the UK-based Morris Motors to attend its centenary celebrations at Oxford.

The much-loved Amby has also caught the fancy of artistes, sculptors and fashion designers. Fashion designer Manish Arora gave the Ambassador a vibrant kitschy makeover for a TV show. The car, hand painted by artists, had a dashboard embedded with snazzy Swarovski crystals. "I drove around in this car for my show; it was an attention catcher. Ambassador is timeless and it's the only car I drive," says Arora.

The car has also inspired famous artist-sculptor Subodh Gupta into creating "Doot", his much-talked about life size aluminium cast of an Ambassador.

But while the white Ambassador con-

tinues to find dedicated followers, the number of black and yellow Ambassadors, used as taxis, has been fast declining in Delhi. In 2001, there were about 10,000 of them; only about 4,000 remain today. Now it only gets attention from curious tourists for whom a ride in an Ambassador is an exotic experience. "I have about 20 customers every day, mostly foreigners, who ask a lot of questions about the car and even take pictures," says Rajbir Singh, who has been driving an Ambassador cab in Delhi for the past three decades.

With its most popular model 1.5 litre diesel being certified as BS-IV compliant last month, the company hopes sales will witness a spurt. "We plan to promote the Ambassador in smaller cities where it commands tremendous brand loyalty," says a company spokesperson. Surely, it is not the end of the road for Amby.

THE AMBASSADOR'S JOURNEY SO FAR

Hindustan Motors (HM) was formed in 1942.



1948: HM produced its first car called 'Hindustan 10', which was based on Oxford Morris model.

1950: HM manufactured 'Baby Hindustan', based on Morris Minor, and then 'Hindustan 14', based on Morris 14.

1954: The company produced Hindustan Landmaster, which was also based on the Morris Oxford.

1957: HM rebranded Landmaster as Ambassador after the tool line of the British Morris Oxford Series III was transferred to India. The styling changes included deep headlamp cowls and small rear wing 'tail fins'. The Landmaster's flat-plane two-spoke steering wheel was replaced by a new dished steering wheel.

1963: The car got a frontal facelift and was named Ambassador Mark II.

1960s: HM company produced 16,000 units of Ambassador cars annually.

1975: The car underwent another facelift with a new black dashboard, new tail lights.

1978: The Mark III was launched in standard and deluxe versions.

By 2004: Hindustan Motors had sold four million Ambassadors. It launched The Avigo model the same year.

Today, the Hindustan Motors produces about 6000 cars a year on an average.

Penguin India celebrated its 25th anniversary by customising an Ambassador and painting it orange and white.

PHOTO COURTESY: PENGUIN INDIA

