

We have to thank John Gill for this copy which came from the Times of London on August 12 2010

## The Ambassador Car

—people will remember it with affection—Here is a note about it and the plans for the future with a NEW model

34

### World

# Fresh start for the car that could not keep up with fashion

#### India

Rhys Blakely Mumbai

Part icon, part curio, the Ambassador car has plied India's roads for half a century. It carries dignitaries as an official limousine and the masses as a humble taxi — and the design, modelled on the British Morris Oxford of 1956, has never really changed.

Now the "Amby" — loved for its so-fa-style seats and bulbous bodywork — is to be radically reworked for the first time in an effort to win over the nation's growing middle classes. Hindustan Motors, the manufacturer, says the new model will combine "retro design with cutting-edge engineering". It will cost between 500,000 rupees (£6,800) and 700,000 rupees, will comply with European emissions standards and is expected to be on sale in India by this time next year.

The company will then look to sell it abroad, starting in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. "We would definitely be interested in bringing it to Britain," Manoj Jha, the managing director, told *The Times*. The new car "will look quite different to the current Ambassador", he said. Some engineering, such as the suspension and roomy interior, will be retained, but the revamped model will

have new user-friendly features and a more powerful, more efficient diesel engine. In the 1970s three out of four cars in India were Ambassadors. Critics say the near monopoly meant that the model's shortcomings — dubious construction quality, high fuel consumption and dire handling, to name but a few — were never addressed.

In April this year, the 900 Ambassadors sold accounted for just 0.5 per cent of total sales as buyers opted for nimble, efficient runabouts instead. Last year, Hindustan Motors lost 428.5 million rupees (£6.4 million).

The most expensive Ambassador still comes equipped with curtains to mask VIP passengers and a pole on either wing for hoisting an official flag. In 2002, however, it was spurned by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who became the first Indian Prime Minister to do without one. He chose a BMW instead; a decision emulated by the current Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh. The reason given was that the Ambassador struggled to carry the armour plating required to protect India's leader.

Despite such failings, Hindustan Motors says it plans to continue producing the old car when the new Ambassador is launched. That may be just as well, given how passionately many

Indians feel about it. In May, the news that Hindustan Motors was to be referred to the Board of Industrial and Financial Reconstruction, the government agency that oversees struggling companies, dismayed many.

"The mere thought of the chubby Ambassador trundling into the sunset is akin to Amitabh Bachchan calling it a day due to his advanced years," the *Economic Times*, India's largest financial newspaper, said. "The head may say yes, but the heart would say no!"

Thunderer, page 22

## TODAYS MODEL

Thursday August 12 2010 | THE TIMES

PARTH SANYAL / REUTERS



Sales of the Ambassador, once the king of India's roads, have plunged in recent years but it still has passionate devotees

### Trusted Ambassador

- The Ambassador was the first car to be manufactured in India
- It was created in 1948 and based on the design of the British Morris Oxford series that was manufactured in Cowley, Oxford
- The Ambassador is known affectionately in India as the "Amby" or "The king of Indian roads"
- The Ambassador was India's official state car until 2002
- Many prominent politicians, such as Sonia Gandhi, continue to use the Ambassador
- The Indian Government was once reported to have a fleet of 5,000 of the cars

Source: Hindustan Motors, Times archives





## It makes no sense to relaunch the old Ambassador car

Stephen Bayley

**T**he transmigration of souls and the transfer of technology are two concepts, ancient and modern, that come together magnificently in the 1954 Morris Oxford. This was never a car that made notable concessions to automobile art nor to imaginative technology, but, reincarnated in India, as the Hindustan Ambassador, it has acquired a sort of religious status. Hindu theology and an Abingdon production line come together in a bizarre affirmation of shared values.

The Ambassador was a car whose design and performance fell a little short of the promise of its grandiose name. Still, it became one of the Imperium's most enduring gifts to its senior colony. My own first visit to India was bookended by Ambassador experiences, as many have been.

We were met by an official at the airport, dressed in a uniform that would have humbled a Mogul emperor, all panaches and campaign ribbons and lustrous strappings.

We stepped into the Ambassador's shiny vinyl interior, a slippery aubergine bench smelling vaguely of poppadoms. Within twenty-five yards of the exit, the car expired in a hiss of steam from a burst hose and the shriek of a fan belt slipping on a hot, dry pulley. But the great thing about the old Amby was that it could be mended by an ambitious tinker possessed only of a hammer and a screwdriver and a belief in the afterlife. As indeed, was the case with our official car.

The Ambassador suited lazy old India fine. Once, on an aircraft, my

## Reigate solicitors no longer want them – nor Indian consumers

Gujarati host reached to adjust the air nozzle and the entire overhead locker collapsed in a daze of fibreglass shreds, birds' nests and burnt wiring. "Ah," he said with Brahmin restraint, "we do not live in a maintenance culture." The Amby was that version of India, all cheerful improvisation and charming muddle.

But now there is a new psychological and practical reality, which requires a new version of the Ambassador. The call has gone out for overseas designers to give it a makeover. Just as Reigate solicitors no longer want such a car, nor do Indian consumers. Never mind that Tata now owns Jaguar and Land Rover (and that those names will eventually appear on Indian-made products — 40 years after "Morris" went the way of all metal). A new Amby, gussied up by European "consultants", might be a brief *succès de curiosité* among the ironic crowd, but it makes no more real sense than relaunching the Vickers Viscount or the Mallard or steamships.

India is already making the most significant car of the new century: the £1,000 Tata Nano. If we are going to have any transmigration of technology, it now needs to be from East to West. Souls we can worry about later.