

Preserving India's history on wheels

► Diljeet Titus owns more than 80 vintage and classic cars, which are displayed in a free museum near New Delhi. Neelima Pathak gets a front-seat look at some of his favourites

As a boy Diljeet Titus thought cars, not money, grew on trees. He would plant dinky cars in his garden in Delhi, India, hoping they would grow into life-size versions. Now, more than 40 years later he is a successful lawyer who, at last count, owns 82 priceless automobiles – including several that were once owned by maharajas. They are displayed in the Pro Bono Publico Museum for vintage and classic cars in Mehrauli on the outskirts of New Delhi. It is the largest collection of vintage and classic cars in an Indian museum, with free entry for visitors.

Of course, planting toy cars under trees as a child didn't bear fruit, but his passion for cars remained. "I was so enamoured by cars that I was sure the toys I planted would blossom into trees laden with them," says the multimillionaire vintage car lover, whose collection has earned him a mention in several respected publications including *Forbes*.

Founder and managing partner of Titus & Co, a legal consulting firm that has clients including 48 Fortune 500 corporations, 46-year-old Diljeet is hugely successful. Although he has a busy professional schedule, he stays connected to his cars and makes it a point to visit the museum almost every day.

One of the cars in his collection that takes centre stage is the Belgian Minerva Type AL. Built in 1933 – only eight of them exist in the world today. "This is the only such car you will ever get to see in the whole of Asia," says Diljeet proudly, gently brushing a speck of dust off the car's bonnet. "It was owned by Raja Mohammad Amir Ahmad Khan of Mohamadabad in Uttar Pradesh. Just 33 of these exquisite cars were produced and only eight are known to exist today." One is owned by the King of Belgium, six by private collectors in the United States and Diljeet owns the eighth. "The car features gold-plated instrument bezels and switches," he says, walking around the museum he set up. "Anybody who is interested in cars or history can come by and enjoy these beauties."

India's love affair with automobiles is more than a century old. "The first car was imported

in 1901 by industrialist Jamshedji Tata and in the years that followed, maharajas and nawabs acquired some of the finest cars in the world including Rolls-Royces, Bentleys and Jaguars," says Diljeet.

But while the maharajas settled for maybe three or four vehicles, Diljeet has no desire to restrict the number of cars he owns.

"My endeavour is to keep the heritage of these vintage and classic beauties alive as they have been part of royalty," he says.

Diljeet grew up with Ambassadors, Fiats and Standard Heralds at home. "My grandparents owned Chevrolets and Austins and I began driving cars inside our compound at the age of 11," he recalls.

"But since I couldn't drive on the roads, I used to spend my free time cleaning cars at home or accompanying the drivers when they took them to the garages for servicing or repairs. I wasn't hugely interested in the Ambassadors and Fiats, but I loved the classics like the Packards, Cadillacs and Rolls-Royces."

Growing up, Diljeet followed in his grandfather's footsteps and earned a degree in Law before joining Singhania & Co in Delhi where he worked from 1989 until early 1997.

Realising his dream

However, keen to set up a law firm of his own, he and four of his friends set up Titus & Co in 1997 and it is now considered one of the leading firms in the country. Diljeet was named one of Asia's best lawyers for two consecutive years (2002 and 2003) by Asia Law, a website that provides news and analysis for the legal community in the Asia-Pacific region.

His legal practice became so successful that in just two years he was able to start realising his dream of collecting vintage cars.

"The cars manufactured from 1919 until the end of 1939 are generally called 'vintage' cars while cars made between 1940 and 1969 fall under the 'classics' category," he explains, lovingly caressing a 1948 Austin A-40, which his grandmother gave him. "She knew I was very fond of this car and she gave it to me in 1999."