

GOOD CARMA // It's not just goodbye to a car but a worldview that cherished the homemade, the local and the domestic

Janice Pariat

How sad and bad and mad it was — but then, how it was sweet
— Robert Browning

With the news that Hindustan Motors (HM) has suspended production of the Ambassador, India heaved a collective nostalgic sigh. After all, this mightily rotund tank of a car has been around forever (1957 is forever), taking up much space on our mostly narrow, potholed roads. And for those of us old enough to remember our pre-liberalization days, the beloved 'Amby' is slotted with Things From Childhood — NP chewing gum, Chitrahaar, Disney Hour, VHS tapes, Tinkle comics, Bournvita, and Thums Up. Items endowed with mystical weight, bearing the insignia of youth, of sepia-tinted memory, of simpler, more innocent times. Naturally, we feel a tug of loss.

Pragmatists will point out the inevitability of the situation, of course. The Amby's a fuel-guzzling monster, they'll say, with high maintenance costs

and little technological and design changes over the decades. What chance does it stand against the infinitely snazzier vehicular options of today? Look at the odds: 'Aggressive appearance with Furia design philosophy' versus 'chubby'. (I'm tempted to buy a fat Ambassador, so in a few years, when it turns into a collector's item, I can sweep grandly past these 'philosophical Furia' cars, and chortle wickedly.) Or there's 'New fascia with larger kidney grille, sporty front bumpers and Xenon headlights' versus 'stays intact, mostly'.

And yet, as Proust reminds us, remembrance of things past is not necessarily the remembrance of things as they were. So while I may not be able to tell you the price of fuel in 1988, I recall clambering into the Amby and feeling as though I was stepping into a ship. While I probably didn't change a tyre, or tinker with the engine, I remember my cousins and I sitting atop my Uncle Darryl's grey Ambassador, playing pirates. (Until we dented the curved ceiling almost all the way through. Let's just say he wasn't pleased.)

My dad owned a string of Ambassadors, from 1978 to 1989 — leaf green, off white, grey,

HAPPY DAYS: Pariat's grandfather sits at the wheel in Assam in the late 1970s



What chance does it stand against the infinitely snazzier vehicular options of today? Look at the odds: 'Aggressive appearance with Furia design philosophy' versus 'chubby'

where in West Bengal, but a worldview that also cherishes the homemade, the local, the domestic. That looks for ways to stem the onslaught of capitalistic consumerism. That seeks alternatives. This is about so much more than just a car.

Admittedly I haven't gathered a vast number of Amby memories; by the time I was old enough in the 1990s, dad had switched to a Contessa (remember those?), and the Gypsy (these could cross river beds, I swear), and eventually something by Maruti. But, to pay a tribute, we rummaged through ancient albums and found photographs in which our old faithful stands aside like a beloved part of the family. In these images, my parents will always be young, my elder sister knee-high, my aunt and uncle forever twenty-something, my grandfather alive and smiling, donning his favourite flat cap, the Ambassador quietly gleaming in the sun. All living is loss, yet how much greater the depletion when the hopes of our memories also drop away.

I hope what HM say is true, that they've merely "suspended production", and might return. Until then, let's raise a glass to our old friend.

The writer grew up in Shillong and various parts of Assam. She blogs at www.janicepariat.com



An Ambytious Ride

The iconic Ambassador might have hit a stop sign but these devoted fans refuse to let the Grand Old Lady retire to the great junkyard in the sky

CAR TROUBLE

► Based on Britain's Morris Oxford, the Ambassador became India's only domestically produced passenger car in 1958. It was hailed as proof that Indian industry could perform on its own

► Heydays were the '70s when it had 70% of the car market and a long waiting list. The other 30% belonged to the Premier Padmini

► It was the preferred car of both netas and babus with some even saying that India has been governed from the back of an Ambassador

► Economic reforms of the '90s brought in competition and the middle class ditched its rounded silhouette and bumpy ride for sleeker, smoother cars

► HM tried to upgrade by introducing features like airconditioning and power steering but there was no serious attempt at improving technology

► Continued to function as a taxi in some cities. Last year, Top Gear, a British TV show, labelled it the world's best taxi, beating the classic black cabs of London and the iconic yellow cabs of New York

► Production, which at its peak was 24,000 units, plummeted to five a day in the last week

Emotional car and owner

Rudra Sen answers questions about his age with the statement — I am as old as my car. He finds it very difficult to talk about his life without talking about his car. The 55-year-old advertising and photography professional grew up around Ambassadors. The first was his father's "office car" bought in 1964, and the other that Sen bought — a Mark II (1959) model in 1984 — for Rs 20,000. "The seat comfort was enhanced by 'Dunlopillo' foam. Till date, it's rear seat is the best in terms of comfort," says Sen.

Sen had bought the car in Kolkata, but it was only when he moved to Bangalore in 1991 and found a good Amby mechanic that he overhauled the car. "Apart from my initial Rs 20,000 for the car, I paid another Rs 60,000 to get a Contessa to strip for parts," says Sen laughing. The car got a new suspension, dashboard, bucket seats with lumbar support, among many other changes. Sen's Amby is undergoing another complete overhaul in a different Bangalore workshop that he swears by. His current mechanic, Gopal even builds half-eaten Amby doors by hand. Says Sen, "You can't compare it with any other car. The Amby is prehistoric. It has no concept of safety. It will take double the time to get anywhere and is a very emotional car, doesn't like to be pushed. But in spite of all that it has a charm which is irresistible."

Sen has already spent Rs 3,50,000 on the second overhaul and will spend another Rs 2,00,000. His family has given up talking him out of his Amby obsession. "From a practical point of view, of course it is stupid. If I were smart, I would probably sell it as junk," says Sen, who has driven it over more than 3,50,000 kms.

But he can't because this is the car whose sturdy roof has supported his tripod on photography assignments and even been a second home when he couldn't afford a hotel room. And then, of course, there is the pride and the Amby swag. He says, "People ask me questions at traffic signals. People stare at it at parking lots. Once in Coimbatore, somebody offered me a princely sum for it but I took one look back at my baby and told him sorry."



TWO FOR ONE: Sen bought a Contessa for Rs 60,000 and stripped it so that he could restore his Rs 20,000 Amby

—Padmaparna Ghosh

Dolled up for the drive

Partner in a law firm, Pooja Dodd's attire is a sombre black and brown. But a scarlet rose stitched on to her tunic offsets the monochrome. Her personal style is reflected in her car as well. She owns a standard white Ambassador Classic 1800 but its interiors are resplendent with kitschy trimmings, gilt accessories and plastic gewgaws.

As a child, she recalls, she always saw her parents driving Ambassador cars. So when she had to pick a car five years ago she was very clear what she wanted. "I wanted something which had a strong character and commanded respect," says the 40-year-old advocate. "I was very excited, it was like a childhood dream come true." Dodd is, in fact, keen to book another Amby before it vanishes from the market.

Dodd enjoyed adding the dramatic flourishes to her car. The car doors are lined with rexine upholstery in

matte gold to set off the magenta net curtains embellished with sequin booties that also find their way to the car seat covers and headrest. Other accessories include a mounted fan (also matte gold), plastic flower vine that drapes the dashboard and various pop collectibles — a stuffed heart, a tiny macramé doll and red wooden flower cut-outs that dangle from the roof in the car's interior. "I dressed it up to make it even more distinctive," says Dodd who sports John Lennon-style vintage sunglasses.

Decorating the car didn't cost her much, and she never tinkered with its mechanics. Her driver Surinder shares her passion for the car and contributes to her fun collection. "He got me these vintage mud flaps from Old Delhi for a neat bargain," says Dodd, who now wants to install rear-view mirrors on the bonnet as older models of the car often did.

—Shobita Dhar

Piyal Bhattacharjee



CO-PASSENGERS: Dodd's driver shares her passion for the car



WHEELS IN MOTION: Chandrakant Birla, chairman of Hindustan Motors, gave Chatterjee a workshop manual to help him with restoration

Love me, love my car

Dr Anjan Chatterjee had never dreamt that BYJ 276 would be his. It is a 1955 Landmaster that has driven around the likes of Drs Homi Babha, Raja Ramanna, both chairmen of Atomic Energy Commission, and classical singer Bal Gandharva. "In fact, when important cases came up, DN Sheorey, the then Advocate General of Central Provinces and Berar State, liked to be driven to court in this car, because it was lucky for him. In 2003, the day Balamukund Kamathikar sold the car to me, he was so sad that he couldn't eat," says the Nagpur-based Chatterjee. Kamathikar was the son of Rai Bahadur Laxminarayan, whose largesse in 1935, had helped set up the Nagpur University. The original owners of the car were key personalities in Nagpur and also the few with a car at the time. When VIPs visited, they would often drive them around.

Chatterjee had to work hard on the car but he got some esteemed help from Chandrakant Birla, chairman of Hindustan Motors. "He sent me a 350-page photocopied workshop manual. The car, modeled on the Morris Oxford Series II, is more than 90% British. Only a hundred odd of them may still be roadworthy today," says Chatterjee, 58, a scientist with the Geological Survey of India. Over the years, he has become a member of various vintage car clubs and in 2012, he also started a fan page on Facebook, which now has more than 2,000 fans.

Chatterjee says the car is ideal for DIY enthusiasts. "Under the hood, I am often pleasantly surprised to see "Made in England" tags on many components that have served tirelessly for 59 years. Most of its components are repairable, which is a boon as spares are not easy to come by."

The die-hard Amby fan recalls an anecdote from a 1999 vintage car rally where a rallyist quipped, "Most of us know our cars better than our wives. The cars have been with us longer and have simpler mechanisms than our better halves." Since then, Chatterjee believes that one can have two wives — one at home and the "Lady in Black" in the garage.

—Padmaparna Ghosh

Why the Dilip Kumar-Madhubala love story had a sad ending

The giddy romance and bitter break-up between Dilip Kumar and Madhubala is now Bollywood legend. In his soon-to-be released autobiography, the actor talks of the real reasons behind their very public split

Was I in love with Madhubala as the newspapers and magazines reported at that time? As an answer to that oft-repeated question straight from the horse's mouth, I must admit that I was attracted to her both as a fine co-star and as a person who had some of the attributes I hoped to find in a woman at that age and time. We had viewers admiring our pairing in Tarana and our working relationship was warm and cordial. She, as I said earlier, was very sprightly and vivacious and, as such, she could draw me out of my shyness and reticence effortlessly. She filled a void that was crying out to be filled — not by an intellectually sharp woman but a spirited woman whose liveliness and charm were the ideal panacea for the wound that was taking its own time to heal.

The announcement of our pairing in Mughal-e-Azam made sensational news in the early 1950s because of the rumours about our emotional involvement. In fact, K Asif (the film's director) was ecstatic with the wide publicity and trade enquiries he got from the announcement. It was not anticipated or planned that it would be in production for such a long period as it was and Asif was aware of Madhu's feelings for me



SENSUOUS ON SCREEN: The couple were barely talking to each other when some of the most memorable love scenes of Mughal-e-Azam were being shot

because she had confided in him during one of their intimate talks. And, he was equally aware of my nature as a man who made no haste in taking critical personal or professional decisions. As was his wont, he took it upon himself to act as the catalyst and went to the extent of encouraging her in vain to pin me down somehow. He went on to advise her that the best way to draw a commitment from an honourable and principled Pathan, brought up on old-world values, was to draw him into physical intimacy.

In retrospect, I feel he did what any selfish director would have done for his own gain of creating riveting screen chemistry between actors who are known to be emotionally involved. Also, I sensed Asif was seriously trying to mend the situation for her when matters began to sour between us, thanks to her father's attempt to make the proposed marriage a business venture. The outcome was that half way through the production of Mughal-e-Azam, we were not even talking to each other. The classic scene with the feather coming between our lips, which set a million imaginations on fire, was shot when we had completely stopped even greeting each other. It should, in all fairness, go down in the annals of film history as a tribute to the artistry of two professionally committed actors who kept aside personal differ-

REAL TO REEL

Many of the thespian's memorable scenes were slices from his life

► In Yash Chopra's Mashaal (1984), there is a heart-wrenching scene in which Dilip Kumar's character is shown standing on a road desperately looking for some help to take his very ill wife (Waheeda Rehman) to a hospital. But she dies in his arms, no vehicle willing to stop on the quiet night street. Dilip Kumar says the scene was a straight replay of his father's panic when his mother had a near fatal asthma attack.

► As a youngster, he spent many years in the hill town of Deolali in Maharashtra. Once, squatting in the kitchen of their gardener he heard a dialect of Hindi which, he says, fascinated him. This was actually Bhojpuri, though he didn't know that at the time. "It sounded fascinating and there was a vivid expressiveness about it while conveying raw emotions," he recalls. His Gunga Jumna is noted for its authentic use of Bhojpuri and the actor says the film came from his long ambition to work the magic of the dialect into a story on screen.

► Portrayed as a brooding tragic hero, Dilip Kumar was actually quite athletic. In Sagina Mahato, one of his later critically acclaimed films, there is a sequence where the character feeling claustrophobic in an office takes off on a sprint alongside a speeding train. "When I suggested the scene to Tapanda, he liked the idea very much. He looked at me and asked me in his quiet manner if I could wait for a double to be arranged for the run. He stared at me in disbelief when I told him I would do the sprint myself." The shot was done in one take.



ALWAYS GAME: Dilip Kumar (with actor Mukri, left) was a keen sportsman

ences and fulfilled the director's vision of a sensitive, arresting and sensuous screen moment to perfection.

Contrary to popular notions, her father, Ataullah Khan, was not opposed to her

marrying me. He had his own production company and he was only too glad to have two stars under the same roof. Had I not seen the whole business from my own point of view, it would have been just what he wanted, that is, Dilip Kumar and Mad-

hubala holding hands and singing duets in his productions till the end of our careers. When I learned about his plans from Madhu, I explained to both of them that I had my own way of functioning and selecting projects and I would not show any laxity even if it were my own production house. It must have tilted the apple cart for him and he successfully convinced Madhu that I was being rude and presumptuous. I told her in all sincerity and honesty that I did not mean any offence and it was in her interest and mine as artistes to keep our professional options away from any personal considerations. She was naturally inclined to agree with her father and she persisted in trying to convince me that it would all be sorted out once we married. My instincts, however, predicted a situation in which I would be trapped and all the hard work and dedication I had invested in my career would be blown away by a hapless surrender to someone else's dictates and strategies. I had many upfront discussions with her father and she, not surprisingly, remained neutral and un-moved by my dilemma. The scenario was not very pleasant and it was heading inevitably to a dead end. In the circumstances, therefore, it seemed best that we did not decide to marry or even give each other a chance to rethink because my resolve by then had become strongly against a union that would not be good for either of us.

Excerpted from 'Dilip Kumar: The Substance and the Shadow' with permissions from Hay House India and Penguin Books India