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60 years on, the Premier Padmini continues to charm

Elegant and beautiful, the car was named after the fictitious 14th century Rajput princess who also went by the name Padmavati



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Photo: Deepak Gopinath

In India, chances are your first car memory ever was inside the cavernous interiors of a [Hindustan Motors Ambassador](#). Or a Premier Padmini. Or a Maruti Suzuki 800. While these cars may have fallen out of favour now, in this three-part series we look at how these three cars first got generations of Indians on the road. We will tell their stories, both good and bad, through very personal memories of them.

This was as "sporty" as you could get back in the day in a country where almost every car on the road was a matronly-looking Hindustan Ambassador. And to be fair, the Fiat 1100D, that eventually became the incredibly popular Premier Padmini, did have sporty Italian provenance. Descended from the positively dolce vita Fiat 1200 GranLuce Berlin, right from its earliest avatar in India, the Millecento (with suicide doors, no less), the car right away appealed to the younger people and those young of heart. And Bombay taxi drivers, of course.



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The Fiat 1100 first came to India in the early 1950 as the Millecento and that is when Colonel Deepak Gopinath's father bought in to this Italian sensation. "My father was in the military too and we travelled all around the country with him," Gopinath says. "And everywhere we went, we went in that little car. We all piled in to the Millecento, the whole family and the pet dog, with our luggage in the roof carrier." The car is a near constant feature in all their family travel photographs – sometimes it is in the backdrop, other times its bug-eyed face is very much one of the smiling subjects being photographed.



In 1982, DR Sivram pushed his Padmini to the limit at the Himalayan Rally. Photos: DR Sivram

He recalls trips to Calcutta (now Kolkata), Lucknow and Raebareilly and watching his father working on the car, on the rare occasion when it broke down in the middle of nowhere. "It is mechanically so simple. You learnt to work with it and do any kind of repair and maintenance work," says the retired Indian Army engineer. Gopinath's father died in 2003 and left him his beloved black 1952 Fiat Millecento and he has painstakingly kept the car going all these years. Today the car and Gopinath are the same age and both are in fine nick. He takes it out every few days and works on it whenever any minor issues develop. The only reason it isn't a daily driver is on account of the heavy steering. "And the suicide doors, while cool to look at, aren't the most convenient way to get in and out of the front seat," he says.

The car evolved over the years, its rounded shape flattening out to create a more chiselled silhouette with the characteristic tail fins that survived till the very end of its production run. The Millecento evolved in to the 1100 Elegant which then became the Select and the Super Select models. And then came the Fiat 1100 D (D for Delight). In the 1970s the Mumbai-based manufacturer, Indian Premier Automobiles Limited, started making the cars here and it was rebadged the Premier Padmini. It was named after the fictitious 14th century Rajput princess who also went by the name Padmavati and was famed to be incredibly beautiful and elegant, just like the car. Except the car was real.

Over the years the modest four-cylinder engines rose and dropped in capacity from 1,100cc up to 1,400cc and put out anywhere between 42 and 48hp that you could use to coax the car up to 140km/h. And this is in the 60s and 70s!

DR Shivram, coffee planter, rally driver and auto enthusiast made full use of the Padmini's sporty credentials. While a lifelong fan of the Hindustan Ambassador, he has fond memories of pushing his Premier Padmini to the limit in the 1982 Himalayan Rally. "We drove the car for days, on gravel, snow, and the car did everything we asked of it, without breaking a sweat," he says. "It was the kind of car you would go in to battle with knowing it wouldn't let you down."

Vivek Ganamukhi, a car lover and healthcare entrepreneur remembers the day two men from factory in Mumbai drove his family's brand-new sky blue Premier to Bangalore. The year was 1975 and having a brand new car parked in the driveway of their family home was hugely exciting for a young Vivek. "I even learnt to drive in the car. No one taught me or anything; I just used to watch my dad drive when he took us around town, going to Cubbon Park, driving down MG Road, trips to Mysore Palace for Dussehra." As Ganamukhi watched his father step on the clutch and shift in to first on the steering column mounted gear shift, the engine made that a low whine. "When I drive it today, the engine still has that same note and the memory brings a smile to my face," he says.



Vivek Ganamukhi got the Premier Padmini from his father and wants to pass it on to the next generation. However, he's holding on to it for as long as he can drive. Photo: Vivek Ganamukhi

One night when his family was fast asleep, he decided to test his knowledge. "I found the car keys and snuck out for a drive in the middle of the night and it was the best 45-minutes ever," he recalls. As he struggled with the clutch and gear on his short drive, he fell in love with the car and those fond feelings mean that he has never quite been able to pass the car, on to the next generation as he would like to pass it on to my next generation but I am holding on to it for as long as I can drive."

In its various guises, as a cab or a vehicle for rally; powered by engines, both petrol, diesel and now, CNG; as the Millecento, Fiat 1100 and Premier Padmini, this car has been a reassuring presence on streets and highways around India for generations. While production ceased in 1998, the once ubiquitous car can even now occasionally be spotted on the streets. And who can resist that friendly face, with the wide grille and those cheery headlight eyes?