



India Ink

Notes on the World's Largest Democracy

In Images: A History of Premier Automobiles

BY DAVID SHAFTEL DECEMBER 31, 2012 7:29 AM 3



Kuni Takahashi for The New York Times A Premier Padmini taxi in Mumbai, in this Dec. 8, 2012 file photo.

The black and yellow [Padmini taxi](#) is as identifiable with Mumbai as the Volkswagen Beetle taxi in Mexico City or the once ubiquitous Checker cab in New York. Alternately loathed and romanticized, the Padmini — or some version of it — was produced in Mumbai from 1964 to 2000 by Premier Automobiles. It became a favorite of taxi drivers in the 1970s because it was cheaper, easier to drive and more maneuverable than the tank-like Hindustan Ambassador, its main competition in Bombay, as the city was known then. For the individual motorist, it was attainable and passed for sporty in a tightly controlled automotive industry.

In 2008, the Maharashtra state government announced that taxis older than 25 years old were to be phased out, signaling the start of the Padmini's demise. At its peak in the 1990s, there were some 58,000 Padmini taxis plying the streets of Mumbai; today there are only around 9,000. The cabbies who drive them say they are cheap and easy to maintain and that they could stay on the roads forever. Most customers, however, prefer to ride in the newer, more modern cabs. But while the rickety and cramped Padmini will not likely be mourned by commuters, private collectors are becoming increasingly interested in them.



Fiat car, top right, and Dodge car, bottom left.



Courtesy of Premier Automobiles

In the 1940s, Bombay-based Premier Automobiles Ltd (PAL) made Dodge cars and trucks as part of a deal with the American automaker Chrysler. After Independence, large American cars were seen by the socialist-leaning government as decadent, according to Maitreya Doshi, Premier's current managing director. So in 1952, PAL entered a joint venture to produce the more modest Fiat cars, like the 500 model, pictured in this image from a PAL annual report.



Courtesy of Premier Automobiles An award-winning Fiat 500, with Bombay license plates.



Courtesy of Premier Automobiles The Fiat 1100D produced by Premier.

The Fiat 1100D produced by Premier was essentially the same car as the Italian version that launched in 1962. Few changes were made to the design of the Indian version that still patrols the streets of Mumbai.

In 1972 the car was indigenized and the joint venture with Fiat was not renewed. For the 1973 model year it became the Premier President. In the 1970s Premier exported cars to Mauritius, as pictured here in this photo from a PAL annual report. Premier also exported cars to Dubai in the 1980s. "There were also stray exports to Latin America, Indonesia, Africa and Nepal in the 60s and 70s," said Maitreya Doshi, Premier's managing director.



Courtesy of Premier Automobiles Premier's cars being exported to Mauritius in the 1970s.

In 1974, when an officious bureaucrat objected to the name "President," the car became the "Padmini," named after a 14th century Rajput princess. Many Mumbai residents still call it a "Fiat." The one pictured here is a Deluxe B-E model from the late 1980s, which featured chrome bumpers and hubcaps.



Courtesy of Premier Automobiles A Padmini Deluxe 'B-E' model from the late 1980s.

The Padmini's main competition was the Hindustan Ambassador, a large, bulbous car that still signifies power and officialdom. The Padmini was marketed as more aspirational, reflected in the slogans used to advertise it.



Courtesy of Premier Automobiles An advertisement for Padmini cars from the 1970s.

Before economic liberalization in 1991, the automotive industry was tightly regulated, so Premier wasn't allowed to implement too many improvements to the Padmini. Instead, it trumpeted the ones that it could make, such as the "stylish polyurethane steering wheel" and "ignition-cum-steering lock."

As the automotive industry evolved slowly in the 1980s and then quickly in the 1990s, the Padmini remained a constant until production ceased in 2000.



Courtesy of Premier Automobiles The Premier 118NE launched in 1985.

In 1985, Premier launched the 118NE, as part of a joint venture with Peugeot. It was modeled on a Fiat 124. Production was stopped in 1999 after Peugeot abandoned the joint venture, says Premier Managing Director Maitreya Doshi. The Fiat 124 was also the model for the Russian Lada.



Courtesy of Premier Automobiles Rio, a compact SUV, launched by Premier in 2012.

Premier re-entered the car market with the launch of the Rio, a compact SUV, in 2012.