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Death of Mumbai's Padmini Taxi

By *Shreya Shah*

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RAFIQ MAQBOOL/ASSOCIATED PRESS A taxi driver waited for passengers in his Premier Padmini taxi in Mumbai, Aug. 1.

Black and yellow Premier Padmini taxis are a familiar sight on Mumbai's streets, but soon there might be few of these cars left.

The Mumbai government passed a law in April that said only Premier Padminis under 20-years-old could run as taxis from August. The Regional Transport Office said old taxis pollute the streets of Mumbai, and because they are old, they are not as luxurious and comfortable for passengers.

Premier Automobiles, the company that made the Premier Padmini, stopped producing the car in 2000. The company has since changed its name to Premier Ltd. Many taxis, with their colorful interiors, are nearing the 20-year mark. By the end of next July, at least half of the 9,000 Premiers Padminis on the road will disappear, according to A.L. Quadros, head of the Mumbai Taximen's Association. They will all be gone before the end of this decade if the government doesn't enact new legislation.

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SHREYA SHAH/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL Hariram Puddam with the taxi he has been driving for the last 19 years.

On Sept. 23, 1994, Hariram Puddam bought a Premier Padmini for 175,000 rupees (\$2,900) after taking a loan from a bank. He garlanded the car, took it to Mahalaxmi temple in south Mumbai and prayed. Since then, the car has been his steady companion, the 53-year-old says, adding that the vehicle is stronger than newer cars which, according to him, would get crushed in a small accident.

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"There is no taxi like this one," he said. "But soon I will have to sell it as junk." Mr. Puddam thinks he will get around 20,000-22,000 rupees for the car.

The number of Premier Padminis has been declining for some time. In 1997, all of the 62,300 taxis in Mumbai were Premier Padminis. Today, they account for only 9,000 of the 42,000 taxis in the city, Mr. Quadros said.

"Passengers prefer newer cars like the Santro now," said Ashok Yadav, who drove a Premier Padmini for seven years before switching to a Hyundai Santro.

"It is good these taxis are being phased out," added Mumbai resident Zahir Ladhahoy.

"They are rickety and they are slower than the new taxis," the 70-year-old said. He prefers to take a Santro or Maruti WagonR taxi, he said.

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Before the Premier Padmini, Mumbai's taxis came from the Hillman Motor Car Co. Ltd. and Austin Motors. Both cars were imported and spare parts were difficult to find, Mr. Quadros said.

In 1954, Premier Automobiles introduced the Fiat 1100 to the Indian market and 14 years later started producing the car. It became the car of choice for taxi drivers in Mumbai because it was economical, strong, had more luggage space, and could be easily repaired at small roadside mechanic shops, taxi drivers said. At the time, the car cost 10,700 rupees, according to Mr. Quadros.

The car was originally called the Fiat 1100 Delight. In 1965, its name was changed to Premier President and it became the Premier Padmini in 1974, named after the princess of the town of Chittor in the western Indian state of Rajasthan, according to Premier Ltd.

A spokeswoman for Premier Ltd. said 10%-20% of the Premier Padminis produced were used as taxis from the 1970s. But in the later years manufacturing the car wasn't profitable, she said.

"The government should now give heritage status to this vehicle," Mr. Quadros says.