



a carrier for the anti-tank recoilless rifle," says Gurugram-based Anil Singhroha, who retired as colonel from the Mahar Regiment. As a newly-commissioned officer in 1994, he first learned to drive on the Jonga.

The Jonga's story begins in 1960, when Nissan introduced a new four-wheel drive vehicle. Nissan called it P60, for Petrol 60. In 1963-64, the P60 was inducted in the Indian Army, which also took over its production and gave it a name — the Jonga, an acronym for Jabalpur Ordnance and Gun Carriage Assembly after the Vehicle Factory Jabalpur, the facility tasked with building it.

A combination of factors made the Jonga a force to reckon with: it was minimalistic; had high ground clearance (222 mm) which meant it could negotiate treacherous terrain with relative ease; and it was quick to achieve peak power (at 3,800 rpm) and peak torque (at 1,800 rpm). "It had the same powerful engine as the army's one-tonne truck. No rally vehicle can give you the same feeling of power and invincibility as the Jonga," says Singhroha.

The Jonga served the army for over three decades, joining soldiers on the frontline during the 1965 and 1971 wars with Pakistan. But its production ceased in 1999. Capable as the vehicle was, it gave only about 4 km per litre. In its last years, the Army brought out its diesel version for the open market, but only about 100 units sold. Eventually, the Jongsas were auctioned, sold to scrap dealers or simply junked.

As the dusts of time settled on it, this legend of the army was forgotten. But there are some who have taken it upon themselves to blow that dust off it. Jaswinder Singh Dosanjh from Nakodar in Punjab's Jalandhar district is one of them. Proprietor of automobile store SD Car World, Dosanjh has restored and modified dozens of Jongsas. His obsessive search for original parts takes him to Ambala, which has a large cantonment, and Mayapuri, Delhi's sprawling auto market. Restoring a Jonga can take up to two months and cost up to ₹850,000, if the person is also buying the vehicle from him. Modification costs can amount to ₹1.2 million.

Dosanjh never paints the Jonga in the Indian Army's olive green and instead opts for the US military colours (beige). He has also restored one in metallic black and another in red, and added power windows, power steering and sunroof on demand.

SD Offroaders, the club Dosanjh started in 2013, has six members who take their Jongsas out once a week, weather permitting, and go off-roading. If they have the time, they head to Dudhwa National Park in Uttar Pradesh, Corbett National Park in Uttarakhand or to the ephemeral streams of Hoshiarpur in Punjab. "The Jonga demands respect and responsibility, so these off-roading expeditions follow strict rules — no racing, no drinking and no disturbing nature and wildlife," says Dosanjh.

Jalandhar resident Ashwinder Pal Singh, who grew up longing for a Jonga, today owns two. Ask him if he worries about its low mileage and he laughs: "Mileage has no meaning when the game's about passion." Like most Jonga enthusiasts, he, too, amasses spare parts, buying them from wherever he can find them.

Years ago, a reviewer who had taken Nambiar's Jonga for a drive wrote: "Compared to the Jonga, these new-fangled SUVs look like wimps." For any other vehicle, this would have been an excessive declaration. But for the Jonga, it is a matter of fact.



(Clockwise from above) Abhilash Nambiar with his restored 1977 model Jonga; Jongsas restored by Jaswinder Singh Dosanjh; Ashwinder Pal Singh on an off-roading expedition

JONGA JUNKIES

A forgotten warrior of the Indian Army has a cult following today, writes **Veenu Sandhu**

One morning in 2007, Abhilash Nambiar was rummaging through a junkyard in Mumbai for Jeep spare parts when his eyes fell on a rusty vehicle in military colours parked in a corner. Could it really be the Jonga — the rugged warhorse of the Indian Army which he had only seen pictures of until that moment? It was.

The Mumbai resident spent the next nine hours convincing the scrap dealer to sell it to him, arranging for the tidy sum the man demanded, and then transporting the vehicle to the garage of his trusted mechanic in Thane. The next year passed in getting the 1977 model Jonga road-ready. Spare parts were extremely hard to come by as was expertise on how to restore the beast. Over the months, friends, acquaintances and strangers from as far as Chennai, Hyderabad and Kolkata offered advice and original parts. The day the engine cranked up, Nambiar rushed to the garage to witness the momentous event and drive the 4x4 for the first time. Though the army had retired it long ago, the old warrior was far from done. Ten years later, Nambiar, now 43, still swears by it.

There is a reason the Jonga incites such passion. "The Jonga was the Indian Army's unique and one of the last built-to-a-purpose vehicles. It served as a personnel carrier, an ambulance, a reconnaissance vehicle and also as



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JASWINDER SINGH DOSANJH
Proprietor, SD Car World