

Business Standard

Dinesh Mohan: Lessons from the Volkswagen tangle

Volkswagen's discomfiture is being lapped up gleefully in India because it shows corruption elsewhere - but exposing something similar in India would be impossible

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Everyone around the world was astonished when the newspapers announced that the Germany-based car company Volkswagen had installed a cheating device in millions of their cars that would help pass US emissions tests but pollute much more when driven on the road. However, this is not the first time that auto manufacturers around the world have cheated on their customers knowingly and wilfully.

- The engine mount used on 1965 to 1969 full-size Chevys could potentially collapse at speed and cause accidents. The manufacturers hid this from the public until they were caught through an investigation.
- As many as 900 people died as a result of the Ford Pinto catching fire in rear-end accidents. Ford had known about the defect before the car even went to production. The magazine *Mother Jones* did an expose in 1977 and by 1978, the public outcry was so strong that Ford reluctantly recalled 1.5 million Pintos.
- In 2012 Toyota admitted that it misled the public, and recalled 9.3 million vehicles worldwide. The defect: unintended acceleration in several Toyota and Lexus models.
- In 2014 GM finally decided to issue 2.6 million recalls for the Cobalt and the nearly identical Pontiac G5 because of a faulty ignition switch that can shut off the engines without warning and cause crashes. GM knew about the defective part as early as 2004 but found that it would be too costly to fix.
- The Takata airbag recall involved 10 of the world's biggest automakers and at least 17 million cars sold around the world. An expose in *The New York Times* alleged that both Takata and Honda knew about the potentially fatal flaw as early as 2004, but failed to report their findings. Takata built airbags that could be affected by moisture and deploy with excess force, causing potentially fatal injuries.

Volkswagen and other manufacturers have shown how easy and tempting it can be for car manufacturers to rig the safety and pollution controls on vehicles to cheat the system. Therefore, it is very important for us to learn from these histories and try and set up systems in India that help us mature into a safer and cleaner road-using society. The existing and proposed laboratories and committees in India will not be

able to do the job.

It is interesting that Volkswagen was not caught by US government agencies but by a team led by John German, who is Senior Fellow with the International Council on Clean Transportation (ICCT, an NGO) and Arvind Thiruvengadam, a research assistant professor at West Virginia University. Mr German has over three decades of technical experience with auto companies and writing regulations for the US' Environment Protection Agency's Office of Mobile Sources' laboratory. Mr Thiruvengadam and his colleagues manage a laboratory that has equipment that can be placed in the trunk of a car and measure pollutants while the car is running on the road. Mr German and his group were actually trying to prove exactly what Volkswagen has been claiming for years: that diesel is clean. But Mr Thiruvengadam tested two VW cars and found that the claims of low emissions were just not right. Since the initial objective of the tests was not to catch VW but to get good data, they double-checked their methodology and did the tests repeatedly, and only when they were satisfied did they submit their results to the Environmental Protection Agency.

There is quite a bit to learn from here. First, the government's safety and pollution control agencies must be staffed by professionals who are world-class technically in all fields of interest to that organisation, and not controlled by committees that are dominated by industry employees. Otherwise government agencies cannot respond professionally and honestly when issues of such magnitude come to their notice. Secondly, there have to be researchers outside of industry, and government departments who are scientifically competent, independent, and have the means to conduct research that requires sophisticated equipment and resources. The latter can only happen when the independent researchers' jobs are reasonably secure, and they get support from multiple sources. It is certainly not possible where independent individuals and organisations work under an atmosphere in which those critical of big industry and government can be threatened and harmed.

At present government regulatory organisations in India are bereft of outstanding expertise and no one in these organisations can claim to be respected for their knowledge and accomplishments worldwide. This is why we are not able to respond in a reasoned, evidence-based manner to problems of safety and pollution confronting us. The VW cars charged with cheating in the US will pass all our tests. In any case, it does not matter, because we do not sell fuel of the same standard all over the country. If you buy a Bharat-4 car in Delhi and take it to a small town in India, you will have to fill it with inferior fuel. This fuel will poison the catalytic converters of the car and increase its emissions and defeat the Bharat-4 norms. If we want cleaner air we have to sell the cleanest fuel possible everywhere in the country - and then force the manufacturers to sell the cleanest Bharat-6 cars. Selling clean fuel will reduce pollution from all other engines like generators, bulldozers and other construction equipment also.

If a Thiruvengadam existed in an IIT he would also have tested the CNG cars and buses running in Delhi. I am sure he would be as excited with the results in Delhi as he was in Morgantown. This is because theory tells us that CNG, like diesel, also burns at higher temperatures than petrol and would produce more NOx. These gases are not dependent on the constituents of the fuel used but the temperature at which combustion takes place. The higher the temperature, the greater the propensity of oxygen and nitrogen in the air to combine and produce NOx. But we carry on happily, taking delight in other's findings and ignoring our backyard.

The VW imbroglio is being lapped up gleefully in India because it shows others to be corrupt also. But we must remember that it is unlikely that such an expose could happen in India. If nothing else, this should wake us up to set up many independent centres of research and take a new look at the proposed Motor Vehicles Act to make provisions for establishing an independent research agency that takes care of safety and emission standards in a scientific and unbiased manner.

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