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Nano at the 9th Auto Expo, Delhi

'Worry about public transport not the Nano'

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New Delhi

THE high voltage launch of the Nano at the auto show in Delhi prompted unprecedented public interest in the cute personal car for a base price of just Rs 1 lakh and the Indian engineering prowess at Tata Motors that had made it possible. The oohs and aahs were, however, also interspersed by a note of caution sounded by environmentalists and activists who worried about what the Nano and other small cars like it would do to air pollution levels and congestion in cities. The short answer to these concerns was that the Nano meets advanced emission norms and its entire production will account for only a small part of the demand for personal transport. It would also find buyers in smaller cities where public transport is virtually non-existent.

But even as the debate went on, several questions deserved better focus and clarity. Do we have too many cars on our roads? Do we have enough road space? What is really a cheap car? Will an inexpensive Nano actually mean an explosive increase in car purchases? We spoke to **Dinesh Mohan**, transport expert at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Delhi, for a reasoned and professional view.



Dinesh Mohan

Do you see the Nano and other cheap cars that may follow as inhibiting the development of public transport?

Actually cheap cars are already available in the Indian market. They are called second- hand cars! You can get an air-conditioned car in reasonably good shape for less than Rs 100,000. Second- hand cars are also cheaper on insurance and can be repaired by roadside mechanics. Monthly expenditure on maintaining a car which does about 30 km a day can amount to about Rs 3,500 and monthly payment on the loan Rs 2,500 to Rs 3,000. A middle class family cannot spend more than 15 per cent of its income on transport and so must earn more than Rs 35,000 per month to afford a car. At present only about 30 per cent of families in Delhi earn more than Rs 25,000 per month and less than 20 per cent in smaller cities. Secondly, people earning Rs 30,000 to Rs 40,000 a month live in small flats and don't have much space for parking. Therefore, I don't see a massive explosion in car ownership in India.

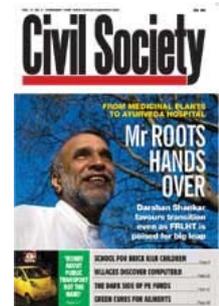
Development and use of public transport is not decided by volume of car production. It is dependent on income, congestion levels, availability of parking, safety of pedestrians and availability of public transport. If you include travel by chartered bus, company bus, Vikrams, tempos, etc., as 'public' transport then more than 60 per cent of motorised trips in all Indian cities is by public transport. This proportion is higher than that experienced by any European or American city! This is mainly owing to our low income levels.

The upper middle class will use public transport only if walking is safe, roads are congested, there is no parking at the destination, use of public transport involves minimum walking and the system is reliable. These issues can only be addressed by government policy. The introduction of the Nano can indirectly affect the development of public transport, as the media diverts attention from mobility and access issues to car ownership. It is quite interesting that when modern low floor buses were introduced in Delhi (these modern buses were much cheaper than foreign imports) it was quite a revolution – the bus design

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changed after 40 years. But the media didn't think it was important, they even questioned whether these buses were suitable for our cities!

The Nano is regarded as a technological marvel. What is your take on its technology?

The team of Tata engineers has to be given credit for taking on a challenge and producing a car that satisfies current emission and safety standards at the price offered. This, in itself, is a major achievement even if you use currently available technologies. Innovations like this encourage young people to think big and create a societal environment where engineers develop confidence to experiment and produce goods that suit our environment and the economy. Unless one knows the details of all the technical components used in the car, it is difficult to say whether it is a marvel. But, I don't think that should be an issue.

Do governments have a role in prompting new technologies?

Governments have a role in prompting new technologies both directly and indirectly. The most important indirect role is what the government does about higher technical education. Unless ordinary people can enter and study in well endowed institutions of excellence very cheaply, there cannot be much technological innovation across the board. Upper class people do not do research or technical innovation. It is the lower middle class, upwardly mobile, intelligent young men and women who take up technical careers and work hard. If education is privatised and made expensive then you don't get these well trained people and nor do you get competent people to take up research and teaching careers. The US is the best example – it allows ordinary people to get educated completely free at the high school level, and then provides very well equipped state universities where they can study without depending on their parent's support. The direct role of the government is in having financial and fiscal policies to encourage desirable investments and discourage harmful activity. If the government charges market rates for operation and parking of cars, removes taxes on bus transport, and announces that incentives will be given to states and cities that promote walking, bicycling, bus and taxi use, then we might see innovation in more desirable directions..

Many have voiced fears of deteriorating urban environment. Do you see small cars as such a threat?

If small cars replace larger cars, that would be a positive development for cleaning up the environment. All cars should be levied an annual pollution tax proportionate to the engine size, volume of pollutants and CO2 produced per km of operation. Do we have too many cars or too few roads? It is not easy to regulate the number of cars. But we can regulate the amount of space taken up by roads in the city. International experience suggests that roads always get filled up with vehicles. So the amount of pollution in a city is ultimately proportional to the road space provided. The amount of road space available in Indian cities is similar to that in European cities. For example, London has about the same proportion of land devoted to roads as Delhi, but London has five times the number of cars per capita as that in Delhi. We should not be clamouring for more road space at all. Better management of traffic, road design for safe walking and bicycling and dedicated lanes for buses on arterial roads is the only way forward.

What in your opinion is the reason for the absence of adequate bus systems and other forms of mass public transport in India?

Public transport is not absent in India, as I have mentioned. What is absent is the existence of clean, efficient and reliable systems. This is because there has been very little interest in affordable public transport by the upper middle classes, professionals and the media. The only form of public transit this section of the population focuses on is the metro rail. It is not possible for our cities to provide metro rail facilities for a significant section of the population in the foreseeable future. We have spent about Rs 11,000 crores on the first phase of the metro in Delhi which accounts for about 3 per cent of the trips in Delhi. If you just take the cost of capital alone, this amounts to a subsidy of Rs 35,000 per passenger per year – more than the per-capita income of the country (Rs. 28,000 per year). This is not sustainable, or feasible. But in the process of waiting for this magical solution all other options have been ignored and neglected. Secondly, vast amounts of money are being spent by every city to build flyovers that only benefit motorists, leaving little available for investment in public transport.

Can we use this occasion to ask you what is the status of the HCBS in Delhi?

The first corridor is under construction and operations will start this year. This will be the first arterial road in the country which will provide seamless travel to disabled persons, safe dedicated bicycle and walking lanes and reserved corridors for buses. Car use will become less irritating as friction with buses and slow moving vehicles will be removed. Public transport will become very predictable and swift. Such smooth traffic and reduced conflicts are expected to reduce both pollution and accidents. The government of Delhi has given its approval for the planning and construction of five more corridors.