

The Nano Car, the Common Man and Development

The euphoria over the unveiling of the Tata Nano car was amazing. It is hailed as a triumph of the nation. The claim is that the car for the common man has finally arrived, promising a sort of revolutionary development on the horizon. It would be interesting to look at the claims as well as the development paradigm such claims promote.

The first reality that strikes us is that of the transport situation. Look at this statistic: cars have proved to be the most inefficient, expensive and polluting mode of transport ever invented. In India, they occupy 75 per cent of road space, but meet less than five per cent of the travel demand. Buses, by contrast, use only a mere five per cent of road space but deliver up to 60 percent of commuter trips. Now, look at the Indian roads and the vehicular traffic. While the Indian urban population has increased 4.6 times since 1951, the number of vehicles has risen 158 times. It took India 50 years to reach the three million mark for personal vehicles by 1981. In the next ten years, the number rose by 14 million and in the following decade by 28 million. Between 2001 and 2004 alone, India added 16 million vehicles to those already on its roads.

The consequences on the road are all too obvious. A doubling of the peak traffic volume and a slowing down of the average vehicular speed; slower vehicle movement with higher emissions. In Delhi, it is reported that the average speed of between 20 and 27 kilometres per hour in 1997 declined to 15 kph in 2002 and now it crawls at only 10 kph. In Mumbai, it dropped from 38 kilometres per hour in 1962 to 15-20 kph in 1993. In Chennai, the average speed is 13 kilometres per hour and in Kolkatta, it is just seven kph an hour.

The second major concern is the safety of the low cost car. At a time when safety hazards are increasing, how is the company promising to cut costs? Some of the measures which the public are made aware of like excessive electronic sourcing, eliminating certain of the facilities available in most cars and not keeping in mind the stringent safety measures already practised at the international level are not very reassuring.

The third consideration shatters the argument that the car is for the common man. The purchasing power of the common man in India is still far too low either to buy or maintain a car. Besides, economists point out the subsidies already doled out to make this car: direct subsidies to the tune of 8,500 million rupees and much larger indirect subsidies and concessions to the company. Would such subsidies continue? If they do at what cost and for whose benefit? An innovation in the name of the common man, who could never benefit from it.

These considerations lead us to the development paradigm that is promoted through such highly publicised, undebated innovations and practices. For a developing country and for that matter, even in a developed country, are cars and private modes of transport the priority? Are they the safest, most efficient, affordable and reliable? The answers are definitely negative. The bulk of the population still depends on public transport. Any moves to further privatise transport will inevitably lead to more traffic congestion and pollution. The privileged in the society will have more privileges while the deprived lose even the conveniences they currently have. Most significantly, the state is backing out from its primary duty to promote public transport and this is a major failure of the system.

The one-sided, uncritical and mesmerisingly euphoric reporting over such events does not lead to any meaningful debate over fundamental issues. The fact is that the Nano car will not ease traffic problems, might increase pollution, not maintain its low price and will only succeed in pampering to the consumerist waywardness of an already pampered minority in the country.

Informed debates and advocacy alone can challenge the misguided steps promoted by the state and the market.

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