

And now 'Nano'

Bharat Jhunjhunwala writes :

The automobile has come to represent economic progress as seen in the saying "What is good for General Motors is good for America." Global auto majors have been trying to build a cheap car. The Tatas have beaten them in the race in unveiling the Rs one lac car *Nano*. One reason for the collapse of Indus Valley Civilization was the excessive forest felling. They needed fuel in large quantities to bake the bricks from which they made wonderful houses. But this led to deforestation, floods and to the decline of that greatest civilization of its time. Mankind has made many goods that have been beneficial for the businessmen but harmful for the society. These include the atom bomb, opium and pornography. Indians may meet a similar fate if they do not deal with the *Nano* judiciously.

Nano will make it possible for middle class families to travel in a car instead of a two-wheeler. While dedicating the car to the nation, Ratan Tata explained he was motivated to make this car seeing a family ride a scooter on a rainy day. One child was standing in the front, another squeezed between the parents and third in the lap of mother. Unquestionably such families will get much relief from *Nano*. But the nature has imposed limits to such comforts. The earth has not enough land or oil to make it possible for the six billion people to travel in a car. India's situation is especially precarious. A comfortable 30.9 square km land is available per 1000 population in the United States and 7.4 square km is available in China but only 2.6 square km in India. Scarcity of urban land is already leading to overcrowding. According to World Bank 77 percent urban people in India live more than two-persons per room. This is highest among the 50-odd countries for which data is available. For comparison, Iran has 33 percent people living more than two persons per room, Argentina 19 percent, Russia 7 percent and New Zealand 1 percent. Indian cities are becoming like workers' barracks of the Indus Valley Civilization. India simply does not have land to make roads and parking spaces for a large number of cars.

Presently about 7 lac two-wheelers and 1 lac cars are sold every year in the country. Tatas plan to make 2.5 lac *Nano* every year increasing it to 3.5 lac later.

The consumption of oil will increase much. India like America, has already become dependent upon oil imports to the extent of about 75 percent of its requirements. America's obsession with the car is leading to the collapse of that economy. The same may happen to Indians. Two-wheelers carry the passengers 50-80 km per liter against 20 km by *Nano*. This will lead to huge increase in consumption of oil. The impact on global warming will also be huge. Addressing the Confederation of Indian Industry, R K Pachauri, who received the Nobel Peace prize this year as chief of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, said the small car will be a major threat to environment: "With the coming in of Rs 1 lac car, I am having nightmares, I don't know what will happen then," he said. People of the Indus Valley slept well in pucca houses. But that comfort led to their death. The same can happen with the *Nano*.

Car culture is especially harmful for the poorest people. Philip Goff of University of Oregon argues that scarce public space is converted into roads and parking lots to accommodate cars. Land, on which the poor man slept, sold his vegetables and on which poor children played is handed over to the rich for plying their cars. Under-paths are made to keep the poor pedestrians away from the roads that have been captured by the rich. The subsidy being given by the Government to oil companies to import oil and supply cheap to car owners is paid for, in part, by the poor. Taxes are imposed on match boxes, bicycle tires and rubber chappals to provide cheap oil to the rich. Municipalities are so overburdened with the costs of making flyovers and highways that they have fewer funds left for providing pavements, street lights, drinking water and sanitation in the slums. Police is heavily involved in catching car thieves and has less time to attend to smaller burglaries in the poor areas. In various ways cars transfer resources from the poorest to the rich. *Nano* does the same from poorest to the middle classes. □□□