

'MOTOR MENACE'

a few year ago a Swedish filmmaker made a remarkable documentary in which guerillas in military fatigue were ambushing in-coming cars with a view to immobilising them permanently. A guerilla war against automobiles, not security personnel. The world is overcrowded with motor vehicles. Pollution apart they are essentially ruining the economy which is ignored by the powers that be in almost all developing countries. India is trapped by motor mania and nobody would like to talk when almost every month this brand or that is being floated with a lot of fanfare.

The automobile sector is one of the growth engines of the Indian economy. India is producing a large number of cars today, thanks to growing middle class market pampered by easy car loans from banks. Simultaneously traffic jams have become commonplace in all metros. The purpose of the automobile revolution was to make travel fast and convenient for the users. But the opposite is happening. Time taken in travel is increasing because cars cannot move due to congestion. People are reaching their destination unnerved and uptight because of long hours spent in solitary confinement.

Number of cars sold and petrol burnt in traffic jam is counted as additions to GDP.

The situation is no different in other countries. A webpage on Australia's traffic says : "a hundred years ago it took about one hour to travel from Paramatta to the centre of Sydney by horse and cart. Today it takes longer by car." Data provided by the Bureau of Transport and Regional Economics of Australia show that congestion costs—principally longer travel times—were set to double in Australia by 2020. Professor Matthew A Turner of Department of Economics at the University of Toronto has done a study of the development of the highways system in America. He writes : "In 2001, the average American household spent over two and a half hours (or 161 person-minutes) per day in a car to accomplish travel that required only 147 minutes in 1995. Multiplying by households and working days, we find that US households used about 5 billion more hours in 2001 than in 1995 to accomplish the same amount of routine daily travel."

One suggested solution is to build more roads and flyovers. But number of cars increases and traffic jams come back. Large numbers of fly-overs have been constructed in all metros but traffic jams have continued to increase. Limited amount of land is available in the cities for making roads, flyovers and parking lots but the number of cars that can be produced is almost unlimited. Therefore, the supply of cars increases to match the availability of roads.

The improvements in fuel efficiency have made things worse. The Ambassador car gave an average of 11 km per litre in the seventies. Present day cars give 20 km per litre. This has reduced the cost of car travel. More people are using cars and traffic jams are increasing. The problem will only become worse if an average of 30 km is obtained from the newest models.

The Union Finance Minister has increased the price of petrol and diesel and also tax on large cars in the recent budget. But this does not solve the problem of traffic jams because this burden is like a drop in the ocean for urban car owners.

The incidence on a city dweller driving 2500 km would be about Rs 500 per month. Moreover, this expenditure is mostly tax deductible for professionals and businessmen. The net payment, therefore, is a paltry Rs 350 or so per month.

Expansion of metro and bus services will not help either.

The Hoda Committee constituted by the Planning Commission had suggested in its report of 2006 to impose congestion tax. Other recommendations of the Committee were: (1) Increase in parking fees; (2) Increase in registration charges of cars; and (3) Collection of annual road tax on the basis of size of car or carbon emissions. These recommendations must be implemented. It is self-defeating to secure unreal GDP growth from sale of cars and burning of petrol in traffic jams.

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