

Distress of 'Automobilisation'

It is high time we reversed the processes of "automobilisation", urban sprawl, and uneven development.

Going by the number of visitors thronging the Auto Expo India exhibition, more than two million, and the number of new model launches, 25, the 2010 Delhi auto show was the biggest display on earth of its kind, surpassing its Shanghai counterpart of 2009, at least in the count of fresh specimens set in motion. The government is now aggressively promoting the industry as an "automobile manufacturing hub" serving both the domestic and international markets. Going by the publicity, the combination of low-cost and high-skilled engineering labour bestows India with a "locational advantage", what with the domestic market expanding at a compound annual growth rate of 30%.

A caveat is, however, due. The car is not about to be rendered into the mass-consumption commodity that it became in the United States by 1970 when there were 1.9 people to every car. In India, there are still 110 persons for every car on the road, but yet, traffic congestion and vehicular pollution plague our cities. As between buses and cars, the latter occupy most of the road space, even as they meet the travel requirements of a minority of the cities' residents; the lifetime road tax for a car is, however, a fraction of that for a bus. The car could become a mass-consumption commodity in the US because by 1924 the low-priced model T Ford (launched in 1908) cost the buyer a mere 45% of the US per capita national income. It may come as a disappointment that the Nano is nowhere near that number in India today. But, vehicular traffic has assumed proportions far beyond the capacity of the available roads in most Indian cities. And, an automobile-industrial complex is taking shape, exerting its influence at the political and ideological levels. The upgrading of roads, the construction of flyovers and highways, indeed, even multilane freeways, are underway at breakneck speed with the appointment of one of the most adept political representatives of business as union minister of road transport and highways.

The question however remains as to what brings more than two million persons to Auto Expo India when most of them would not be able to afford the maintenance of a car, even if they were to buy one, agreeing to pay later. Thorstein Veblen, in his *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, first published in 1899, wrote of conspicuous consumption, conspicuous leisure, and pecuniary emulation. With a sizeable market for the luxury ends of the

range of Audis, Bentleys, BMWs, Jaguars, Mercedes Benzes, Porsches, Rolls Royces and Volvos, most of them imported in completely built-up form, these symbols of luxury lifestyles have become instruments of the competitive striving for social distinction and standing. Their public display indicate an individual's commanding position in the society, and they are part of the kit that goes with the sumptuous living, entertaining and travelling of those who constitute the exclusive circles in business, finance, and politics. The rest of the population – the high and mighty do not even consider the poor to be "citizens", so what one is left with is the middle class – exposed day in and day out to an incessant barrage of advertising and page 3 "news" aspire to or dream of a pattern of living and a structure of wants that includes the latest model car, appliances and consumer electronics, designer clothing, and so on. Indeed, these are proof, if proof is required, of one's success, one's worth, for the latter has come to be defined solely in terms of market valuation.

The range of the goods and services the rich command, on the one hand, and the lack of adequate food, clothing, shelter, health and education among the poor, on the other, have become so glaring, so stark in their contrast, at the national and international levels, that the unsustainability of such consumption patterns has inevitably come to the fore, manifested in terms of consequent environmental degradation. The point needs to be made that even if the standards of living of the world's poor are raised to acceptable levels, the problem of environmental degradation will remain. What is required is a drastic contraction of the carbon footprints of the rich, both in the developed and in the developing countries, through a redistribution of income and wealth to the poor, whose carbon footprints are much lower, and over time, a convergence of footprints across classes to levels that make for the sustainability of the planet. What this would entail as far as cars are concerned is a massive contraction of their output and use, with a corresponding huge expansion of public transportation, accompanied by the required changes in urban development and infrastructure.

Tragically, public policy in India is going in the opposite direction, actively promoting the "automobilisation" of the society; together with the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission, what is unfolding is an intensification of urban sprawl and uneven development. Meanwhile, traffic congestion and

