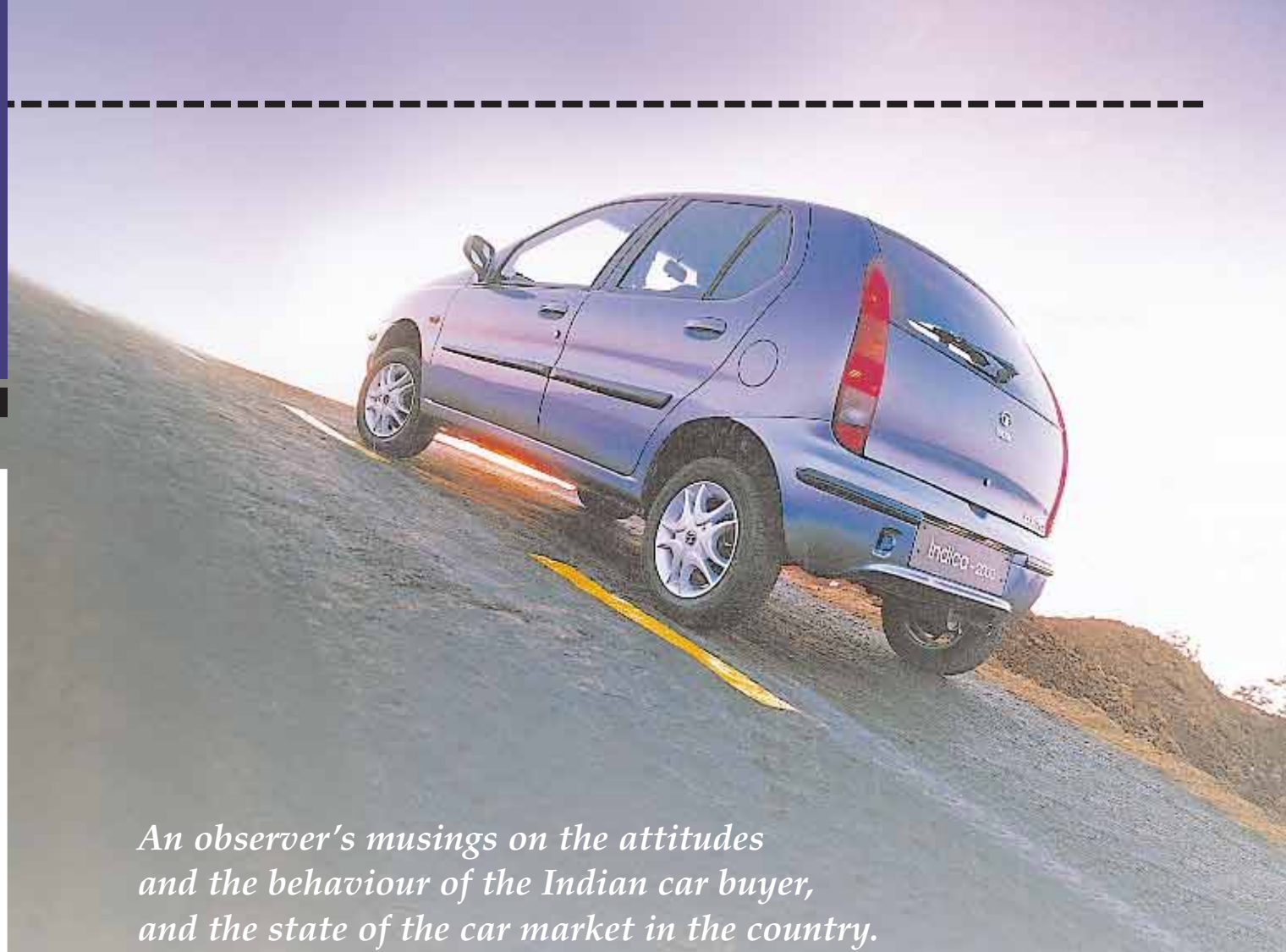
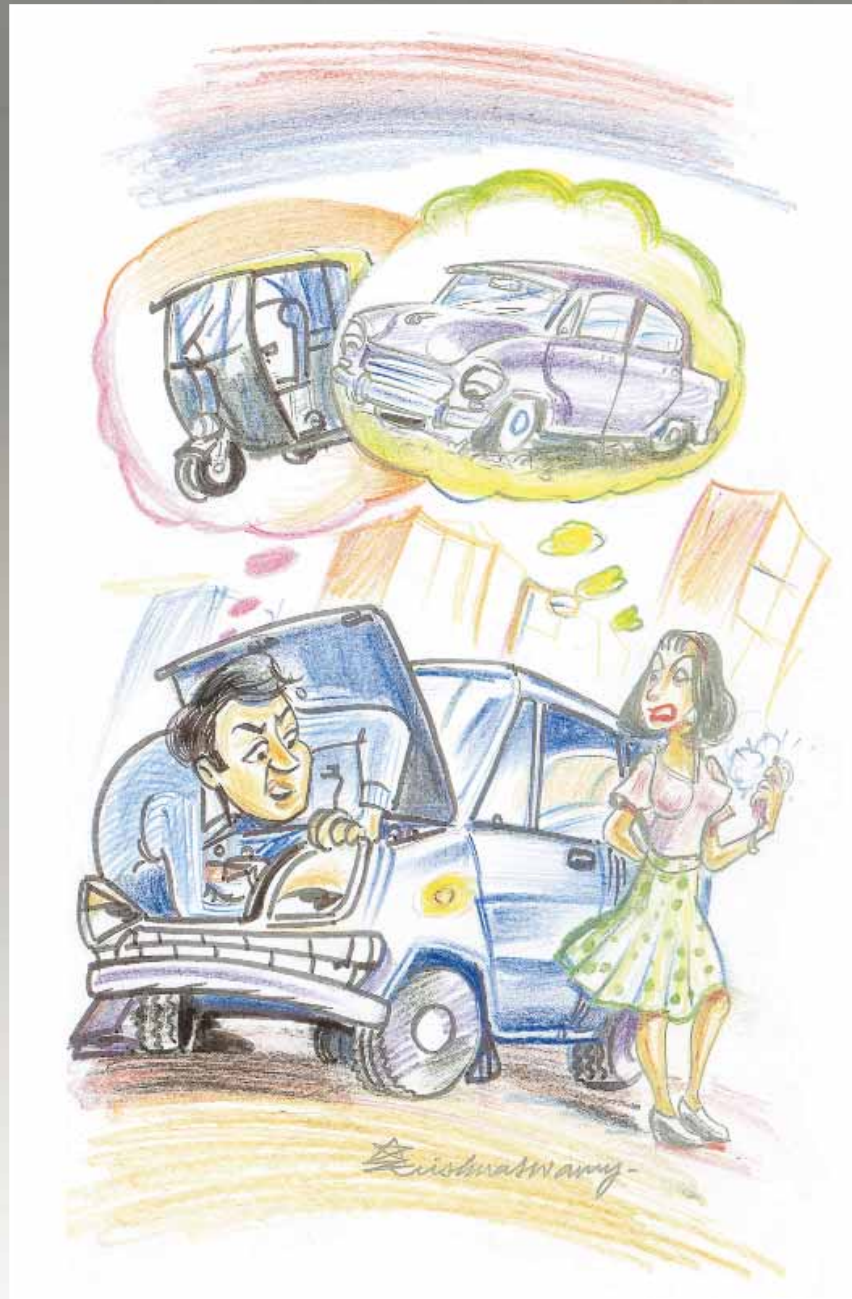


Hmm... and haw... of buying a car

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An observer's musings on the attitudes and the behaviour of the Indian car buyer, and the state of the car market in the country.

AND so you're planning to buy a car. Your first. That's nice. At least, that's what your car *financewallahs* will tell you.

But why? Not why will your car *financewallahs* tell you that it's nice that you're buying a car – that's pretty obvious – but why are you buying a car in the first place? *Why?* What kind of question is that? You're buying a car because... you want to get from point A to point B. Like from your residence to your office. Or, even better, from your office to your residence. *That's why.*

But you can do that using the public transport, can't you? Most big cities and many small towns

have some sort of a public transport system in place these days and, barring random events such as a *bandh* (during which you can't take your car out anyway), you can get around fairly efficiently using the system.

Or, if you're kind of finicky about things, you could buy yourself an autorickshaw. Excellent machines – though Bajaj has got things backwards with its two-wheels-in-the-back, one-in-the-front configuration. (The hottest thing in personal transport design is the two-wheels-in-the-front, one-in-the-back configuration, using tilt wheel technology (TWT).)

And that's not all. An autorickshaw comes with a sticker price

that won't knock you out. Low running and maintenance costs. Easy parking. Enough space for your bitter half and the brats. And your own, brand new, decal-decorated auto will certainly be a 'social' level higher than a two-wheeler scooter and a couple of levels higher than a bus. And as if all that's not enough, you'll also get to make a statement - although it may not be the statement that you want to make.

You don't think it'll fit the bill? I didn't think it would. But we'll come to that later...

At this point, it's pretty clear that you are not planning to buy a car merely in order to move from one place to another. You want to do this in *safety* and in *comfort*. *Aha!* So you're looking to buy an Ambassador. Now there's a *comfortable* car, especially if you do up the interior a bit. And also if you're

lolling around in the rear seat, making life an absolute misery for your driver with contradictory directions, observations on the state of the world and confessions of your indiscretions at last evening's do. And it's a pretty safe car too - generations of bad drivers have travelled all over the place in it and lived to die peacefully in bed.

Well, not really, you say. You're thinking along the lines of buying one of the newer cars. You know, an Alto or a Santro or something like that. Latest technology and all that. But what good is all that technology going to do for you if you're stuck behind a bullock-cart on a narrow road, hoping that a passing cyclist won't take your paint off.

You would have figured out by now that what I'm trying to do here is to show you that *there is*

no such thing as rationality in the purchase of cars.

To an extent, irrationality in car purchases is rooted in your head. To an extent, it is dictated by the market.

According to the Indica Research study of car purchase behaviour in the country, the typical first-time buyer of a car is motivated by the need for self-expression, status considerations and the desire to belong. Sure, you find references to comfort, performance (especially mileage), safety and so on - but that's all they are, mere references. And nobody, but nobody, seems to be inclined to evaluate a car in terms of the efficiency with which it transports you from one place to another *under Indian conditions*. All that I can say is that we, as a society, must be in a pretty sorry shape if we have to buy a car in order to

express ourselves, affirm our status and develop a sense of belonging. The slick sedan school of self-actualisation ...and roll over, Maslow!

Actually, if you stop to think about it, these findings are not surprising in the least. After all, we've traditionally been a sharply-segmented society and all that we've done now is to use cars (and other products such as television sets and clothing accessories and so on) to.... *express ourselves, affirm our status and develop a sense of belonging in a newly segmented society.*

And now for buyer irrationality as a function of the market. The market is far too limited to facilitate a rational choice. And most of the vehicles currently available in it, broken up into appropriate categories, are pretty much like each other. For instance, if you want to buy a muscle rig, you're pretty

much stuck with the Tata and the Mahindra lines which run basically to lemons. The buyer is obviously going to make an irrational choice ('Hey, I like the windscreen wiper!') in this kind of an environment.

I think it is important to stress here that all of the above relates to the virgin buyer (by which I mean a person buying a car for the first time - not a buyer of virgins) and that, as the buyer goes up the ladder to buy a second car, his or her purchase criteria tend to change. This phase shift, as it were, is reflected in the Indica Research study which identifies the 'needs' of the second-time car buyer as performance, quality, functions, after-sales service and performance feedback. The second-time car buyer has 'emotional needs' too - movement up the social ladder, the broadcast of status signals and so

on - but I rather suspect that he or she is much more hard-nosed about the criteria deployed. Which fits in just fine with the common-sense perspective on the situation because a second-time car buyer would have already figured out that you just can't buy caste with a car.

In conclusion, the empirical evidence at hand suggests that the Indian car market (comprising the sellers and the buyers) is essentially an immature one... but that this can be expected to change as time goes along.

Which means that the question that auto manufacturers should be asking the average buyer is: "What do you want to be when you grow up?" ■



Pic: A.Roy Chowdhury