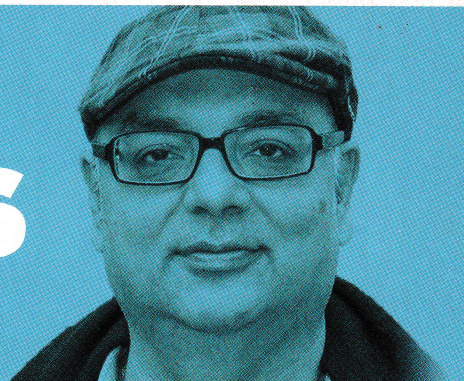


Reflections

by BOB RUPANI



India's new-found affluence has seen the rise of a class of nouveau riche given to displays of crude and loutish behaviour in public

RECENTLY AT A TRAFFIC LIGHT IN MUMBAI, two people sitting in a BMW rolled down their windows and threw out some soft drink cans and other waste. A fellow motorist, who was parked alongside, got out and picked up the trash and told the guys in the BMW that they should not be throwing garbage on the road. The response of the guys in the BMW was to get out and beat up the civic-minded citizen. After which they drove off in their BMW and the bleeding citizen went alone to the police station and filed a complaint.

Normally nothing much would have come out of the beaten up person's complaint, but fortunately the media in Mumbai picked up the matter and it became front page news in several newspapers. The police then went and arrested the two guys who were in the BMW, only for them to be released on bail. When these two youngsters were interviewed by the media, one said, "That chap had no business to tell us what we should or should not do." His friend, the owner of the BMW, was also equally unapologetic and when asked why they had not surrendered to the police, he replied, "When I read in the papers that a complaint had been filed, I considered going to the police station and surrendering. But then I thought the police get paid to do their job, so let them come get me."

I am sure you will agree that the arrogance and attitude of the guys in the BMW is simply unbelievable. This is not the only case; there are many other such cases, especially of road accidents involving expensive cars, caused by youngsters drunk on money and power. In fact, the son of one of India's richest industrialists is also alleged to have crashed his Aston Martin at Peddar Road (the family's world famous residence is in the locality) and abandoned it. Later a driver employed with the family went to the cops and said it was he who was driving it.

There is a very apt phrase for such boys in Hindi, 'bade baap ka bigda hua beta' or 'rich father's spoilt son'. Such boys and their brutish behaviour have always been around. But now you see them far more often and in almost all parts of our country.

If you keep a lookout on our roads, you will notice that most expensive cars are driven somewhat sedately or properly only when the chauffeur is driving it. The moment the owner or his children get behind the wheel, all hell is let loose on the road. Very often these rich and powerful people have bodyguards and police protection and the security personnel usually drive alongside them in powerful SUVs and try to shout and wave people out of the way

of their boss. And God forbid if someone objects to the rash driving (or the throwing of litter). The owners of the expensive car or their security staff will get out and beat up the citizen who dares to complain.

Let me make it clear that I have nothing against expensive luxury cars or sports cars. In fact I love them. But what I find appalling is that a fairly large number of such cars are owned by very badly behaved people. Obviously the car or its manufacturer are not responsible for this. The fault lies with our social structure and the law and order system. Those who have big money, power and high connections consider themselves superior to everyone else. They flaunt their bad manners and give two hoots for the law. Simply because they know that they can get away with.

Interestingly, the media also tends to report accidents involving

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expensive cars in a different manner than those concerning more affordable cars. Rarely will you see reports about a person in a Maruti, Hyundai or Indica ramming into a wall or running over someone. But if the car happens to be an expensive one, you will certainly find its make and price mentioned. What I find even stranger is that the media tends to focus more on accidents involving BMWs. In fact, the hit and run incident where Sanjiv Nanda mowed down six people, including three policemen, with his BMW in 1999 in Delhi, was dubbed the 'BMW case'. In several other cases, it was highlighted that the driver was in a BMW. Why? My guess is that the media associates this German car maker with the rich. But why BMW more than other luxury cars, I have no idea.

It's not just the rich in their expensive cars who behave badly on our roads. Almost all State Transport bus drivers drive in a very aggressive manner with complete disregard for everyone else. Drivers of vehicles like the Tata Sumo, Mahindra Scorpio or Toyota Fortuner too behave and drive very belligerently. It's almost as if the muscle and strength of their vehicles inspires aggressive and offensive behaviour.

I hope Modi's 'acche din' plan includes enforcing driving discipline and adherence to traffic laws on our roads and highways. ❏

Bob Rupani is a pioneering Indian automobile journalist and has edited magazines like Car & Bike International, Auto Motor and Sport (India), BBC Top Gear (India) and Auto India.