

Reflections

by BOB RUPANI



Why has the Tata Nano not been as big a success as Ratan Tata hoped?

I **IN NOVEMBER, I WAS INVITED TO SPEAK AT** the Fourth Mumbai International Literary Festival. I was to talk about my new book 'More Driving Holidays in India' and also converse with Vanessa Able, author of 'The Nanologues', which describes her 10,000 kilometres drive across India in the world's cheapest car, the Nano. The book is very well written with Vanessa's description of her experiences clearly targeted at an international audience. But what struck me was Vanessa's take on why the Tata Nano has not been as big a success as Ratan Tata hoped.

Vanessa says the reason is 'aukaat' or social status and position of a person in Indian society. She apparently met a senior civil servant on her journey and he told her he would never buy a Nano as "It is not appropriate to for me to drive a Nano. It is seen as a poor man's car". This was in 2010, soon after the Nano had been launched. Vanessa also spoke to few more people and concludes in her book, "I wonder if the civil servant's attitude was representative of the upwardly mobile middle class as a whole. Who wants to be seen driving the cheapest car on the market, if you are trying to show yourself as being on the way up?" What's very significant is that these are findings of a foreigner who hardly knows India.

Recently, Ratan Tata also admitted that pitching the Nano as the cheapest car was a mistake and Tata Motors will try and build a new image for it. But why are we talking about all this here, in a magazine that is devoted to the thrill of driving? Well, for one, when the Nano was launched in March 2009 everyone wanted one, even the guys who owned Ferraris and Lambos. In fact when I test drove it I had people following me right to my residence to have a closer look and talk about it! There is another important reason too. What are the biggest global news stories to have emerged from Independent India?

India's Independence in 1947 of course, but this was tinged with the news of partition and communal riots. Next the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, followed by the killing of her son Rajiv Gandhi. Also India's nuclear tests in 1974 and 1998. Then the wars with Pakistan and China. After that the tsunami in 2004 and various other natural and man made calamities. In recent times it's the Nirbhaya rape case that has made international headlines and television news. All negative news.

But when the Tata Nano was shown for the first time at the Auto Expo in Delhi in January 2008, it got featured positively in the media all over the world. Everyone thought it looked cute and attractive despite being the 'world's cheapest car'. And again when

Ratan Tata launched it commercially in Mumbai on March 23, 2009 with the famous words "a promise is a promise", people all over the world (including car makers) sat up and took notice.

The Tata Nano may not have achieved a lot in the Indian market place, but it has certainly been one of the biggest news stories to have gone out of India. And for just this one reason - it deserves to be permanently included in the 'Indian Hall of Fame'.

Tata Motors is trying to change the Nano's image with youth-centric advertising campaigns like 'Sound of Awesomeness'; 'Khushiyon ki Chaabi'; etc. This should have some impact, but the real change could come when Tata makes mechanical changes to enhance the Nano's performance, upgrades the interior and increases the equipment and features.

What may also help is a promotional campaign targeting people who have never even considered buying a car. For example, an advertisement showing a small shop owner driving home in a Nano where his son screams out in surprise, "Baba gadi

The **Tata Nano** has certainly been one of the **biggest news stories** to have gone out of India

kahan se aayee?" Or "Where did the car come from?" The proud father says, "Beta dukan ka kabad bechne se," or "By selling the shop's scrap". Another could show a youngster who normally uses public transport one day driving up to his girlfriend in a Nano. She screams out in delight, "Gadi kahan se aayee?" He proudly says, "Bachchon ko tuition dene se," or "By giving tuitions to small children." Another one could be of a bank clerk driving to work in a Nano. As he is getting out he is surrounded by envious colleagues who ask, "Arre, gadi kahan se aayee?" The proud man says, "Hafta mein do baar overtime karne se," or "By doing overtime twice in a week." And show someone milking a buffalo. Right outside the cattle shed is parked a Nano. A neighbour asks, "Arre bhaiyya, gadi kahan se aayee?" The proud milkman says, "Do aur bhains rakhne se," or "By keeping two more buffaloes." Such campaigns will state that by being enterprising one can buy a car like the Nano, something not even dreamt of earlier. ❧

Bob Rupani is a pioneering Indian automobile journalist and is presently the executive editor of Auto India