

# Reflections

by BOB RUPANI



The cars of a few decades ago inspired their drivers to become well adept at fixing all the things that could - and did - go wrong

**F**OR AN ENTHUSIAST, A CAR IS NOT just about getting from one point to another. It's all about the thrill of driving and going to great places. I have been doing this from an early age and it has always been my endeavour to ensure that 'the pleasures of the journey were in equal ratio to the delights of the destination'.

I started driving in the late 70s, when the choice of cars to go touring in was very limited. All we had were the Ambassador and Fiat. I began by driving an Ambassador and subsequently moved on to Fiats as they were a lot more fun and involving to drive. Back then even brand new vehicles were very basic and largely unreliable. When I bought my first car, I spent the initial few months modifying it and working on its mechanicals. The accessories I fitted included Hella H4 conversion headlights with halogen bulbs, an electric windscreen washer (yes, cars back then did not come equipped with any of this), seat belts, sports steering wheel, powerful horn, map-reading light, reversing light, fog lights, extra brake light, mud flaps, door mirrors, meatier gear knob, tachometer, oil pressure gauge, ampere meter, superior quality imported wiper blades, etc. You also needed to carry a proper tool kit and spares like hose pipes, fan belt, fuses, engine oil, brake oil, locking wire, clamps, etc.

Breakdowns were a regular feature with these cars. The minor glitches you fixed yourself and for major ones you hitched a ride to the nearest town and came back with a mechanic. Drivers of that era also had their own 'jugaad' ways to deal with mechanical problems. If there was a fuel starvation issue (this happened very often in the summer months), you wrapped a wet cloth around the fuel pump and poured water on it. In fact I had a cloth permanently wrapped around the pump. I would also put a waterproof surgical glove around the distributor cap to prevent water getting inside. If you had an external leak from the radiator, you used soap to stem the leak and if it was internal, haldi (turmeric) powder was used to plug the leak. Replacing broken fan belts, hose pipes, etc, were skills one acquired as was cleaning carburettor jets, replacing spark plugs, contact breaker points, etc. One also learnt to set the ignition timing, the contact point gap, idling speed and fuel mixture of the carburettor.

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usually went wrong. The dynamo could fail, the radiator mounting would break or the brake cylinders started leaking. These things were common and you took them as part and parcel of any journey. On drives of over 5,000 kilometres, you could be sure of major breakdowns, like clutch failure, breaking of axles and wheel bearings, leaking of oil seals, blowing of cylinder head gasket, etc. Replacing suspension bushes, tightening of nuts and bolts, cleaning of the carburettor and minor and major tune-ups were things you needed to carry out during the course of any long drive.

We may have often groused and grumbled about the flim-flam nature of automotive engineering then. But it was also a fact that all of this made you get to know your car better and it helped us establish stronger bonds with it.

The cars back then may have had reliability issues, but despite this they took me to all corners of our delightful country and helped me get to know it better. And for sure, most of those drives were usually as much fun as was revelling in the pristine and unspoilt state of most of our destinations. ✕

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.