

# INTERNAL COMBUSTION

BOB RUPANI



**THERE IS NO REASON TO BE UPSET BECAUSE F1 CHAMP LEWIS HAMILTON SAYS WE ARE A POOR COUNTRY AND NEED MORE SCHOOLS AND HOMES**

bob@overdrive.co.in



**R**ecently, Lewis Hamilton who was crowned Formula One Champion for the fifth time said, "I've been to India before, to a race which was strange because India was such a poor place yet we had this massive, beautiful grand prix track made in the middle of nowhere. I felt very conflicted when I went to that grand prix." This upset many of us Indians and triggered off a storm

of critical comments on social media. Some even told Lewis about India's fast growing economy and pointed out that its economy is now the sixth largest in the world. When Lewis learnt he had offended many, he stated, "I noticed some people are upset with my comments on India. My reference was that a grand prix there felt strange to drive past homeless people, and then arrive in a huge arena where money was not an issue. They spent hundreds of millions on a track that is now never used and that money could have been spent on schools or homes for those in need. When we did have the race, nobody came because it was too expensive or there was no interest. However I have met some amazing Indian fans."

Personally, I find nothing wrong in what Lewis said. In fact, if anything, I have a lot more respect for him, because what he said shows that he is a sensitive and thinking person, alive to other people's needs and the shortcomings in their lives. How can anyone deny that despite the growth of the Indian economy, we are still a poor country with millions of homeless people? Malnutrition is yet a problem and the fact is we need a lot more schools, homes, hospitals and what have you. India lags behind the developed nations in numerous areas and a few of the only things we have in excess are people, politicians and their politics, rampant pollution, corruption, etc. Of course, we also don't have a shortage of views and opinions (including some from this writer) and these days, there is also a misplaced growing sense of extreme nationalism and false pride.

Why can't we just accept what Lewis Hamilton said is true? Why do we have to be so touchy? Despite being a hardcore motor racing fan and auto enthusiast, I feel the F1 track was not needed, especially when we still have to develop and establish the lower levels of motorsport in our country. Yes, it's great that we had an Indian F1 GP, but can anyone refute that it lasted just three seasons - from 2011 to 2013. And that we struggled to fill the stands. Did having a F1 GP improve or benefit Indian motorsport in anyway? I surely think not.

Coming to Lewis's comment about feeling conflicted when he came to the

Indian GP and saw the poverty and on the other hand the expensive racetrack, I think it's important to understand the context. I was born here and have lived my entire life in our country, despite this, sometimes I still feel a sense of despair and shame with the way many things are, particularly the inequalities we see around us every day. As a matter of fact, I have been embarrassed so often test driving or touring in expensive cars in our hinterlands, that now I actually try and avoid this. Let me give a few examples. Several years back, I was on the Jaisalmer to Barmer road in a Volkswagen Passat when I stopped at a small fuel station. In our bigger cities, a Passat hardly attracts any attention, but in this not particularly prosperous region, it drew quite a bit of a crowd. A youth asked me what the car cost and if it was mine. About ₹30 lakhs I replied. He quickly called some of his friends. They all wanted to know if a car could cost over two crores of rupees. I cautiously inquired about the reason for their curiosity. Apparently, a big luxury sedan had stopped there a few months before and the driver had bragged it cost ₹2.25 crores! The locals did not believe this was possible. I told them that there were very few such cars. Some started laughing and said please don't joke, who can buy such expensive cars! I just nodded and moved on. Another time I was passing through the interiors of Bihar in a sporty petrol powered luxury sedan. It was a gas-guzzler and while the massive tank was being filled, a small group collected. Around me were two-wheelers that were filling ₹50 worth of petrol and my amount was about ₹10,000! These people also asked what the car cost and if it was mine. They wanted to know what I did and how I could afford it. I just smiled and said I wished it was mine.

I explained that I was simply test driving it and had borrowed the car from its manufacturer, a big auto company. On hearing this, they relaxed and said, "He is just a driver". Someone even patted me on the back and said, "come have a cup of tea with us", which I did. But what if I had been the owner? I am sure they would not have been as welcoming. Even though we are a people who believe in "Karma" and many happily accept their fate, there is still a divide between the rich and poor. 