

INTERNAL COMBUSTION

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MODERN DAY CARS HAVE GOTTEN SO ADVANCED AND COMPLEX THAT YOU CANNOT RELY ON THEM TO TAKE YOU AROUND THE WORLD

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On 19th November, many Tesla owners spread across several countries and continents got locked out of their state-of-the-art electric cars, because of an error on the Tesla mobile app that stopped the owners from connecting with their vehicles! Many owners, who use their phones to enter and start their Tesla cars, took to social media to vent their ire and frustration and in response Tesla chief executive Elon Musk tweeted “Apologies, we will take measures to ensure this doesn’t happen again.”

This is the very first time I have heard of anyone being locked out of their cars due to a glitch in a mobile app that denied owner’s access. This reinforces

my belief that we have begun to rely way too much on technology. Cars today are packed with more computers, chips, sensors and advanced software than was used even in Apollo 11, which took man to the moon!

And going forward, connectivity, software, telecommunication, GPS, radars, and so on, are all going to play a much larger role in vehicles. In fact I am told a lot of work is being done to improve a moving vehicle’s ability to have a constant data connection with a server. But even the best of engineers and most optimistic techno-geeks cannot deny that issues of data connectivity from a moving vehicle, especially while going through things like tunnels, can and will crop up.

Yes, in the very near future, cars will become very dependent on data connection to a server and disruptions in connectivity will not only mean a loss of certain in-car infotainment systems and other functions, but because of the increase in autonomous driving features; malfunctioning software and interruptions in connectivity, could affect the actual driving too.

What intrigues me is this inclination to keep adding more and more advanced features and functions to a car, several of which are seldom used. Manufacturers tell me that features attract customers, particularly in India where buyers apparently prefer fully loaded cars. And while the Covid-19 pandemic has changed mindsets all over the world and made people gravitate towards simple living and minimalism, when it comes to cars, it appears the opposite is true as everyone seems to want more.

As far as I am concerned, I certainly prefer simpler cars with the focus being on good design, driving pleasure and performance, and of course reliability. Honestly, I am no fan of present day modern cars where even to play the music of your choice, you have to touch the screen several times or press and push various buttons, open up menus, select the media source and correct folder, and so on. And doing all this while driving is neither safe nor easy. And each make and model has a different customer interface and dissimilar operating systems to get the same job done.

Let me cite one more example. To keep track of the fuel efficiency, every time one fuelled up earlier, you just pushed a button on the speedometer to

zero the tripmeter. In some lower end cars you can still do this quite easily by pressing a button on the dash or steering wheel. But in higher end cars with advanced digital displays and multi-function screens, for a non-tech savvy person like me, it can be difficult to do something as simple as zeroing the tripmeter. In fact not long ago, I drove a vehicle for an entire week, without being able to figure out how to zero the tripmeter! I guess I was just not smart enough to get the vehicle to reveal its secrets to me.

Recently, I was also speaking to a friend who is planning a round-the-world trip once the pandemic settles. This person knows his cars and understands the requirements of long distance driving and overland journeys very well. He is currently in the process of buying an SUV and preparing it for his dream journey and was discussing his options with me. After a lot of deliberation, what emerged was that the biggest concerns were reliability and ease of repair, especially in less developed countries with a limited network of authorized service centers.

Both of us agreed that modern day SUVs are packed with way too many sophisticated electronics, sensors, software and features, due to which they are not as reliable as vehicles made a couple of decades back. Also in older vehicles if you carry the required spares and a toolkit, they can be fixed by the roadside by most mechanics all over the world. But a modern SUV needs highly trained technicians and complex diagnostic machines and computers to fix them. And obviously a warehouse that stocks the exact spares, sensors, solenoids, etc.

After a long debate it was decided that it would be best if he acquired a used Toyota Land Cruiser or similar SUV, from the 80s or 90s with bare minimum electronics, ECUs, etc. He could then rebuild this SUV with proven performance and reliability from ground up, and prepare it for his dream drive across the globe. Yes, there is definitely no denying that modern day cars have gotten so advanced and complex, that you cannot rely on them to take you around the world. To do this, you need an old fashioned vehicle that has fewer electronics, sensors and computer chips, which makes it more reliable and also easier to repair. 