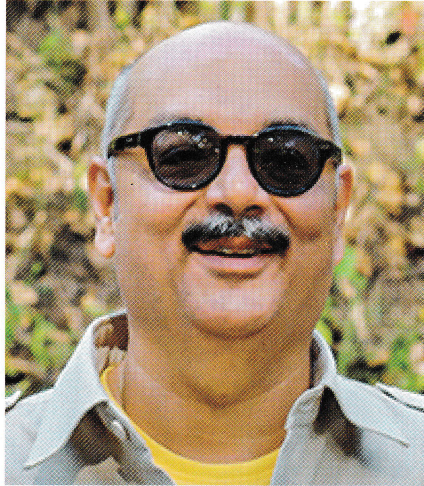


The number of car manufacturers and models available in India has swelled in recent years. Along with this, there has been a large growth in the number of road tests and reviews of vehicles done by self appointed 'auto-experts'.

With the volume of cars increasing in the marketplace, there is definitely a need for reviews as it helps buyers make a more educated choice. But are the thousands of reviews and road tests we see in the print, electronic and social media insightful and credible? I think not. Many basically parrot what is said in a manufacturer's brochure. I am fine with this, because they at least provide information from the correct source. But what is irritating are the underwhelming reports written by unqualified and inexperienced people.

Evaluating a car is serious business—it requires special skills. Sadly in our country, such skilled evaluators are few. And as they are a minority, their insightful and credible reports are often buried under all the trash that is so speedily churned out. I say speedily because there is a race to be the first one to report on a car. First there is a race to tweet your view. Then there is a race to post your view online. After which follows the video. What matters is how quickly you are out there. Because the subject is trending, people look at what is being said, but this does not help them in making a better choice. Simply because judgements are passed in an ad hoc manner without any proper product evaluation procedures. I have been on media test drives where I have even seen some auto journalists sending out their views and reviews just minutes after they have gotten their hands on the car.

A manufacturer invests lots of money, time, talent and energy into building a product. But many Indian auto journalists and bloggers pass judgement on it in an instant. Yes, the one area you can give an instant opinion on is styling, because this is subjective and all you need to do is to look at a vehicle and decide whether you like its looks or not. Of course, it helps if you understand the design philosophy and technical and engineering requirements. But even if you don't, other persons will not be misled because they can look at the vehicle and form their own personal opinion on the styling. But when it comes to things like performance, ride comfort, handling, steering, acceleration, braking, driveability, etc, it's a completely different ball game. The regular buyer turns to those who review products. And as I have said, most reports these days are



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The tribe of those passing judgement on cars has multiplied. But not many possess the skills to carry out a proper product evaluation

unreliable and untrustworthy.

Look at a specific aspect like ride comfort. A manufacturer can set up a car to have a soft ride for comfort or a harder ride that aids sharper handling. For example, if you look at the Hyundai Verna and Honda City, they have a soft ride to soak up the bumps and insulate occupants from deformities in the road. On the other hand, cars like the Volkswagen Vento and Skoda Rapid have a harder edged ride. In these cars, you feel the irregularities more but at higher speeds the body movement is lesser, which results in better stability and handling. So which has the better ride? Can you simply pass judgement and say the Verna has the better ride? No. What is accurate is that at speeds below say 80kmph, the Verna and City offer better ride comfort than the Vento. But once you reach three digit speeds, the Vento is more stable and planted. I would tell a potential buyer, if the driving cycle is largely city-based, go for cars like the City and Verna. But if you do a lot of highway driving, then the Vento or Rapid are more suited for you.

Same is the case with steering assist and feel. Some manufacturers like Maruti, Honda, Mahindra and Mahindra, Hyundai etc, usually offer more assist on the steering. Their steering

is lighter and aids agility and makes it easier and faster to change direction. This is something Indian drivers like as it helps them cut through our chaotic traffic. But when it comes to manufacturers like Ford, Volkswagen, Skoda etc, the steering on their cars requires more effort, which is good at high speeds. So if a potential buyer drives mainly in the city, a car with a lighter steering might be more suitable. But you will find that most car critics are critical of cars with light steering.

Many auto journalists also put a lot of emphasis on 0 to 100 acceleration times. To achieve the best times, one has to push the engine to its rev limit in each gear and then quickly up shift. But most Indian drivers rarely rev their engines hard. They are in the habit of up shifting early. So what matters more to them is driveability and in gear acceleration. This is dependent on the torque of the engine, gear ratios, turbo lag etc. But most journalists only look at 0 to 100 times and then pronounce their judgement on performance. The irony is that the ones who are supposed to shape public opinion, have flawed opinions themselves. They need to do their job in a much better manner because many readers put their faith in them. **DD**