

INTERNAL COMBUSTION

BOB RUPANI



CONCEPT CARS AT THE AUTO EXPO WERE WAY SHORT ON IMAGINATION AND INSPIRATION. MAYBE THE DESIGNERS NEED TO COMPLETELY LET LOOSE THEIR 'MIND'S EYE'

bob@overdrive.co.in



As you can see, this issue and most of the news around us is full of what happened at the Auto Expo. As always much was said and shown at India's premiere auto show that is held every alternate year in Delhi, but the dominant theme was EVs or electric vehicles.

In the past I have written about our transport minister Nitin Gadkari and his aim to make India an exclusive electric vehicle market by 2030. In fact he had even threatened the auto industry saying if they did not make this shift, he would take severe action. This statement of Gadkari was reported extensively in

the media and sparked many debates. Interestingly, at the talks held at the OVERDRIVE Awards (event featured elsewhere in this issue) Nitin Gadkari appeared to hold out an olive branch to the industry. In the presence of the leading lights, he said he was not their enemy and would work closely with the industry to successfully make the shift to electric vehicles. In a moment of self-grandiosity he also said, "In case any of you in the auto industry face any problem, just come to me. I will solve it in 24 hours!" When some of the more bold members in the audience expressed that they were still waiting for the comprehensive 'scrapping policy' the minister had promised some three years back, Gadkari smiled and said, "Oh, I know that is pending. I had cleared it but now it's resting with the GST board members!"

I am sure none of you are surprised by any of this. Our ministers and government are known to talk and promise far more than they ever deliver. Even when transport minister Nitin Gadkari had announced that he would ensure only electric vehicles in India by 2030, I had said this was not practical and would not happen. After hearing Gadkari at the OVERDRIVE Awards, I am completely convinced it will not happen. I have elaborated on the details earlier, but now also see a clear 'weakening' or should I say 'softening' in the minister's stand. Is this because the next Lok Sabha elections are around the corner in 2019 and the Modi Sarkar is not sure of its prospects. Many of us believe that despite the clear majority Prime Minister Modi achieved in 2014, his government has not delivered substantially on its many promises. The opposition says the promised 'acche din' (good days) are still to arrive. Lots of the citizens feel other than announcing several sensible schemes, the ground reality remains the same. We now have many more acronyms like – PMJDY (Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana), PMSSY (Pradhan Mantri Sukanya Samridhi Yojana), PMMY (Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana), PMJJBY (Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana), APY (Atal Pension Yojana) etc. Not to forget - Make in India, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan and what have you. The Modi Sarkar has surely announced many more schemes than any other Indian government before it. But "the times they are a changing", is still not a happening anthem in our country.

Given all this, please let's be realistic. The pollution in our cities and urban centres is not going away anytime soon. Electric vehicles will happen, but it will take lots more time. The government may have announced 2030 as the cut-off year to completely phase out petrol and diesel driven vehicles, but this is unlikely to happen too. And in case the BJP led by Prime Minister Modi fails to retain power in 2019, it's likely that whatever new government is sworn in, will roll back many of the schemes and plans announced by this Modi Sarkar. Yes, while foreign investors, manufacturers and even nations may keep talking about and wanting stability and irreversible long-term policies, this is unlikely to happen in our very own Bharat anytime soon. Simply because, "Oh Darling, Yeh Hai India".

Coming back to the Auto Expo, I must admit that to me this was one of the most lackluster editions. Not only were several auto manufacturers missing, but even the ones that were present, appeared to be just going through the motions. The buzz and excitement we have experienced in the past was just not there. Admittedly, there were few exceptions like Kia Motors that has just entered India. Market leaders like Maruti and Hyundai were of course there in full strength, but still did not show anything one could call path-breaking. Local players like Tata Motors and Mahindra did not display anything spectacular either.

Given what I saw, I cannot help but wonder, if imagination, innovation and out of the box thinking are in seriously short supply. When designers are given the responsibility of making a concept car, I would presume they also have a blank canvas to let their imaginations run wild. But unfortunately most appear to be treading the beaten and cautious path. No wild ideas like streetlights with mini nuclear reactors to remotely charge your vehicle on the move. Imagine you never had to stop and charge your electric vehicle. How cool would that be? Or a vehicle with a multi-dimensional platform and body that can stretch or compress and even changes shapes and structure due to deployable bonnets, roofs, boots, doors, etc. Hi, there is no harm in dreaming. Once you come up with a wild concept, I am sure there are ways and means to make at least a few of the design features reach the production stage. Come on guys, you can surely do better.