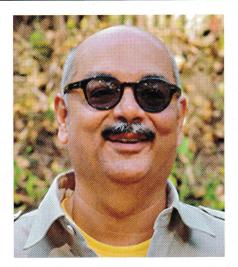Recently the Chinese auto maker Chang'an Automobile Engineering & Research Institute said two of its driverless cars have embarked on a 2000 km test drive. Li Yusheng, engineer-in-chief, said "The vehicles have performed well in uncomplicated road conditions, such as urban driveways and highways, but they still need the help of a driver to navigate them in places like gas stations and toll booths". Tan Benhong, deputy director of the institute said, "We want to improve the vehicles' sensors and processing technology, and then to prepare models for mass production". They hope to have their cars ready by 2018.

Google too has also been working on autonomous self-driving cars for several years and their cars have already covered over 1 million miles without anyone at the wheel. The internet giant is aiming to launch its driverless cars by 2020. Globally, close to two dozen car manufacturers are working on autonomous cars including the likes of Audi, BMW, Ford, Toyota, etc. It is now a given that autonomous cars will be introduced in the near future. Looking at it as an enthusiast, I think it's not a really nice development because cars can be fun to drive. And personally also I love to drive. But when I think like a global citizen, I feel moving towards self driving cars is a welcome move. It will remove the stress of driving in urban traffic. The drivers who will no longer drive shall be able to utilize this time in a much more fruitful manner. I am told by experts that autonomous cars will communicate with each other and so space utilization on the roads will be better and traffic will move along in a more organized manner. I am also informed that these cars will be safer as they will be programmed and trained not to get into accidents. All sorts of state of the art sensors and processors will ensure the car does not dash into another vehicle, human or any other object. They will also be programmed to avoid any sort of skidding or loss of control.

In western countries where people are disciplined and follow rules diligently, it's likely that self-driving cars will work and succeed. But when it comes to India, I have very serious doubts. Ours is possibly the most undisciplined country on the planet. Chaos rules on our roads. Rules and regulations are flagrantly disregarded. We also have the world's second largest population (soon we shall pass China and become the largest) as a result of which we have huge congestion and one has to battle for every centimeter of space. I wonder how

Bob Rupani

bob@overdrive.co.in

Google and others should develop their self-driving cars in India, because our chaotic country will be the ultimate test bed.

self-drive cars will work in such a situation. Let's imagine a scenario where one does go out onto the road. It will need to be programmed to brake constantly, like almost every second to prevent running into someone. But what is someone? In the western world it can mean another car or vehicle, two-wheeler, cyclist, or pedestrian. In India it can mean anything. Three-wheeler, bullock cart, hand cart, cattle, horses, dogs and all sorts of other animals. Plus you have the 'jugaad' vehicles which can be of any shape and size. Then there are other objects, these again can be anything. Boulders, barrels, cans, containers, up rooted trees, construction debris, cow dung, bricks, sticks, garbage, etc. You name it and you can find it on our roads. And what about the roads. In places you will struggle to find them. When you do they will be uneven, broken and decorated with potholes and craters.

In western countries you have separate spaces for vehicles and people. In India, it's a free for all. On pavements meant for pedestrians, yes we do have some, you are sure to find people driving and riding on them. Pavements are also encroached upon by shops, hawkers, temples, graves and what have you. People live on our pavements and roads and bathe, sleep, eat and even make babies there. Anything is possible on our roads. Even what is beyond imagination. How then will self-driving cars work in our country? I will truly be amazed if they do. If Google or the other companies were to test their cars in India, they well might give up the idea of making them. I am sure they will get hit from every direction and the sensors and processors will flame out in no time due to the hyper activity they will be subjected to. If auto makers and companies like Google are committed to making autonomous cars, then they really must develop and test them in our very own Bharat. Now who wants me to say 'jai' here? Okay I will say "Bharat Mata Ki Jai". Jai also to the 1.5 million people who die on our roads annually. Jai to the 4 or 5 million who get injured. Jai to the drivers who drive without any driver training or license. Jai to all the millions who break traffic rules every single day. Jai to those who drink and drive. Jai to those who do drugs and drive. Jai to those who ride without helmets. Jai to those who refuse to wear seatbelts. Jai to our pockmarked and poor roads. Jai to corrupt road contractors and self serving civil servants and politicians. Jai Hind. OD