

INTERNAL COMBUSTION

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SECRET OF THE ALTO BEING INDIA'S BEST SELLING CAR FOR SIXTEEN CONSECUTIVE YEARS

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The Maruti Suzuki Alto was introduced in 2000 and astoundingly for the last 16 years, it's been India's highest selling car! Yes in 2004, just four years after it was introduced, the Alto became India's best selling car. Since then it has ceaselessly held on to its leadership position and over 40 lakh Alto's have been sold till date! This is more than the total cumulative sales of several other vehicle manufacturers. It's a marvelous feat, especially because new models are being continuously introduced and the Indian consumer is evolving and spoilt for choice.

At the time of its launch, the Maruti Suzuki Alto was deemed as the successor of the Maruti 800, India's first modern car that ignited the automobile revolution. The Alto had big shoes to

fill, and there were doubts about it being able to build on the Maruti 800's success. In fact even its creators must never have visualized the kind of success the Alto has now attained. And this achievement is even more laudable because by the time the Alto made its debut; many new manufacturers had already entered India or were in the process of starting operations and offering us their latest products.

Initially, the Hyundai Santro was one of the Alto's biggest rivals. Launched as Hyundai's inaugural car in 1998, it was very modern and one of the first cars in India to be sold with MPFI (multi point fuel injection). Right from 2000 to 2016, when it was discontinued, the Santro was one of the main competitors of the Alto. In 2018, the Santro returned as a completely new model, and began battling the Alto again.

Many other entry level cars including the Chevrolet Spark, Renault Kwid, Datsun Go and Redigo and also the Tata Nano have tried to compete with the Alto, but it has gotten the better of all its competitors. One manufacturer that has always seriously eyed the Alto's enviable position as India's highest selling car is Hyundai, India's second largest car maker. In 2011, it launched its most determined attack to take the Alto's crown by introducing the Eon. The Hyundai Eon was clearly benchmarked against the Alto and designed and engineered to be superior to it in almost all aspects. The Hyundai Eon was specifically made for the Indian market and to compete with the Alto. After its arrival, many of us auto journalists (including this writer) prophesied that the Hyundai Eon would challenge the Alto's dominance and possibly even unseat it and claim the bestseller title. But this did not happen. And while the Maruti Suzuki Alto continues to reign as India's best selling car, the Hyundai Eon is not on sale anymore. The Hyundai Santro which returned in 2018, as a possible replacement of the Eon, has also been unable to make any substantial dent in the Alto's sales figures.

So what is the secret of the Alto's unmatched triumphs? In my opinion one of the biggest factors is that Maruti have never become complacent

and have constantly strived to keep improving the Alto, with each new version raising the benchmark. They have also been very aggressive with the pricing, to the extent that at times Maruti have even lowered it, while introducing new models of the Alto.

Then there is the fuel efficiency. I think this has a direct correlation with the Alto being India's highest selling car for the last 16 years and counting. In all these years the Alto has not just delivered great fuel economy, but has also been amongst India's most fuel efficient cars. Being the highest selling is certainly related to being the most fuel efficient. And what's more, Maruti have kept improving on the fuel efficiency of the Alto. In 2005 it was 17.6kpl, 18.1 kpl (2008), 19.7 kpl (2010), 22.3 kpl (2013) and 24.7 kpl in 2016.

Crucially, the fuel efficiency has never come at the cost of performance. Drive some of the Alto's rivals and you get the feeling the engine is being choked and starved of fuel to deliver better economy. But Alto's have always been peppy and youthfully responsive to the demands of your right foot. One of Maruti's strengths is how it sets up its engines and matches them to the gear ratios. They understand Indian driving conditions and customer preferences very well, and even the 800 cc Alto, conveys the impression of being a sprint champ waiting to get off the blocks.

I believe it's not that important how quickly you get from 0 to 100 kmph, but how it feels getting there. And Maruti makes it feel good, even in cars with small capacity engines like the Alto. The fact that the Alto is one of the lightest cars around, also aids its performance.

Other ingredients of this success formula are the reliability and low cost of maintenance. I feel the advertising has played a vital role too. The Alto has never been promoted as a cheap or entry level car and Maruti has actually made it aspirational. Most of the advertisements show the Alto being taken on long drives on lovely roads. The tag lines are also inspiring. "Chalte Rahen Shaan Se" or keep moving in style. "Toh Chalein Kya" or should we go. And "Let's Go Alto". It's due to all these elements that the Alto is India's highest selling car. 