

# It's time to wean Delhi off expanding its fleet of cars

METRO MATTERS



SHIVANI SINGH

Launching his new SUV in Pune last week, Mahindra Group chairman Anand Mahindra cautioned the auto industry about the potential threat posed by taxi-hailing apps. He was worried that these apps were giving alternative transportation options to young people who might stop buying cars.

Unlike most cities in the world, Delhi still doesn't allow flagging down a cab but, as Mahindra reckons, both app-based and radio taxis are quickly filling up the gap between a privately-owned car and the patchy public transport system in the capital.

Compared to the previous year, the number of taxis registered in Delhi rose by 6% in 2014-15. Priced reasonably, these air-conditioned vehicles fitted with reliable fare meters are available in most locations. In terms of convenience, comfort and safety, they are a big improvement over the elusive kaali-peeli taxis and the overcharging, reckless three-wheelers.

What's more, young people find them cool.

To keep their products moving, manufacturers like Mahindra, of course, bank on people's aspiration for owning cars. The figures should not worry the industry just yet. The domestic passenger car sales went up by six per cent in August as compared with the corresponding period last year. Between 2014 and 2015, Delhi added 165,316 cars and jeeps to its already massive fleet.

A car is still a symbol of status and upward mobility. Easy loans fuels this dream. In the absence of a well-oiled, integrated public transport system, owning a car is also a necessity for many in Delhi. But keeping a car is also becoming a liability. Rising maintenance and fuel cost is one constraint. Then one has to buy garage space and find parking slots daily.

There are 8.8 million vehicles registered in Delhi. In most housing complexes in Delhi and NCR, garage space for a car cost anything between ₹1.5-2.5 lakh. Parking con-



■ There are 8.8 million vehicles registered in Delhi and parking them consumes 8-10% of Capital's urban land. ARVIND YADAV/ HT

sumes 8-10% of urban land in Delhi and most legal and illegal spots get taken early in the day. It is not unusual for people to add 10-15 minutes, for finding a parking space, to their commuting time. For those driving to multiple locations, losing at least an hour daily just to park and get the car out of crammed parking lots is a routine.

In Delhi, we seem to have already surpassed the Marchetti's constant. Developed by Italian physicist Cesare Marchetti, it says that commuters don't budget more than approximately one hour of travel time for getting to work.

For similar reasons, in a number of cities in the developed countries, the distance travelled per person in a private car, that peaked at some point, is now falling.

According to a 2012 report by Frontier Group and US PIRG Education Fund, the average annual number of vehicle miles travelled by young people (16 to 34-year-olds) in the United States — the car capital of the world — decreased from 10,300 miles to 7,900 miles per capita—a drop of 23%—between 2001 and 2009. Among the reasons, the study listed higher gas prices, new licensing laws, improvements in technology that supported alternative transportation, and changes in values.

Another survey, by the National Association for

Realtors quoted in the report, stated that young people preferred to live in an area that had shopping, restaurants, schools, and public transportation nearby as opposed to an urban sprawl where people must travel significant distances for the basics.

Improvement in technology is making transportation alternatives more convenient. Websites and smart phone apps that provide real-time transit data have made public transportation easier to use, particularly for infrequent users. Technology has also promoted car-sharing services which are becoming popular across the world.

Then, it is also about having more personal time. According to the study, using public transportation also allows people to do things they can't do while driving. Bus and train riders can make phone calls, send text messages, use tablets and laptops, or just read.

If Delhi residents ever chuck their car fetish, the reasons would not be any different. Our auto industry has already sensed the challenge. It is time the government understands the changing customer behaviour. Most people will always buy their first car. It is the urge for the second, and the third, that more convenient, economic and fashionable transport alternatives can nix.

■ shivani.singh@hindustantimes.com