Translated and Amended Version of "Motorisierung – Geschichte, Gegenwart und Zukunft Indiens"
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India on Wheels: Past, Present, and Future*

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Specialized research interests in the humanities and social sciences are not always readily understandable by the wider public. In one sense, this is unavoidable, since scholars must develop their own terms and language to carry out deep research and talk with each other about their findings. But historians and social scientists especially should also strive to present their areas of research in an accessible way to audiences who may be interested but not as familiar with specialized language. With this in mind, I attempt here to describe what I have been working on since 2010 under the guidance of Professor Ravi Ahuja in the context of the DFG-funded research project „The Motorisation of the ‚Mufassil': Automobile Traffic and Social Change in Rural North India, c. 1925-70". The project deals mainly with economic, political and social aspects of motor transport in a few regions in India since the late colonial period. Here, motor vehicles were not merely tools used by various groups; they also stood in a reciprocal relationship with India's politics, economy and society at the time. The project pays attention to why and in which regions motor transport developed in ways that were similar to Europe or the USA and where the development trajectories were completely different.

Instead of delving into the precise arguments of my project, I would like to address here some other issues that came up in my research. These things were and are not central to my main project but might be of a particular public interest that is connected to the fact that a major part of the economies of industrialized countries is

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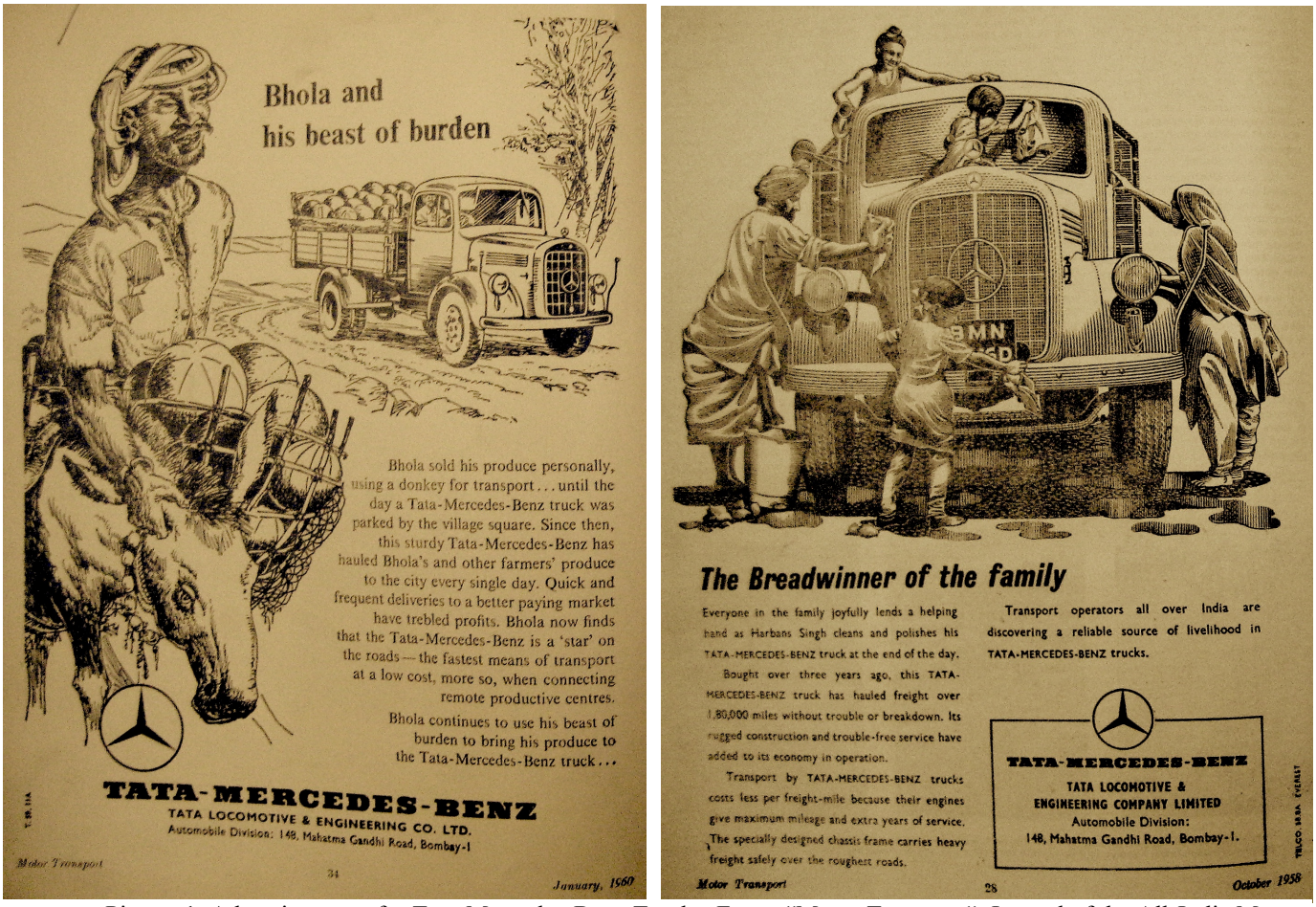
built on automobile production and export. The German economy is a good example. Currently, several German manufacturers of mid- and upper-range automobiles such as Volkswagen and Daimler are showing significant interest in the growing Indian automotive market. This is the case even despite the relative stagnation of recent sales figures in India, when compared to the much more important Chinese market.

Historically, Daimler especially played a very active role in India's automotive sector, for example by cooperating with the Indian company Tata on the manufacture of trucks between the 1950s and 1970s as well as on the production of cars during the 1990s and early 2000s.



Picture 1. Advertisements for Tata-Mercedes-Benz Trucks. From: "Motor Transport", Journal of the All-India Motor Transport Union Congress, January 1960 (left) and October 1958

Daimler also had a five per cent stake in Tata Motors until 2008 and continues to maintain several production sites in India, along with a research and development department in Bangalore that provides technical expertise for the company's entire global operations.

Recent decades have witnessed a huge expansion of production in industrialising countries, driven by their various special economic programmes. Regardless of whether or not one counts India as being among the already well-established economic powers, the country's automotive sector certainly has not contributed to the country's economic upsurge in a very significant and major way. It is true that a range of political ideas and initiatives existed in this direction, for example the recurrent appearance of the discussion around a low-cost small car for the Indian populace. These discussions were, however, often protracted and marked by great political and economic uncertainties. It was only in 1981, with the founding of the still-existing and very successful joint venture between Maruti and Suzuki that these plans were really implemented. During the first twenty years, only the upper and middle classes could afford the cooperation's motor vehicles, but the middle class has expanded immensely since the 1990s. In addition, the highly diversified companies Tata and Mahindra were able to develop as real success stories in the automotive sector without state intervention. Both companies produce private and commercial vehicles of different sizes and for different purposes. In 1998, Tata began producing the Indica, the first car to be fully produced within India; it has been successful in the domestic market with a growing range of products ever since. But the company also expands overseas, both with its own brands and through acquisitions of high-value brands such as Jaguar and Land Rover in 2008.

Overall, however, the Indian political and economic leadership has not tried to establish the automobile industry as a key industry along the lines of what was done in Europe or the USA, but rather stimulated other sectors in an attempt to support the overall economy. It is important to ask whether this should be really the model to emulate for the Indian political and economic system at all, especially since developments in Europe and the USA seemingly suggest that promoting the car industry as a central economic feature might be outdated. The only alternative, however, would be to import mid- and high-priced cars in great numbers also in future and hence to cause a sizable trade balance deficit in this regard. This is not to say that India's development path in this regard has to look exactly the same as in the established industrialised countries where the internal combustion engine would not survive without their energy policies on fossil fuel. Positive economic effects aside, a more efficient and cost-effective production of automobiles in India could also incorporate new and badly needed mobility concepts and environmental aspects in automotive design and development. Manufacturers from industrial countries have barely begun to consider taking those steps. The necessary technological know-how and corporate capital for such innovations, of course, has existed in India for a long time. They would only have to be channelled correctly through the implementation of new and strict policies that address higher education, research and technology.

The increasing motorisation of India implies not only positive economic effects, but also significant risks. One of them is the problem of transport in India's major cities, which have exhibited a large and growing motor vehicle fleet for several decades already. Increasing traffic and environmental problems led governmental authorities in the 1980s to introduce car sharing practices as well as time-based restrictions on inner-city motor vehicle use, although with little success. (Interview Dr. P.S.

Pasricha). Motor vehicle numbers have grown steadily since the 1990s, and this growth is accelerating. This is borne out by the fact that more and more individuals and families want to and can afford motor vehicles for personal transport. This trend also suggests that customers are mostly interested in upgrading their means of transport towards bigger, more expensive and prestigious vehicles.

Tata's highly acclaimed introduction of the small car Nano in 2009 is the perfect example of this trend. Both the company and the public put high hopes in the vehicle selling in cities and across the country, not least with respect to solving traffic problems due to its smaller size and lower emissions and allowing more people to have their own cars. But we can now say the product and concept have largely failed. Sales figures remained minuscule throughout despite having a low price of roughly 1,500 Euros, and the most recent news is that sales have collapsed by eighty per cent (article in Financial Express). There are probably several reasons for this. Tata itself already points to one such reason with the slogan „Move up to Sedan Class" in an advertisement campaign for the Indica Vista running in 2012.

Picture 2. Advertising campaign for the Indica Vista, http://www.network2media.com/, 24 June 2013

The potential shift of customers toward bigger vehicles that fulfil the middle class' ideals and concepts of what a car should be seems to have taken place rather quickly, and companies have already adjusted their product range and sales policy accordingly. This trend is also reflected in the design and conceptualisation of automobiles. Most Indian consumers seem to prize technical sophistication and driving pleasure to a lesser extent than European car owners, and instead are more interested in the total package and especially in a comfortable and lush interior design (Interview Hormazd Sorabjee).

But the increasing tendency in terms of quantity and quality towards changing to individual mobility and bigger car models will raise serious problems and challenges. For example, urban areas now witness much greater traffic that entails time consuming and stressful traffic jams. Problems with CO2-emmisions and the lack of space are bound to increase immensely over the next decades. But also smaller cities and the countryside already possess a solvent and growing clientele for automobiles who will carry the motorisation process into this area in future. This tendency will grow over the next years and decades, as numerous and expanding programmes in areas such as highway, road construction, and logistics extend well-connected routes between major cities to an increasingly sophisticated and comprehensive national road network.

If one were to extrapolate based on the current use of fossil fuels in the transport sector to the development expected to take place in countries such as India and China, humans and the environment in these countries and beyond will probably have to face serious problems. Exhaust gas emissions from motor traffic in Indian cities already have reached critical levels already and often surpass maximum permissible values especially during the winter months (talk Parikshit Ghosh). It will be important in this

respect to see how discussions on climate justice and emissions proceed in India and other countries in relation to global institutions. The political and intellectual leadership in countries like India currently seems to be inclined to demand a per capita consumption of CO2-emissions in order to have an economic development similar to what industrial countries experienced over the last half decade or so. This is also based on the assumptions that hitherto unfulfilled development potentials are a fallout of the long colonial past and that these potentials must be realized now no matter what. The positions of various political actors in this matter seem deadlocked.

Important further questions remain to be answered: what will the motorisation of India look like in future? Will it be a major concern for actors and institutions at the national and global level at all? What happens with and in Indian cities if the Indian populace starts favouring mobility concepts similar to those Germans in particular have practiced since the 1950s for commuting to work or in their leisure time? Will India see mega traffic jams during holidays and festivals similar to the packed highways that Germany and other countries across Europe see during their summer holidays? Or will the Indian transportation sector develop in a completely different direction? These will be important questions while motor vehicle use is almost bound to increase drastically.

Research Material

Websites of the companies Tata, Maruti-Suzuki, Mahindra, Daimler, Volkswagen and the German Federal Government

„Tata Motors slashes Nano production, signals mega slowdown", Financial Express, 5 March 2013, http://www.financialexpress.com/news/sharp-cut-in-nano-output-signals-mega-slowdown/1083104

Interview with Dr. P.S. Pasricha, former Police Commissioner, Mumbai and Director General of Police, Maharashtra, 3 September 2012

Interview with Hormazd Sorabjee, Editor of Autocar India, India's foremost Automobile Magazine, Mumbai, 27 August 2012

Parikshit Ghosh, Delhi School of Economics, Presentation „Contested Land and Polluted Cities: Some Dilemmas of India's Development", CeMIS-Colloquium, 12 June 2013

"Motor Transport", Journal published by the All-India Motor Transport Union Congress, New Delhi since 1936