

King of the road

With the promise of made-to-order customisation, better ergonomics and heavy durability, Tata Motors' world truck is set to take over the road

Colourful and loud, bedecked with religious and other imagery, Tata trucks have been kings of the road. They have been the lifeline of the nation, transporting agricultural produce, water and construction material. They have been a ubiquitous part of our highways, evoking admiring glances for their showy personalities.

Basic and functional, they have served their purpose for decades, even as countries elsewhere adopted more powerful, ergonomically designed vehicles. But now it is time for truckers in India to enjoy the same driving experience that their counterparts in more developed countries enjoy.

Prima, the world truck recently launched by Tata Motors Commercial Vehicle Business Unit (CVBU), is a contender worthy of the global arena. Created by CVBU, designed jointly with Tata Daewoo Commercial Vehicle Company and with testing refinements from the Tata

Motors European Technical Centre, the Prima is as much a harbinger as it is a consequence of the development of India's road infrastructure.

It was the Rs550-crore loss that Tata Motors suffered in 2000-01 that prompted the management to introspect and see the loss as a wake-up call. R Ramakrishnan, head, sales and marketing, CVBU, says, "We had to make sure we never got into such a rut again. We also wanted to increase our presence in markets outside the country. Simultaneously, Ratan Tata, our chairman, envisioned an identity for us as a world-class corporate."

Taking the leap

The company realised that the way to put the company on a firm footing would be to help India make the transition from functional low-cost trucks to world-class ones.

The leap from being backward in terms of truck



technology to producing the equivalent of global technology and competing abroad was too radical to comprehend, even within the company. Employees voiced doubts about the company's capability, its ability to scale up, the readiness of the market, the state of the roads, etc.

Meanwhile, the Indian government had announced road projects such as the Golden Quadrilateral and the Pradhan Mantri Gramin Sadak Yojana, which promised to alter the face of the road network in the country. The improvements would make the domestic share of India's largest truck manufacturer vulnerable to foreign competition. CVBU knew that it had to act fast if it wished to maintain and grow its position.

A team from CVBU met customers in India to understand their needs. They also visited international auto expos and studied the vehicles there. They learned that trucks in India lagged far behind those in the developed world and even in developing nations like Brazil, China, etc. The truck industry in India had far to go.

Mr Ramakrishnan says, "The transition is not going to happen overnight. Trucks in India have been driven largely by the infrastructure and the road network as well as issues of affordability. India is a price-sensitive market." Additionally, with at least 15 to 20 per cent (in the case of cement even higher) of the cost of any commodity being transportation- and warehousing-related, price was a delicate issue. So the world truck team had to consider the purchasing power of those who would buy the truck and those who would directly or indirectly avail of its services.

The company also had to consider the implications of manufacturing the world truck. "A truck," says Mr Ramakrishnan, "is not a single truck. Applications are varied. Those used in the construction industry transport sand, bricks, stone and even steel from the quarry. They have to ply on-road and off-road. Trucks used for mining work ply in steep gradients, below the earth."

The variety of applications posed multiple challenges for Tata Motors. Mr Ramakrishnan explains, "Regulations and conditions are different in different countries. So are customers and drivers. Their needs vary, so we must cater to those needs. The wide range has to be managed in such a way as to get volumes and scalability. The way to address the issue is to make use of the modular philosophy across geographies, models and time."

Designed to deliver

The Prima is not just a single truck but a range of trucks covering multi-axle trucks, tractor-trailers, tippers, mixers and special application vehicles. Mr Ramakrishnan elaborates, "The range has a

carrying capacity of 10 to 49 tonnes in India, in terms of gross vehicle weight. Internationally it can go up to 75 tonnes. There are two-, three-, four- and five-axle trucks. Once these are exhausted, you can add tractor-trailers. It can take engines of different horsepower. Drivers can choose the features, comforts, type of roof, trims and colour. The potential variants go up to more than 1,000."

With its made-to-order promise, the Prima is poised to take the transportation industry by storm. Ravi Pisharody, president, CVBU, says, "We have local engineering, design and development capabilities. We have complied with world-class specifications and used world-class aggregates, but the integration has been localised. So we have a cost advantage over the relevant competition."

So far trucks have been simple, not attaining high speeds because they don't use very powerful engines. The use of a powerful engine would demand a more rugged drivetrain, clutch, gearbox and axle, adding to the cost.

The improved road network would expose the inefficiencies of the current range of trucks as they can neither overtake speedily nor travel at high speeds. Thanks to its superior machinery, the Prima can truly take advantage of road conditions, cutting down distances by half, reducing congestion on the roads and keeping pace with cars.

Mr Ramakrishnan says, "Today transporters are paid per tonne per km. They know that with current roads and vehicles, they cannot cover too much distance. So they overload the trucks."

With the Prima, they can carry the optimum load, but get much further and return for a second load. Better ergonomics makes driving a pleasure, encouraging drivers to drive long distances instead of stopping to rest. Also, one driver can drive while the other sleeps in the fully air-conditioned cabin.

At 10 years with the first owner, the Prima's useful life is twice as much as the five years of current trucks, thereby slowing the rate of depreciation and increasing its resale value. Most of the reliability and durability analyses indicate roadworthiness of around a million kilometres.

The Prima also requires much less routine servicing, ensuring that the truck is available for use for longer periods. Tata Motors guarantees that it will be available for more than 330 days a year. "The Prima will be a more cost-effective way of transporting, despite its higher cost. It will help transporters reduce costs, thereby lowering inventory. It will help truckers to improve their deliveries and increase business," avers Mr Ramakrishnan.

The company is currently engaged in training

drivers to drive the Prima. Mr Pisharody says, "Before the customer buys the Prima, we make sure that each vehicle has two trained drivers. This will ensure that the drivers are not intimidated by the vehicles and that they are able to run it efficiently and get the best out of it. Also, for the first few runs of the vehicle, our service engineers will travel with the drivers."

This initial handholding is bound to increase the confidence of drivers and customers. Mr Pisharody reveals that the company plans to have a service centre every 100km across the country.

The Prima has been extensively tested for environment and safety standards in different conditions and countries and for different laws. The components have been tested by the suppliers and by Tata Motors. CVBU has sourced aggregates and components from different parts of the globe. For example, the cab styling is from Italy; the engine technology is from Cummins Korea, and also from Iveco; and the gearbox is from Eton, an American company. The expertise and knowledge of all these people have contributed to the making of the world truck. The trucks also meet weight and dimension requirements of different countries. CVBU is confident that with the Prima, it will be able to deliver the lowest lifecycle cost anywhere.

Tapping new markets

Prima now has its sights set on the world. The first phase will include India, Korea, South Africa, the Middle East, parts of Eastern Europe, including Russia and the Ukraine. The second phase will see the truck in Latin America and the developed nations in Europe.

At home, large operators have expressed an interest in the Prima. Mr Ramakrishnan believes that financiers will prefer to finance a reliable vehicle, on which the repayments instalments come faster. This will prompt a shift in the market. The next wave of the market will ride on a 'wait and watch' policy.

"In the first few years, we don't expect the world truck to contribute significantly to our market share of around 70 per cent," says Mr Pisharody. "Initially, it will be just concept selling. We have to get our customers used to the vehicles and the economics. But over time, we are confident that our product will get established and grow its share of our truck sales," he adds.

With the Prima, India can truly lay claim to having arrived on the world trucking stage. It is now up to India's transportation industry to share this successful makeover. ●

Cynthia Rodrigues

The Prima range: Bringing in higher driver comfort, higher tonnage, more mileage and longer engine life

