

Cars, not land

What the debate on Singur hasn't touched



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A remarkable fact about the recent debate about Singur is that it is so much about land, and so little about cars. Yet a thousand acres of land is really not very much, given that the state has over 1.3 crore acres of cultivated land, and even Mamata Banerjee cannot be entirely serious when she talks about the absolute sanctity of agricultural land. After all, if someone really believed that, then why stop at Singur? The New Town at Rajarhat, I am sure, could be double-cropped (and so, for that matter, could Chowringhee). Would she support a policy of no further urbanisation: Why not agitate to turn back aspiring migrants, who are, after all, probably the most important reason why cities grow and agricultural land turns into housing estates.

A hundred thousand cars additionally a year, on the other hand, is serious business. After all, in 2005, the total number of cars sold was just over a million. And cars are what economists call a 'public bad'. When I buy a car, it makes me happy (or at least that is the presumption) but it makes everyone else worse off. The suspended particles that get released into the air when I drive my car, will eventually contribute to killing someone and the carbon dioxide that results from burning hydrocarbons, even George Bush seems to have realised, might end up killing us all. My new car also contributes to worsening the traffic, lengthening the working day, and encouraging the murderous manoeuvres of drivers late for work...

Less obviously, it alters the political economy of transportation. Before I bought my car, I was a devotee of public transportation. Even if I had owned a

two-wheeler, when it was raining or when the sun was blazing, or when I wanted to travel with friends or family, I was happy to take a bus or a train. When a new metro was built, I cheered. When the government turned the state transport corporation into a sinecure for drivers who no longer felt like driving and conductors who refused to conduct, I agitated.

Now that I own my small car, I am largely indifferent to the fate of public transportation. Indeed if all the buses stayed off the streets one day, my dri-

cars, when it would have much more sense for it to agitate for higher taxes on all cars. Since cars make everyone else pay for the driver's pleasure, the driver needs to pay society back, and a special tax on every new car purchase is the best way to get there. Figuring out what that tax ought to be would take some work, but I would not be surprised if it turned out to be in the lakhs.

This is not to say that the West Bengal government should not try to attract the Tatas, nor that they should, as Medha Patkar has been telling us,



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ving would actually be less stressful.

Every time someone buys a car, the pressure on politicians to deliver better public transportation goes down. The people who get hurt by this realignment of political priorities are the poor, those who cannot imagine buying a scooter, let alone a car. They need public transportation the most, and yet in terms of the ability to influence politicians, they tend to lag behind the lower middle classes. Therefore, when the lower middle class exit the public system, the poor lose their most effective champions. This is why a one lakh rupee car, targeted exactly towards the lower end of the middle classes, is likely to be particularly perverse in its effects.

The mystery, for me, is why a leftist government decided to make a showpiece out of a project for building small

stick only to agro-industries. Indeed, why not a different vehicle project? Given the state of roads in rural India, SUVs are actually often the only available form of transportation—the one way, other than walking or cycling, of getting out of a village, especially during the monsoon. In medical emergencies—when pregnancies suddenly start going horribly wrong or a child's fever refuses to subside—having access to one of these can make the difference between life and death. Why not invest in developing a newer, cheaper, very much more energy efficient version of the Tata Sumo, still the archetype of an SUV in rural India? ■

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