

# The Nano and its Discontents

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This appeared on the *Tehelka* website on 10th April 2009

The launch of the Nano car marks the culmination of a long and controversial journey for its manufacturer, Tata Motors. For India's corporates and its middle-class, the arrival of the 'world's cheapest car' is a proud moment when their country finally enters the world-stage. Such an air-brushed story, however, elides the serious questions that lurk within the cross-country transposition of the Nano factory.

Despite being touted as a success story of corporate India's capabilities, the Nano's cheapness is only possible due to the largesse bestowed upon the Tata's by that *bete noire* of the free-market, the lumbering Indian state. It is an open secret that the Nano is deeply discounted because of very large Government subsidies that have neither been scrutinised nor justified. While the Chief Minister of West Bengal had claimed the TINA factor in rolling out the red carpet for this car project at Singur, his Gujarat counterpart feels even less compelled to explain his executive decisions that made the move to Sanand attractive.

How is it, one might ask, that inveterate, ideological foes are united in their embrace of the Nano ? The obvious answer lies in their political calculus, based on middle-class support for the Nano model of industrialisation. However, the explanation for this groundswell of support has to go beyond the usual political and economic analysis. To fully understand the sociological and psychological underpinnings of the Nano saga, we have to step back a full century in time.

A hundred years ago, in September 1908, the first Ford Model-T was rolled out in Detroit. Inspired by the 'dis-assembly lines' of a Chicago slaughterhouse, the assembly-line technique was introduced to keep up with the growing demand for the car. With this move, the modern age of mass production, mass consumption, and if one might add, mass destruction was inaugurated.

Since the late eighteenth century, thanks to Adam Smith, the relationship between division of labour and economic productivity was well understood. In his *Wealth of Nations*, Smith had introduced the pin factory metaphor where each worker perfected just one specialised task rather than crafting an entire pin. However, the jump from a simple pin factory to the vastly more complex Model-T assembly line was a leap of faith. By ushering in the biggest increases in economic productivity since the Industrial Revolution, the Model-T assembly line would go on to transform the social, cultural, and economic landscape of America and beyond.

Thanks to the productivity of the new assembly line, Henry Ford was able to pay higher wages that converted his workers into his customers. The subsequent reshaping of the way of living and thinking by the assembly line has been crucial to American economic and military domination in the twentieth century. Beyond cars and wars, every aspect of modern consumerism is fuelled by assembly line production. Not only do assembly lines determine how we work, but also what we eat, and where we live.

The domination of the assembly line in our contemporary lives is so complete that it has transformed citizens vested with rights and duties into individual consumers fully preoccupied with exercising their choice to buy from an array of goods. Thus, the assembly line is not merely a technical innovation. Rather it is a 'technics' - a set of ideas, values and methods embedded within mass production - that has permeated the very fabric of our society

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as well as our minds. It is in this sense that we must view the Indian middle-class conception of car-ownership as a 'right' and their enthusiastic support for the Nano as a triumph of Henry Ford.

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Admittedly, a century of assembly line production has resulted in economic prosperity for hundreds of millions around the world. However, this rapid global rise in living standards has imposed large social and ecological costs, mostly borne by people at the bottom of the heap. Further, the modern assembly line has reduced individuals to mere cogs in the wheel of global economic production.

Recognising such problems, influential thinkers have countered the preeminent role occupied by the assembly line model in economic production throughout its hundred-year history. Frederick Taylor, one of the founders of modern scientific management recognised the monotony for the worker even as he advocated the assembly line method in the interest of increasing productivity. In the early 1930's, the Italian Marxist intellectual, Antonio Gramsci observed that the combination of Ford's assembly line and Taylor's scientific management were primarily responsible for the prevailing 'hegemony' in America. For Gramsci, Fordism was central to the idea of 'Americanism'.

Contemporaneous with Gramsci's critique, Aldous Huxley's 1932 classic, *Brave New World* is perhaps the most enduring portrait of the impact of the Model-T assembly line on our lives. Huxley's satirical technopia is set in seventh century *A.F.* (After Ford). The year 1908 when the first Model-T rolled out heralds the beginning of the 'era of Ford' in Huxley's calendar. The assembly line is so overwhelming of society that Huxley's characters worship "Our Ford" and wear T's instead of the Cross. Recognising the bleakness of the world he had created, some fifteen years later, Huxley admitted that if he were to rewrite the book, he would present a third alternative that is neither utter destitution nor a disastrous technopia.

The intimate relationship between economic production on the one hand, and justice, freedom, and dignity on the other finds its most clear and profound expression in the life-work of Mahatma Gandhi. As the world enters the second century *A.F.*, we will do well to look back at Gandhi's fundamental critique of mass production. Gandhi's pioneering critique contains a grammar for both resistance and renewal that is at once social, moral *and* aesthetic.

While he was the pre-eminent leader of India's struggle for political independence, Gandhi's fundamental concern was with individual freedom and dignity. Indeed, by 1935, Gandhi formally retired from Congress politics to devote all his energies to the social and economic rejuvenation of India. During the inter-war period, many Indian leaders and intellectuals saw the Bolshevik experiment as an antidote to the depredations of global capitalism. However, for Gandhi the choice between socialism and capitalism was a false one since it hardly mattered for the common man whether the state or the market controlled the levers of the political economy. Indeed, Gandhi recognised early on that the combination of state socialism and assembly line industrialisation leads to less, and not more freedom for the workers.

For Gandhi, freedom and dignity for all required representative democracy to be firmly tied to political decentralisation. The crucial insight he provided was that such a deepened conception of democracy was possible only with economic decentralisation. Thus, in Gandhi's political economy, the primary focus is neither the state nor the market but freedom and justice for every individual in society. Consequently, Gandhi demanded that the interests of the state and the market be made secondary to that of society. However efficient, assembly-line industrialisation was no answer to these considerations as it inevitably robbed the individual worker of his or her basic freedom and dignity.

It is an unrelenting pursuit of the ideals of freedom and dignity that lead Gandhi to advocate reorganising India around its villages. His insistence on the village as the locus for politics and economics did not stem from a Luddite view of the world. Rather, unlike his Marxist detractors, Gandhi recognised that an agrarian transformation that delivers justice and equity was far more complex than the mere possibility of escaping from the 'idiocy of rural life'. India's inescapable reality was that people needed to be provided healthy and useful work in their place of

living. If freedom, justice and equity were to be available to all, in Gandhi's pithy summarisation, mass production had to be replaced by 'production by the masses'.

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In the peculiar and self-serving vocabulary of our times, to the new middle class, the Nano represents 'freedom' and a 'me-too' model of consumer justice. At the same time, the Nano model of industrialisation is being presented as the only way to resuscitate our ailing agrarian economy that has been driven to desperation out of sheer neglect. However, we must see the Nano for what it truly represents. On the one hand it represents the Indian maturation of the seductive allure of the assembly line. On the other hand, it represents a particularly insidious coming together of state and market forces that greatly imperils the best of our values.

More than making the case against the Nano in economic and ecological terms, we must not accept the dangerous claim being put forth that automobile ownership must not remain an entitlement of the rich alone. We must not accept this specious notion of equity. Confronting the power of the global assembly line will require us to draw upon our deepest resources. Here, Gandhi offers us salutary lessons and some answers that will require us to look within and make some hard, serious choices.