



TELCO BUILDS A GENUINE SPORTS UTILITY



Safari



The Tata Safari is finally rolling off the production lines at Telco's Pimpri plant and even though it is pretty much based on the original 207 ladder type chassis, the thought and the execution behind it is light years ahead of Telco's previous best. This is a mighty statement but one look at the new Tata Safari and many of you will be echoing similar sentiments.

The very first thought that here was a new face of Telco which was trying its best to emerge to the forefront came when Telco lined up a pre-launch function at its sprawling Pune plant for selected journalists from all over India. Telco really went to town and showed off not just the Safari but the immense strides it has made in terms of technology acquisition, advances in technological capability of its staffers, shoring up on evaluation and analytical systems and by and large arming itself to the hilt in its quest to be totally independent of most factors when it comes down to designing and manufacturing its own automobiles in-house here in this country. Sticking

my neck out yet further, I can confidently state that no other auto manufacturer in India comes close to Telco on this count, and knowing the industry, it would be hard for anyone else to match it, atleast not in the near future.

After the visiting journos were escorted to various key departments in the company, they were then let loose on the test track to sample any of the five Safaris they had kept there for this explicit purpose. Thoughtfully, there were versions in both two, as well as in four wheel drive configurations for the pen pushers to experience. From there it was down to the special assembly line set up for the Safari and there was further evidence of the capability aspect which I spoke about in the earlier para. The complete sheet steel body panels are welded by robots which are so unerringly accurate and with an overall trueness good to one millimetre from one end of the body to the other, the obvious structural integrity and form are eons better than on any other Telco built vehicle. And mind you, this holds good for any other Indian built vehicle in its

SINCE ITS UNVEILING ALMOST TWO YEARS AGO, TELCO'S SUV IN THE MAKING HAS HAD A LONGISH GESTATION PERIOD. BUT AS ADIL JAL DARUKHANAWALA REPORTS, THE NEW TATA SAFARI IS A QUANTUM JUMP FORWARD FOR THE COMPANY IN ALL RESPECTS OF THE GAME, INCLUDING OVERALL FIT AND FINISH, THE BUG BEAR OF ITS PREVIOUS OFFERINGS. BUT IS IT A GENUINE RIVAL TO THE LIKES OF THE PAJERO, LANDCRUISER, PATROL, TROOPER AND DISCOVERY? READ ON....



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IN FOCUS: V. M. RAVAL

The man who is in charge of directly supervising design and development and subsequent execution and manufacture of Telco's car line up is Telco old hand V. M. Raval. A dynamic hands-on executive who is a close confidante of Telco chairman and managing director Ratan Tata, Raval is the typically engineers' engineer.

From a humble beginning with Premier Automobiles where he worked for four years since December 1959, Raval's entire career thereafter has been spent in Telco. Rising from the ranks through sheer hard work and an innate ability to get the job done without any fuss, Raval has put in over three and a half decades of unstinted service at Telco, by being based at Jamshedpur for over 12 years and then at Telco's Pune works for almost a quarter of a century.

Appointed General Manager of Telco's Pune works in 1984, Raval was responsible for getting the class act LCV of the last decade — the Tata 407 — into proper gear and then manufacturing it in even larger numbers with the best quality. This was followed by him being appointed the Resident Director of the Pune works in 1988 and then with Telco's forays into the automobile sector, he was entrusted with the overall charge of the company's Automobile Business Unit as Executive Director (Automobiles).

To many within the company Raval the executive comes across as a hard task master. But then in the same breath, they also revere Raval the person just as much for his humane nature and his ability to harness the overall skills and efforts of both the

white and blue collared staff for mutual growth. Were it not for these facets of his personality, Telco wouldn't have registered a production level of 220,000 units in the last fiscal year — a figure which is second only to Maruti Udyog and lets face it, all of MUL's models are only indigenous in the fact that they are made here.

The Telco models are the genuine true blue all-Indian vehicles and it is in this perspective that the large 220,000 units figure deserves viewing.

Apart from his obvious management skills and his adherence to quality and technological standards, Raval is quite a sophisticated personality who has a keen outlook on most things and issues plus an eye for detail. His acquisition of the brand new Nissan production facility in Australia at a very competitive price and its subsequent dismantling and shipping to India is a case in point. The equipment of this plant will incidentally help Telco's new small car immeasurably.

Widely respected in the Indian automobile industry, he is presently the President of the Association of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (AIAM), the apex body of the industry in India. He shares the same sort of

vision as his ever focussed boss Ratan Tata and the two of them make a terrific team. And knowing how high standards of teamwork can bring about fantastic products and working practices, that's what the car buying enthusiast will be seeing in increasing manner from Telco.

Adil Jal Darukhanawala



equipment and Rs. 100 crores for design and development) spent has enabled Telco to acquire a capability which now begins to shout 'CAR' much more confidently than in the past. And Telco can only build upon this as the years roll on.

So what does one make of India's best and also most modern SUV? We were allowed to "play" with one brand new example of the Safari at Telco's Pune plant and even though an example was being readied for a long term test, time was too short for us to do a pukka road test on this vehicle which will, of course, follow in the forthcoming months.

Let's begin with the most apparent aspect and that

is the overall styling of the vehicle. Decidedly a mix of Yankee and Oriental preferences, the overall lines have turned out very well with a form and proportion which is very macho. Maybe the move away from its previous Mercedes-inspired looks (and heritage) has seen the front end lack a defining identity. But then the need for a corporate grille or the like will build up accordingly and even though the smallish Telco "T" emblem adorns the leading edge of the bonnet, it wouldn't have been out of place to have had the new "T" logo as on the trend-setting Tata mini (refer our cover story) adorn the front air intake. In fact, just for the eagle-

eyed among you, the new "T" logo appears on the wheel hubs of the Safari!

While there is not much one can do in overall form for a four-door SUV, you can add your own distinctive details to highlight your product and Telco has done that with a rear window which follows the profile of the C-pillar and curves accordingly, a large thickish rubbing strip running from the front bumper to the rear positioned in the midriff section on the two sides, deft use of subtle textures wherever they could be employed to highlight certain details (a case in point being the roof section above the rear side windows), a cheeky happy frontal face with

rectangular headlights and a flush fitting front wraparound bumper. Thin carrier rails on the roof go with the character of the vehicle while at the rear the thoughtfully integrated step in the rear bumper plus the tailgate-mounted spare wheel further accentuate the SUV lineage. For a vehicle with an overall length of 4800mm and an overall height of 1910mm, the symmetry and form is well laid down and it is the right balance which really hits you first time out. The colour schemes (five metallic shades are offered) go a great deal towards striking the overall harmony between form and bulk, and this is another line of thinking

which has been given its head.

What is also most apparent (and a mighty positive development in that) is the quality of the panel fit and finish, the door shut lines and the tremendous upgrades apparent in overall turnout. Where one dreaded to see large gaps between body and bumper as also garish weld lines or weld blobs on the superstructure in vehicles like the Sierra and Sumo, the Safari comes across much better in this regard. Credit this to the new CAD/CAM

design and manufacturing as also the quality of the body construction with automated body weld robots performing the operations to the absolute design-specified tolerances. As Mr. Y. Nath, Vice President in charge of Telco's Pune works, informed me: "Our new body construction techniques have moved several strides forward with the Safari. The new robotic body welding system helps achieve a correctness of line which is not more than one millimetre out of sync from front to rear."

So if you are pleased as punch with the exterior styling and turnout but fear an interior right from the early days of Telco passenger car design might hit you in the face, don't be afraid. Go right ahead, open the front door and slide in behind the wheel and you are pleasantly socked in the eye — ouch! Gone is the dark black interior with the crudely fitted and old hat style of dashboard. As the exterior reeks of modernity and contemporary feel, the



Mag alloy wheels shod with Kumho Radial Powerguard (235/75-R15) tyres are standard fitment as are self locking hubs.

same is echoed in the interior. There is no doubt that Telco has been listening to many, checking out the best available from the international competition and then identifying what needed to be done for the

Step into the cabin and you are confronted with an all-new thickly rimmed soft touch four-spoke steering wheel with a large centre pad which can also house an air bag (yes, indeed there is provision for an air bag restraint system and Telco will be offering it in some

Safari. Moulded door panels with attractively placed arm rests built into them along with integrated air vents for the air con to flow all around the driver and the front seat passenger, a handy grab rail and perfect placement of handles and switches are the first thing which you notice when you open the driver's door. Also apparent is the large deep and wide rimmed door pouch for maps and magazines plus a torch.

time to come!). The soft curvy form of the injection moulded dashboard (finished in a pleasing light steel blueish grey — whew!) with its thoughtfully recessed top for odds and ends is as contemporary as one can get. The instrument panel is nicely positioned with the dials for the speedo and the rev counter plus the fuel gauge and other bits comfortably in the line of vision. The central console on the dashboard has an array of switches for various functions, air vents for the air con (Telco breaks new ground for an Indian car maker by using an environmentally-friendly CFC-free refrigerant) plus the controls to work it, a digital clock and a Philips DC632 car stereo system which comes as standard equipment along with four matching speakers. In fact, I have it on record that Telco and Philips engineers have worked

The ladder type chassis frame (with eight cross members) owes its ancestry to the 207 family. While torsion bar sprung independent front suspension is employed, the rear layout (pic) employs the five link layout as seen on the Sierra.



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Safari delights in its practical character as much as in its car like looks and go-where capability. The rear seats can offer extra seating for three or some more and when the seats folded can provide room for carrying luggage. More room can be made for other pieces of equipment by folding the split bench seat (pic below). Telco offers seat belts even for the three persons on the rear bench seat.



closely together to perfect the in-car audio system on the Safari.

Where formerly we had the sad sight of improperly placed adhesive on flimsy rexin-cotton roof lining and lousy quality of rubber seals and beadings, the Safari comes across as a major cultural shock. New moulded roof lining and pillar panellings are not only superb to feel but are also well affixed with no apparent crudeness. The seats are well upholstered in long wearing brushed fabric. Seat belts are standard not just for the front two seats but also for the three occupants on the bench seat behind them. Speaking of seats, the Safari can offer easy comfort to five in the front two rows of seats with good leg, elbow and head room. In fact, the rear seat passengers have more space than in the Sumo and that too with even more leg room to boot. Better space management right from the design stage has enabled this to happen. At the rear, on the left one has a folding seat for two while opposite it there is just a single seat because Telco has thoughtfully added a dual control split air con system so that the luggage bearers (if the occupants here could be termed as such!) do not get stewed!

What is also pleasing is the amount of detailing which is apparent even in the rear. Once the seats are folded, their base plates have the same plastic covers so that they present one homogenous form. Plastic strips keep the floor carpet firmly affixed with no ungainly cuts or frayed ends staring you in the eye when you swing open the tailgate. The rear bench seat is a split affair and what aids the practicality of such a vehicle is that this can be

folded out of the way to present a longish load bed if ever you need to move any bric-a-brac.

Quality of equipment is also top notch. Central locking, child proof door locks, power windows, remote fuel flap operation, rear window wash and wipe system and a tiltable steering wheel column to aid in the perfect positioning of the steering wheel vis-a-vis driver's preferences are some of the standard fitments. I have already mentioned about the Philips audio system which is another standard fitment. For options, Telco also offers a front headlight washer system.

While the exterior and the interior offer an exceedingly positive feel good aspect, there is much to look forward to on the same lines as regards the chassis and suspension plus the drivetrain. The strong ladder type chassis (with eight cross members) owes its ancestry to the 207 frame and this has been suitably altered for the Safari in terms of both dimensional enhancement as also for its intended application. That it now carries a different front suspension also meant a good deal of change. The most important change in the chassis comes in the form of the suspension system at the front.

The independent front suspension layout with twin wishbones now utilises torsion bar springs instead of the coil spring over damper layout from earlier. This has been resorted to because Telco now has its four wheel drive gear ready and so as to move along in the true contemporary 4WD SUV character, a torsion bar set-up provides the ease and the flexibility, not to mention superior tuning of the front end while yet allowing the high dynamic

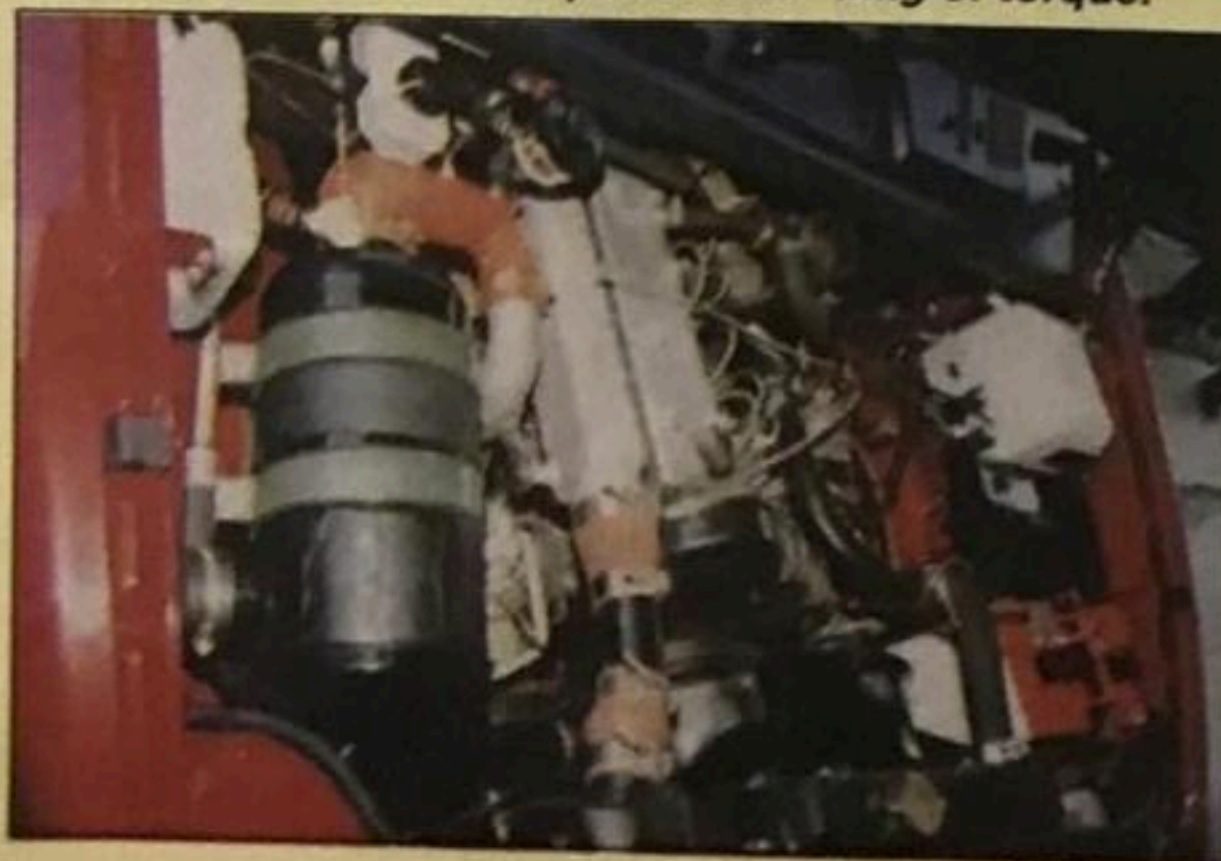


An eye for detail is evident in the rear section which features the split air con controls and vents. Slick packaging and flush panels present an appealing interior.

ability of a full independent layout to flourish. At the rear, one finds the coil spring 5-link suspension set-up from the Sierra but now suitably revised and recalibrated.

Hydraulic double acting telescopic shock absorbers do duty on all four wheels while body roll is contained to a great extent with the fitment of anti-roll bars at both ends.

Engine is the proven 1948cc turbocharged and inter-cooled Tata 483 DL unit mated to a five-speed tranny. Engine delivers 90 PS of power and mkg of torque.



For the first time in this country, a vehicle manufacturer has taken the bold step of offering aluminium alloy wheels. Of course, Honda Sael Cars has informed that its 1.5EXi Sports model will come with these sort of mag alloy wheels as standard fitment once this model begins rolling off the assembly line in late March this year, Telco's Safari is ready and rolling with mag alloy wheels. Of course, these would only be offered as an optional extra informed Mr. Harpal Singh, Telco's Marketing Manager. These mag alloy wheels (made in collaboration with Mullins of Australia) of size 6.0J x 15 inches come shod with Kumho 235/75 R15 radials, the first time this size of tyre has ever graced an Indian vehicle. Early on, tests were carried out with a variety of Indian rubber but the 235 size tyres were unavailable from either MRF or JK and so Kumhos and Bridgestones were tested and selected. Early production examples will carry the Korean rubber (more than capable of tackling any and everything which we subjected the Safari to), while from the middle of this year, Telco will begin equipping the Safari with Bridgestones as this company's production facility in Madhya Pradesh will begin churning out these tyres.

Braking is by means of discs in front and drums at the rear with a dual circuit system with vacuum-assist. A pressure reducing G-valve is employed as seen on the Sumo. Power-assisted steering gear is employed. What is most impressive about this power steering gear is that it is speed sensitive and it adjusts automatically in direct proportion to the speed of the vehicle so that

Knowing how important NVH (noise, vibration and harshness) levels play in the overall customer perceptions, Telco has invested in capability to evaluate and isolate the sources of noise and vibration and take corrective measures thereafter so that in the design stage itself, the vehicle structure is made vibrate free. Telco has designed and built the largest anechoic chamber in the automotive world (at least that's the word from some of the key figures in Telco's ERC and I do not have reason to doubt their statement) to check out NVH levels as also pass-by noise which is a most important criteria - at least in the developed countries. A full fledged team led by Dr. G. Arora, Manager-Testing monitors this facility and if ever you marvel upon the low in-cabin noise as also the almost rattle free body structure of any new Telco automobile, remember that these boffins have played their part in some measure. The anechoic



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Just as Telco has excelled on the exterior sheet metal job, the same is true about the Safari's interior treatment. Moulded door panels (above) feature built in vents for the air con, fabric door inserts, stereo speaker, a deep map pocket with courtesy light handily placed above it, controls for the central locking, power windows and rear view mirrors. The dashboard is another major improvement with a soft form and feel to it. New four-spoke steering wheel has provision for an air bag. Switch next to gear shift is for the electronic 4WD actuation.

chamber was conceived and set up by the Telco boffins themselves, using inputs from various other sound laboratories abroad. This is just another example of the vision and zeal of Ratan Tata to arm his favourite company with the best ammunition to be able to progress ahead in its avowed ambition to take on the world's best.

The same rationale oozes forth in other areas as well. Just as important as design and manufacturing technology is for a car manufacturer, in these socially conscious times the auto makers plans are further loaded up with addressing problems of harmful exhaust emissions and also safety. For the former, Telco's ERC has been equipped with a fuel emissions test cell which monitors the exhaust emissions at each and every portion of the rev range under all sorts of loads and operating conditions. Again with the help of computer programmes, it is possible to run the engines on a

