

# Force Motors' SUV plan gathers speed

One of the oldest names in India's auto sector gets ready to take on M&M and Tata Motors in the SUV space even as it refreshes its overall business plan, says **Sumantra Barooah**.

**F**orce Motors (earlier Bajaj Tempo) is set to rejuvenate itself with a first serious attempt at the 'personalised mobility' space with a premium SUV. This vehicle will be the 60-year-old company's first attempt to woo premium car buyers in India's urban markets. The company hopes its SUV can do for it what the Scorpio has done for Mahindra & Mahindra (M&M). Towards that aim, Force Motors has roped in expertise from abroad to help engineer its flagship product slated for launch in 2011.

Lotus Engineering, the legendary British firm, is the specialist roped in to hone the ride and handling of the new SUV. Power will come from a new 2.2-litre engine which will be built under license from Daimler. Foreign consultants are working on minimising NVH levels.

In an exclusive interview with *Autocar Professional*, Prasan Firodia, managing director, Force Motors said, "The powertrain technology that will be offered will be best in the segment. The SUV uses a C-in-C chassis that has been designed and developed in-house by us. We are very happy with the performance of our prototypes."

This is not the first time that Force Motors is trying



New cathodic electrodeposition paint shop at the Pithampur plant.

to enter the SUV space. At the beginning of this decade, the company had launched Judo and Gurkha – both derived from its utility vehicle, Trax. Both did not make a mark and were withdrawn. The company had also roped in automotive designer Dilip Chhabria for a Hummer-inspired vehicle concept named 'Juggernaut' that was showcased at the 2002 Auto Expo. That didn't reach production stage.

Given this background, Force Motors is going all out to ensure its new SUV will be a hit. Indeed, 11 test mules have clocked around 300,000 kilometres to ensure that the vehicle achieves levels of quality

and NVH acceptable to a quality-conscious urban customer.

Force Motors' current utility vehicle products are engineered to be workhorses. "Our current products are money-earners," Firodia says. It is a challenge for the company to offer a product that will compete with the likes of Mahindra's Scorpio, its new flagship (codenamed W201) slated for a mid-2011 launch, and Tata's Safari. The company hopes that the engineering expertise from overseas will help it take on these formidable rivals.

Force Motors will build the SUV at its Pithampur plant. An estimated Rs 150 crore has been invested in the project which will have an installed annual production capacity of 24,000 units in the first phase. The SUV will be sold through an exclusive dealership network of 20-25 outlets. The new SUV will be part of a segment that sold over 60,000 units in the last fiscal.

With the next generation of the Firodia family in the driver's seat (Prasan Firodia took over as MD in October 2009), the SUV project has generated several new initiatives. A new vertical that covers R&D to marketing has been set up reporting directly to Prasan. By January-March 2012, the company will also launch

a van that could target the Innova-Xylo space.

Even as teams are on overdrive for the SUV launch, plans are also being drawn for the company's commercial vehicles business. After phasing out the three-wheeler cargo carrier Minidor, the company is now focusing on growing its light trucks business, while its joint ventures with MAN focus on heavy trucks and buses. The first product from the bus JV will roll out later this year.

Force Motors will set up its third plant exclusively for small commercial vehicles. This plant will build two new mini-trucks that will be built on an all-new platform. The company faced a lot of heat in that segment with stiff competition from the likes of the Tata Ace. It currently has two mini trucks – Trump15 (rated payload 790 kg) and Trump 40 (rated payload 1100 kg).

The new trucks will sport two-cylinder Euro V-compliant CRDI engines. Force has also made a discreet entry into the light four-wheeler passenger carrier space with a product called Trip. Around 300 Trips are doing the rounds in Maharashtra and Karnataka.

While the mini passenger carrier tries to get a grip in the market which is led by the Tata Ace Magic, Force Motors' flagship brand – Traveller – is set to get a facelift, while the Trax platform will also get upgraded.

Force Motors went through a tough period during the last two years or so when it had to focus its energies on its HCV joint ventures with MAN. With the JV gaining momentum, the focus of the Abhay Firodia-led group is on growing Force Motors, which is aiming at a turnover of Rs 1,800 crore, up from close to Rs 1,000 crore last year. ■

## INTERVIEW PRASAN FIRODIA, MANAGING DIRECTOR – FORCE MOTORS

### What are the main focus areas to build Force Motors' business?

There are three major focus areas. Firstly, customer connectivity will be a major focus area. To begin with, a strong CRM programme is being installed and the front end of the business is being upgraded. Secondly, we are preparing to move into aspirational vehicle business with SUVs, which is a different business from the traditional working vehicles manufactured currently by the company. These vehicles are different, the customers are different and the processes are different as well. Thirdly, the immense technological depth and strength of the company is being leveraged to install new facilities, plants and capabilities across all product lines.

### Will your company look at re-entering the three-wheeler segment, after the phasing out of Minidor?

The Minidor actually pioneered the country's mini truck segment. We have sold in excess of 2,00,000 units. The markets have shifted towards four-wheeler mini trucks. Thus our future offerings shall also be four-wheelers instead of three-wheelers.

### The new SUV will be 'the next big thing' for your company. What are the steps you are taking to ensure its success, technically and marketing-wise?

In line with our aspirations to enter the personalised vehicle space, a completely new product platform has been created in the SUV segment. This new SUV is based largely on three elements.

- A state-of-the-art driveline i.e. engine, gearbox and axles, which are products manufactured at Force Motors under license from Mercedes-Benz.
- A 'C-in-C' chassis is designed and developed at Force Motors with high-quality



suspension, ride and handling characteristics finetuned with the help of Lotus and benchmarked against the best.

● Body, interiors, trim, styling. The complete sheet metal stamping process has been outsourced. The trims, styling, clusters, lamps, seats and infotainment has been developed with leading suppliers in India to international standards. Some of the internal and external trims have been imported. The combination of all these elements gives us a high-performance, highly stylish, personal SUV.

### Which brand in Force Motors' portfolio continues to be the single biggest contributor to revenues?

The Traveller is undoubtedly the top product in our portfolio, contributing 50 percent of the top line for the company. The Traveller now also sports a common-rail driveline which is Bharat IV-compliant and Euro 5 capable with a very contemporary, highly stylised new exterior.

The vehicle platform has been further enlarged upto 21 seats carrying capacity with a thoroughly re-engineered

and strengthened monocoque body structure. We believe that this positions the Traveller as a clear winner.

### The Force MAN JV faced some problems in the initial phase. What were the major problems and how did you resolve them?

The main problem we faced initially was the difference in approach between us and our JV partners in deciding what are the right vehicles for India. Though we have introduced power-moderated vehicles to improve the performance of the joint venture, a full philosophical alignment of the partners and the product alignment to the market is still being worked upon.

We have a very modern, highly reliable set of aggregates, technology and manufacturing facilities. Force Motors' engineering has ensured high levels of localisation at low costs. However, we still need to launch lower-powered haulage trucks to gain volumes.

### How is your engine business with Mercedes doing?

Force Motors and Daimler have a long and fruitful association

which goes back to the early 1980s. Aware of our strength in terms of engineering infrastructure and capabilities, they had asked to setup a dedicated facility for assembly and testing engines for Mercedes passenger cars built in India. We have supplied over 21,000 engines. The warranty on engine assembly and testing rests with us. We have had no complaints so far. This business has now grown as we have added axles, both front and rear, for the C and E-class cars over the past two years.

### What are the sales numbers for the Trump trucks? How much investment do you plan for the new truck plant?

We will sell about 6,000 units of Trumps in the current fiscal. The total investment over the next three years will be over Rs 1,000 crore.

### What is the gameplan for the export business?

Our current exports account for approximately five percent of the turnover. Our aim is to grow up to 10 percent over a three-year period.

### Force Motors' presence in the tractor market is not significant. What is the average sale of tractors and do you plan to develop new products?

In one of our best years, we manufactured about 6,000 tractors. We have so far, sold in the region of 30,000 tractors. Tractors continue to be an important product in our portfolio. We are working to grow this product both on the front end as also on the product platform side. You will see this business gaining larger volumes shortly.

### Are you increasing your manpower? If yes, in which departments?

More than simply enhancing manpower, we are focusing on training and ensuring that we have young, energetic and motivated teams in each area and business.



Test mules of Force Motors' new SUV have clocked over 300,000km.



Force Motors' SUV could take on M&M's next SUV (W201).



New SUV will also gun for Tata Safari customers.