A small car for a small family: building India’s first ‘people’s car’

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ABSTRACT
The Maruti Suzuki joint venture between the Government of India and the Japanese Suzuki Motor Corporation in 1983 launched India’s first ‘people’s car’ – the Maruti 800. This article argues that the conceptualisation and promotion of the Maruti 800 as the ideal car for a small, middle class family revealed subtle continuities with the controversial family planning programme of the state which had reached its peak during the internal ‘Emergency’ of 1975. By associating the Maruti 800 – an object of aspiration for an emerging middle class and of at least potential mass consumption – with a small family, the state reiterated its message of population control albeit subliminally. The article further suggests that the adoption of Japanese management practices at Maruti, which laid emphasis on hard work and loyalty to the company-family, was in line with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s desire to enforce discipline and enhance labour productivity, a notion also vocalised during the Emergency. Finally, the article illustrates how the ‘people’s car’ project placed the Indian state as the ‘driver’ of middle class aspirations and mobility in 1980s’ India, a full decade before the liberalisation reforms of 1991.

KEYWORDS
Indian middle class; consumption; car ownership; family planning; population control; Japanese management

Introduction
Maruti Suzuki has announced halting the production of its iconic first small car, the Maruti 800, which revolutionised road transport for millions of Indians … In many ways, the Maruti 800 was the first harbinger of liberalisation … [It] symbolised a revolution of expectations in India – a Maruti culture of sorts. As it passes into the footnote of history in India’s automobile industry, that culture lives on. (‘The car that symbolised middle class dreams’, New Indian Express, 12 February 2014)

In the early 1980s, the passenger car market in India was dominated by two private sector players: Hindustan Motors, owned by the Birla family which manufactured the ‘Ambassador’, and Premier Automobiles Limited, owned by the Walchand Group which manufactured the ‘Padmini’. The two accounted for most car sales in India, a commodity deemed a luxury at the time (D’Costa 2005, 85). When the Maruti Suzuki joint venture between the Government of India and Suzuki Motor Corporation of Japan was launched in 1983, it was expected to produce 20,000 vehicles between 1984-85, ultimately targeting to reach 100,000 vehicles by 1988-89 (‘Rs. 269-crore Maruti project approved’, Times of India, 18 August 1982). Within a decade from its inception, Maruti achieved its first major milestone as the only Indian automobile company to have produced a million vehicles. By March 2011, the number jumped to 10 million, and in May 2015, Maruti’s 15 millionth car rolled out from the company’s sprawling new manufacturing plant in Manesar, Haryana. Today, Maruti Suzuki manufactures 1.5 million ‘family cars’ annually.
Maruti’s early history is largely a political one, marred by accusations of nepotistic favours, bankruptcy, and an overarching and inefficient public sector administration of the 1970s in India. This article explores Maruti’s dynamic comeback in 1983 when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi assumed the role of the project’s unofficial ‘brand ambassador’. It examines the birth of a unique Maruti work culture and its significance for Indian industry at the time. It argues that the adoption of Japanese management practices with their emphasis on hard work and loyalty to the company were in line with Gandhi’s desire to project the virtues of national productivity and discipline previously vocalised during the internal ‘Emergency’ of 1975. More significantly, the article suggests that the conceptualisation and promotion of the Maruti 800 as the ideal car for a small, middle class family revealed subtle continuities with the controversial family planning programme of the state which had reached its peak during the Emergency. Finally, the article illustrates how the ‘people’s car’ project placed the Indian state as the ‘driver’ of middle class aspirations and mobility in 1980s’ India, a full decade before the wholesale adoption of the liberalisation reforms of 1991.

Indeed state-sponsored spectacles like Maruti were some of the earliest attempts to ‘reintegrate’ the Indian economy with global markets following roughly three decades of inward looking economic policy based on ‘socialist’ principles of self-reliance and import substituting industrialisation (D’Costa 2005). From the late 1970s onwards, policy changes led to a gradual deregulation of previously state-owned industries, thereby opening the economy to foreign participation. Globally, around the same time, there was emerging consensus around liberalisation and market-led development championed most prominently by multinational aid agencies such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

It is important to note that in the case of India, this ‘opening up’ did not result in (nor was it intended to) in a withdrawal of the state from the economy (Kohli 2006; Rodrik and Subramanian 2005). Rather the example of Maruti demonstrates the growing influence of alternative economic models which combined elements of market capitalism with state authority. This ideology found resonance amongst the chief economic advisors strategically appointed by Gandhi in the early 1980s, including L. K. Jha, Manmohan Singh, Montek Singh Ahluwalia, and P. V. Narasimha Rao who implemented India’s economic reforms in 1991 as Prime Minister and was a fervent believer in the redemptive power of the state’ (Sitapati 2016, 269). Arguably, state-directed capitalism captured the zeitgeist of the period as exhibited by the successes of the ‘East-Asian Tigers’ between the 1960s and 1990s – Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan – where high growth rates were attributed to an interventionist industrial policy on the one hand, and ‘Asian values’ of discipline, loyalty, and collectivism on the other. The compatibility between statist regimes and the market was also demonstrated by China under Deng Xiaoping, who presided over the country’s spectacular economic reconstruction in the 1980s. The ‘internationalisation’ of the auto industry in India through the Maruti project is situated within this national and global context which saw the ideology of self-reliance trumped by greater market integration under the guiding hand of the state (D’Costa 2005, 80–81).

The state continued to exercise considerable influence not only in determining the economic trajectory of the nation, but in its wake and from a sociological standpoint also summoned into being a highly visible, aspirational, and consumer-conscious middle class. As Fernandes (2009) observes, the Indian state has ‘remained a central agent in shaping the material dimensions of new middle class formation’ (227). In the 1980s, the emerging lifestyle of consumption and its associated vocabularies did not arise ‘purely as a function of changing consumer preferences … or simply because middle class individuals [were] responding to new global images and lifestyle practices’ (ibid). Rather the state played a significant role in introducing these images to the middle class and legitimizing consumerist fantasies. By emphasizing and evaluating the state’s conscious embrace of the ‘global’ in this formative decade, this article thus seeks to introduce the high-profile example of Maruti to two parallel but related sets of historiographies on the political economy of Indian liberalisation and of its greatest champion and agent, the Indian middle class.
In addition to secondary literature on the subject, the article is informed by primary accounts, in particular printed memoirs and autobiographies of bureaucrats, technocrats, and political advisors serving during the Indira Gandhi years such as R. C. Bhargava, V. Krishnamurthy, and K. K. Birla amongst others. These ‘insider’ reflections are crucial in puzzling together events of the 1970s and 80s from varying and often conflicting perspectives leading up to the establishment of Maruti Suzuki. They are especially helpful given limited access to the private papers of Indira and Sanjay Gandhi. Parliamentary debates in the Indian Lok Sabha also offer a glimpse into the political mood and reactions to the highly contentious Maruti project in the context of the Emergency. Given the article’s focus on the urban middle class, articles and letters to the editor in English dailies, periodicals and magazines popular amongst this readership were consulted, namely Times of India, Hindustan Times, Illustrated Weekly of India, and India Today sourced at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in Delhi. A readership survey conducted by the Indian Institute of Public Opinion (1982, 22) revealed that of 6,000 respondents in metropolitan cities, 58% read editorials, and 59% read letters to the editor ‘regularly’ or at least ‘occasionally’. Public opinion surveys themselves are useful tools to gauge general attitudes and sentiments of the public. The article references monthly surveys conducted by the private Indian Institute of Public Opinion, targeting ‘literate’ households across four metropolitan cities in India (available at the University of Oxford). Albeit limited in scope and audience, these surveys are helpful in studying emerging middle class opinions and positions on a range of issues from family planning to spending patterns on consumer items. The above survey also revealed that 44% respondents read newspaper advertisements ‘regularly’, 20% ‘occasionally’, and only 9% were ‘not interested’ (ibid.). Brosius (2011, 105) has argued that messages communicated through visual material such as advertisements enable a better understanding of the ‘aspirations and anxieties of producers and consumers of the images’ in different performative contexts. The text accompanying the images also reveals intentionally constructed associations between the reader and the image. For example, newspaper advertisements for the Maruti 800 revealed as much about the statist message of family planning as they did about middle class attitudes towards consumption. These visual archives (including internal publicity material shared by a former Maruti employee) offer deeper insight into the deliberate ways in which Maruti was promoted to this audience. Finally, to examine the genealogy of family planning policies in India, declassified documents of the Planning Commission of India and the World Bank were consulted, as well as promotional material such as posters and advertisements appearing in reports by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare accessible at the National Archives of India.

The article begins by contextualising the Maruti project against the political events of the 1970s in India, in particular the Emergency. It explores how the ‘small car’ concept was aligned with and informed by debates on population control and family planning prevalent at the time. Following sections examine the role of an ascendent middle class in championing this concept and imagining the Maruti 800 as a symbol of socio-economic mobility. The final section looks at the management culture at Maruti wherein familiar notions of productivity and discipline were reintroduced by the state and popularly upheld in the newly liberalising environment of the 1980s.

**The need for a ‘people’s car’**

Within six months of emerging victorious in the 1980 elections, Indira Gandhi faced the biggest jolt of her personal and political life – that of losing her ‘favourite’ son and political heir, Sanjay, to a plane crash. Many commentators have argued that the relaunch of Sanjay’s brainchild, Maruti – which he had envisioned as India’s first ‘people’s car’ in the early 1970s – was closely tied to Gandhi’s involvement in the project, and her keenness to personally ensure that her son’s dream of making a car for the Indian middle class was fulfilled. Soon after Sanjay’s death, she put together a team of technocratic ‘experts’ who were to carry forward his legacy. Taking up the ‘people’s car’ project also bolstered Gandhi’s own agenda of addressing urban middle class demands for car...
ownership at the time, which paved the way for other consumer durables to enter the Indian market through liberalisation in the 1980s (more on which later). Maruti, as a joint venture between the government and the private Japanese corporation, Suzuki Motors Ltd., was chosen to set the precedent.

It was in the 1960s that the Planning Commission of India had first reached out to several European manufacturers to collaborate on a low-cost, small car project. French company, Renault, had been identified as a potential partner. However, the idea did not take off then as it was argued that producing a passenger car for a small minority of the population did not align with the ‘socialist’ priorities of the state at the time (Bhargava 2010, 2; Gupta 1979, 2). The looming threat of war with Pakistan and an unfavourable economic climate thereafter meant that the ‘people’s car’ project could not be moved up the list of priorities for the government.

The project was given new impetus in the 1970s when Sanjay assumed heightened power on the back of Indira Gandhi’s spectacular electoral victory in 1971. Despite receiving preferential treatment, from obtaining a special manufacturing license to acquiring land for his factory, Sanjay’s Maruti was riddled with charges of corruption and financial mismanagement from the get-go. The company was finally rescued when the government formally nationalised it under the Maruti Limited (Acquisition and Transfer of Undertakings) Act of 1980 (Bhargava 2010, 12).

French company Renault was back in consideration in 1981 as Gandhi’s team of experts sought foreign collaboration, not least to lend credibility to the failed car project (ibid.). Initially, the Ministry of Heavy Industries favoured a collaboration with Renault to manufacture a ‘family sedan’ model called ‘R18’. However, Maruti’s first chairman, V. Krishnamurthy, reveals in his memoirs that the executives were unsure whether a larger sedan was the appropriate choice for the Indian market given that talks up until then had only been regarding a smaller car (Krishnamurthy 2014, 139). At this point, director of marketing and Maruti’s current chairman, R. C. Bhargava, suggested creating a market survey to directly hear from the consumer about the kind of ‘family car’ they aspired to own. In typical bureaucratic fashion, there was plenty of opposition to the survey as officials from the Ministry argued that Indian families were large and would naturally prefer larger sedans. Nonetheless, they went ahead and commissioned the Indian Market Research Bureau to conduct the survey.

Krishnamurthy notes that first, the survey itself was a ‘path breaking exercise’ by a public sector company ‘at a time when such surveys were rare even in the private sector’ (Krishnamurthy 2014, 140). Second, the results of the survey presented unanticipated results – almost ninety percent of car usage was with four or less people, confined to urban city limits, and that customers sought fuel efficiency, reliability, and low initial cost (ibid.). The survey clearly revealed an urban customer base with smaller families, and a middle class value-for-money attitude towards consumer goods. Armed with statistics, the Maruti Board now sought out small car manufacturers suitable for partnership, and the focus shifted eastward to Japan which specialized in small cars (D’Costa 2005, 85). The decision to partner with Suzuki Motor Corporation in 1982 to manufacture the ‘Maruti 800’ was met with enthusiasm. As a Congress Party leader summarised in Parliament:

Production of a small passenger car in the country was a dream … and we are pleased with our Prime Minister, Shrimati Indira Gandhi, under whose Government with her personal efforts these small passenger cars are going to be produced in our country (sic). These are to be used by the middle class people of our country. It is a long cherished demand of the people. This small passenger car, as the people say, will be the people’s car. (Government of India 1982a, 4)

The Emergency of 1975

In hindsight, the results of the survey were not surprising at all. In fact, the way in which the Maruti 800 was conceptualised, designed, and advertised, particularly its small family car image, reinforced the ‘a small family is a happy family’ rhetoric heavily promoted by the state during the Indira Gandhi years most infamously during the Emergency. The twenty-one-month long Emergency (1975-1977) is remembered as a watershed in India’s democratic history due to its ban on political dissent, suspension of constitutional rights, press censorship, and imprisonment of leaders in the opposition.
The period witnessed Gandhi’s attempts to address socio-economic issues that were perceived to be the cause of several domestic crises at the time. She devised a ‘Twenty-Point Programme’ of reform encompassing land redistribution, housing for the poor, and higher wages for workers amongst other things, using the Emergency’s rhetorical ‘discipline of the graveyard’ to compel economic growth. But the Emergency quickly came to be associated with Sanjay Gandhi’s own ‘Five-Point Programme’. Sanjay, as leader of Congress’ youth wing, formulated a programme that included slum demolitions to beautify cities, and family planning which assumed its most exploitative form in mass sterilisation camps concentrated in the northern states of Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, and Delhi.

The Emergency evoked mixed responses from international audiences. Whilst many lamented the death of democracy, some also viewed Gandhi’s actions, especially on population control, as necessary corrective measures for the economic issues the country was grappling with at the time. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank had for years been pressing Gandhi to dismantle her populist economic policies and impose discipline in the country (Roy 1978, 11). In May 1976, in the middle of the Emergency, the World Bank published a report that lauded India’s efforts to alleviate the economic hardship faced by millions. The draconian measures undertaken were championed as a welcome turn of events, described as ‘adjustment efforts’ (Koshy 1978, 57). Forced sterilisations and other human rights violations were disregarded whilst political protests and strikes were seen as a wasteful ‘reduction of man hours’ (ibid.). The Soviet Union acknowledged the ‘efforts of India’s progressive forces to solve its socio-economic problems’ calling it a ‘brave new experiment in democracy’, whilst a British parliamentarian concurred that India desperately needed the ‘smack of firm government’ (52, 55). Robert McNamara, President of the World Bank, defended Gandhi’s population control measures stating, ‘No government really wants to resort to coercion in this matter. But neither can any government afford to let population pressures grow so dangerously large that frustrations finally erupt into irrational violence and civil disintegration’ (Connelly 2008, 332).

This preoccupation with population statistics was part of a wider, global discourse and attack on the populations of developing countries largely led by multinational aid agencies often ostensibly in the form of development programmes. The overall attitude of international institutions was reflected in their consideration of India’s ‘great achievements’ when deciding the contributions to the Aid-India consortium set up during this period. Despite knowledge of the nature of the family planning programme during the Emergency, development aid from the World Bank increased from 10,693 million rupees in 1973-74 to 14,180 million rupees in 1974-75 and 15,620 million rupees in 1975-76 (Roy 1978, 12). In 1983 Gandhi was also awarded the United Nations Population Award for her efforts in ‘population-related activities’, alongside the Chinese minister responsible for developing the infamous one-child policy (Population Council 1983).

The language used to propagandise population control was replete with references to economic development, which concealed the true extent of its coercive approach. For instance, in 1969, president of the Population Council, Bernard Berelson, argued that ‘whether programmes for eliminating population growth are or are not politically acceptable depend largely upon whether they are perceived as positive or negative, where positive means that they are seen as promoting not only population limitation but other social benefits as well and where negative means they are limited to population control’ (Berelson 1969, 534). Berelson’s words were fundamental to the language of population policy espoused by international donors and adopted by Indian policymakers to create positive associations between population control and individual welfare and reproductive freedom.

At the same time, the very concept of population control was perceived as regulatory and intrusive in the most private aspects of familial life, not least in a largely conservative society such as India’s. Despite several attempts by the state to reiterate the logic of population-based under-development, there was no significant change in attitudes towards fertility. Considering this, the illusive concept of family planning was incorporated into the population agenda. It was felt that population
policies needed to be integrated into a comprehensive development programme that had bearing upon the basic determinants of fertility such as education, improvement in the status of women, child-care, female empowerment, and labour force participation. However, the small family aspect was given primacy over the attainment of social well-being. For instance, when combined with education about contraception, there was disparate emphasis on terminal methods such as sterilisation (see Williams 2013). The government also acted to broaden the legitimacy and appeal of its population programme by offering rewards and incentives such as food subsidies and health services for increased rates of participation in family planning (Kasun 1981).

One of the earliest documents to comprehensively analyse family planning policy in post-independent India was the Bell Report of 1964. The report commissioned by the World Bank suggested expanding family planning services by integrating them with health services, whilst specifying that ‘integration with other services is good but not if family planning comes second’ (Bell 1965, 47). The report acknowledged ‘the advantage of finality’ was an ‘attractive feature’ of sterilisation, urging support for a government policy to provide free surgeries and building infrastructure for sterilisation (31). Following Bernard Bell’s visit to India, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare sought to intensify its publicity on family planning which included short feature films produced by the Films Divisions of India (a government-owned entity responsible for producing educational content and documentaries), and staging of various exhibitions in rural areas.

Although the Bell Report suggested the means to bring about faster fertility reduction, it was Berelson’s highly influential paper Beyond Family Planning published in 1969 which explicitly stated that coercive measures needed to be undertaken in developing countries to ‘solve’ their population problem (Berelson 1969, 533). Berelson stressed the ‘time penalty’ involved in the population debate and the need to address it as quickly as possible. He argued that the concept of family planning was closely tied to maternal and child-care, and would gain ready acceptance as a public health measure. Moreover, as it was supposedly voluntary, it could be justified as contributing ‘to the effective personal freedom of individual couples’. However, he believed that a more ‘draastic solution’ needed to be identified as voluntary family planning was ‘not enough’, suggesting ‘a direct manipulation of the family structure itself by introducing nonfamilial distractions such as employment of women outside the house’ (ibid.).

The National Population Policy (NPP) introduced during the Emergency is a testament to the degree of influence these ideas had on population control measures adopted by developing countries. The NPP included a ‘Minimum Needs Programme’ with emphasis on an integrated package of health, family planning, and nutrition (Government of India 1976, 309). Whilst the role of contraceptive knowledge and literacy amongst women was acknowledged, it clearly stated that ‘to simply wait for education and economic development to bring about a drop in fertility is not a practical solution … the time factor is so pressing and the population growth so formidable’ (310). Gandhi too confided, ‘We have tried to be serious but those [voluntary] programmes have not worked and therefore we may now have to take steps that will not be very popular’ (Karlekar 1976, 9).

It is well known that the excesses of the sterilisation campaign were a significant factor behind Gandhi’s electoral defeat in 1977. But even as the Emergency was lifted, S. Chandrasekhar, Minister of Health in 1967 under Gandhi, remarked, ‘What happened during the Emergency brought down the family planning programme into disrepute and slowed down the pace of population control in India’. Despite the negative reactions to the Emergency programme, he urged a continued ‘regulation of population growth for the betterment and welfare of the individual and society’ (Chandrasekhar 1978, 117). These ideas continued to appear as slogans and advertisements in official reports such as one published by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare as late as 1982. On the cover page of this report appeared a small family with two young children having a brick house, proper clothing, and time for study and play. Next to them, the image showed a large family with four children sitting idle with forlorn expressions and empty bowls of food in front of them (Government of India 1982b). Doubling down on this harsh message, Chandrasekhar argued that it was the
‘fundamental biological obligation of all married couples to limit family size to two’, stressing that public opinion was now ‘ready to accept much more stringent measures for family planning’ (Chandrakekhar 1978, 117).

**Population control and middle class aspirations**

In many ways, the results of the Maruti survey echoed Chandrasekhar’s views, and validated an already prevalent norm of nuclear families amongst urban middle class (and primarily upper caste) households in India (Rajagopal 2011, 1017). This segment of the middle class was also generally supportive of the Emergency, not least of the family planning programme. Another survey conducted by the Indian Institute of Public Opinion (1981) concluded that family planning, at least in urban areas, was ‘accepted as an imperative for a better family life’ (3). The demand for a small passenger car, then, reflected what was already considered to be an acceptable family size in urban India. Crucially, the car as the most visible identity marker of an aspirational middle class had the potential to widely project the image of an ideal family across a larger demographic, or amongst the masses. Fernandes and Heller (2006) argue that a ‘dominant fraction’ of the middle class projects a politics of consumption that ‘hold[s] out the promise of inclusion to other aspiring social segments’ who look to this class and emulate its distinct practices and behaviours (501). Car ownership, at the time limited to the upper segments of the middle class or the ‘dominant fraction’, figured crucially in the process of defining the parameters of what it meant to be (and to be seen as) middle class and partake in exclusive middle class rituals (Nielsen and Wilhite 2015, 12).

Mazzarella (2003) in his fascinating study of advertising in contemporary India illustrates how the family planning campaign during the Emergency failed precisely due to its moralising and dictatorial tone. The message of practicing safe sex through family planning was communicated top-down by way of statist orders, failure to follow which resulted in punishment in the form of involuntary sterilisation. Even the advertisement campaign for the state-sponsored condom brand ‘Nirodh’ (which translates into restraint or control) ‘seemed detached and admonitory’. Mazzarella argues that the ‘stern tone of these communications … was a symptom of the government’s distance from the sensate lives of the people’ (68-71). Against this, the subliminal nature of the Maruti campaign underlining the same message of population control reveals the change in government communication tactics from coercion to consent during this period (see Rajagopal 2011). Rebranding family planning as ‘A People’s Programme’, a report by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare hinted at the same idea, stating that ‘intensified efforts will be made to spread awareness and information about the small family concept by effective and imaginative use of multi-media and interpersonal communication strategies’ (Government of India 1982b, 61).

This idea was given new impetus with the introduction of the colour television and advanced satellite technology in the mid-1980s. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting published a report called ‘An Indian Personality for Television’ in 1985 laying out the distinct ways in which effective communication could address population concerns, which was ‘one of the most exciting – and exciting – challenges facing the country’ (Government of India 1985a, 125). It noted that television and Doordarshan (state-owned broadcaster) programming had ‘an immediacy and intimacy’ which made it a powerful communication tool. Systematic attempts were made to ‘create the circumstances’ in which the smaller family concept could be ‘perceived to be, in reality, as advantageous as the communication messages claim’ (126). It called for a ‘redifinition of family planning communication’ seemingly different from the earlier top-down approach to one which would emphasise ‘the ability of the human being to take a conscious decision regarding a very basic intimate aspect of life that signifies control on its course’ (emphasis in original) (127).

Other recommendations proposed using culture-specific communication tactics targeting communities and religious groups that were particularly lagging behind in accepting family planning (137). These groups typically included rural and urban poor, Muslims, and low-caste Hindus, all of whom were collectively identified as backward.
Family planning also began making an appearance on television as state-sponsored entertainment, drawing upon a pre-existing international repertoire of techniques in population management. Former director general of Doordarshan, Bhaskar Ghose, recalls that in the early 1980s an American non-profit called the Population Communications International met the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in India, putting forward the idea of using soap operas to communicate social messages subliminally (Ghose 2005, 34). The Ministry responded positively, and Gandhi invited Miguel Sabido to India, ‘a pioneering producer of soap operas in Mexico who had used them successfully to carry messages about family planning’ (ibid). Ghose remarks that this was ‘seen as something of a genius’ by media authorities in India (ibid.).

Thus was launched India’s first and one of its most iconic soap operas *Hum Log* (‘We the People’) (1984-85). Against the setting of a nuclear middle class family, the show took on social issues such as caste harmony, empowerment of women, and Hindu-Muslim marriage. It was argued that ‘in those six or eight characters on the show, you had a set of new Indian values … a different approach to caste, eliminating the idea of Untouchables. This was a bold and beautiful vision of what India could be’ (‘How soap operas changed the world’, *BBC News*, 27 April 2012).

**Becoming properly middle class**

In a documentary capturing key moments of the 1980s in India, media critic Santosh Desai notes, ‘Maruti represented mobility. But in my view, not just mobility between Point A and Point B. But in the sense that I can move from Point A and Point B in my life’ (National Geographic 2013). The Maruti 800 had established its target demographic amongst middle class professionals concentrated in cities for whom the dream of car ownership was now within reach. However, the passenger car was still beyond the financial means of the average Indian consumer. In fact, Maruti went on to replace the Ambassador as the symbol of middle class luxury – ‘the dream car’ – and remained over-booked well into the mid-1990s.

Yet it is remarkable how the Maruti 800 transformed the car from a luxury good into an object of ‘at least potential mass consumption’ (Kelly 1995, 416). It successfully captured the imagination of millions and furthered the aspiration of owning a car and other consumer items in India. As Desai recalls, Maruti symbolised mobility beyond the middle class:

> The Maruti freed us from our scripts. For most of us, who were born in the middle class only to die there, the car was a border we could imagine crossing … The Maruti compressed the promise of consumerism in its appearance, performance and price. It flung the doors of aspiration wide open and made us believe for the first time we could escape the middle class … In a larger sense, it made us experience the power of desire and the exhilaration of being in the driver’s seat. (Desai 2015)

Although the middle class has always been associated with an aspirational culture, the 1980s witnessed the state, for the first time, legitimising and ‘selling’ this culture to the public. Maruti 800’s lottery-based allotment process⁵ and advertisement as the ‘people’s car’ were important signals of the state’s active participation in recognizing and even spurring middle class demands for other consumer goods in the market. This signalling effect was accompanied by policy changes. As an article in the popular *India Today* magazine highlighted:

> Over the last decade, a money-hungry government has actually slashed personal income tax rates from a maximum of 97 per cent to no more than 50 per cent, and sharply reduced the excise and customs duties on the kind of goods especially dear to the middle class: two-wheelers, cars, refrigerators … TV sets, and all manner of consumer electronic goods. At one extreme, the customs duty on even Scotch whisky was slashed last fortnight! (‘Rise of the middle class’, *India Today*, 16 December 1985)

The change in the government’s attitude towards consumption was also demonstrated by the visual and textual vocabularies of consumer goods’ advertisements that flooded newspapers and magazines at the time often preceding their actual availability in the market (Ross 1995, 27). Most passenger car advertisements in the 1950s and 1960s described the car as a sought-after luxury with
phrases such as ‘a cut above the rest’, ‘the ideal car for the chauffeur-driven’, ‘luxuriously upholstered’, etc. The descriptions reflected the reality of the time as car ownership was limited to political and business elites. Advertisements for the Ambassador, for example, showed wealthy couples as passengers of their chauffeur-driven car – men dressed in Western suits and women in saris with jewels around their neck. These contrast with advertisements for the Maruti 800 and other ‘owner-driven’ cars introduced in the market post-1991. Most Maruti advertisements depicted a nuclear family – a housewife with her two children and briefcase-carrying husband with the car in the foreground. Phrases such as ‘family car’, ‘value for money’, ‘economical’, and ‘user friendly’ especially targeted first-time buyers.

These creative yet carefully crafted representations of the ideal middle class family also reinforced gender roles. Ross notes how automobile advertisements have historically depicted the car as ‘l’aime de l’homme’ or ‘man’s friend’ as the ‘conjugal partner’ to household items like refrigerators and cooking appliances showcased as ‘les amis de la femme’ or ‘woman’s friends’ (Ross 1995, 24). Playing on these stereotypes, many commentators noted that Maruti 800’s small design actually turned out to be liberating for women who could now drive independently for the first time. Previously, women would not be seen driving the bulky Ambassador. For women, automobility therefore ‘came to mean freedom’ (National Geographic 2013).

In the 1990s, advertisements for Maruti referenced population control more directly. A poster celebrating the production of Maruti’s 1.5 millionth car exclaimed, ‘One Population Clock India is Proud Of’ (Maruti Udyog Limited 1996, 4–5), whilst another showed the small Maruti 800 as ideal for only one child, but spacious enough to fit a plethora of toys and consumer goods purchased. Interestingly, the imagery and language of car advertisements also became bolder and rife with double entendre. For instance, a 1998 advertisement for the Maruti Suzuki ‘Esteem’ showed a female model in a Western dress next to the car, and the text read:

The shape that will launch a thousand sighs – Body coloured bumpers hold you in a warm embrace. The driving seat fits snug. The upholstery works its magic over you. The soft, moulded dashboard seduces you, with controls within easy reach. An engine responds to your nearest touch. The 1998 Esteem. Get set for sighs of admiration.

The campaign for Esteem was designed to capture a new demographic with sign-off statements such as ‘What Men With Drive Will Drive’ and ‘Much More Than Luxury’. Another advertisement for Mahindra’s roofless ‘Classic’ model from the period similarly exclaimed, ‘Admit it. You’ve always been crazy about topless models!’

Capturing this consumer frenzy, car dealerships offered unique prizes for making early bookings. One Roshan Motors in Bombay advertised:

Hurry! Hurry! Book Maruti Gypsy/Van and claim your fabulous prizes – Suzuki motor cycle, air-conditioner, refrigerator, music system, personal computer, colour television, etc. etc. (Times of India, 14 August 1985, 9)

One advertisement even incorporated Maruti 800’s small image to advertise air conditioning services:

When your car is an extension of your workplace … A cool interior is the best way to keep your cool. Papers, papers and yet more papers! Reports to read, speeches to go over, signatures to be made. A never ending stream of work that spills over your normal working hours. And faithfully accompanies you every day in your car to-and-from your office from-and-to your home! (Times of India, 22 May 1985, 5)

This advertisement showed a well-dressed male sitting at his office desk inside the Maruti 800, and is a good example of a new logic in advertising that became popular during this period, combining the idea of working hard (‘work that spills over your normal working hours’) to fulfil aspirational, primarily material, desires. In this case, the reward for a hard day’s work was the air-conditioned car with its promise of shielding one from the grime and pollution of the city. The car as ‘l’aime de l’homme’ symbolised the paternal duty of the male breadwinner to care for his family outside the home as a conjugal partner to feminine domesticity inside the home. In a powerful way, these advertisements also represented the business world as an exclusive space overwhelmingly dominated by ‘driven’ men.
The language in these advertisements suggested that the privileges of consumer access were now linked to professionalism in the workplace (Patico 2008, 40). The implicit notion of sacrifice alongside the explicit demand to work hard is reminiscent of the masculinised performativity of the nation-building campaign in Nehruvian India (see Roy 1997). However, the statist discourse of working hard and producing for the national good was replaced by rewards for consumption. In this context, Chowdhury argues that modern forms of ‘consumer-citizenship’ are ‘not about rights that collective struggle has forced the state to honour’, nor do they ‘entail civic responsibilities such as voting’. Indeed consumer-citizenship is about ‘economic responsibilities that accompany the act of earning ‘your own living’.’ Similarly, the consumer-citizen is one who contributes to the economy as a ‘responsible earner’, and in turn earns the ‘right’ to consume – ‘Consumption is his reward.’ (2011, 61).

Zhang, writing on the urban middle class in China, argues that the making of class, family, and state is a ‘mutually constructive process’ in the new material world (2016, 1). In particular, he illustrates how middle class lifestyles in China, increasingly associated with the car, are ‘deeply embedded in … the multigenerational familial relationship contoured by state reproductive policies and the new political economy’ (ibid.). This argument has been explored above with the small family concept that was central to Maruti 800’s design and promotion. Additionally, Zhang’s analysis is relevant to the study of the role of state in advancing a set of values consistent with the objectives of making a particular type of consumer-citizen. Following Zhang and Chowdhury, the next section examines how Maruti was a state-made example of the virtues of discipline, hard work, and collectivity found in the new middle class consumer-citizen.

‘Maruti Culture’

The phenomenal success and growth of Maruti may be ascribed to a number of factors. Exceptional government support, preferential duty concessions, liberal permissions to hike prices, the customers’ preference for a new, modern car, the middle class boom in the country – all these have undoubtedly played their part. But by any reckoning, the most crucial factor has been the unique system of Japanese Management practices introduced from the very inception. (Chatterjee 1990, 20)

In his memoirs, Krishnamurthy proudly declares, ‘If there is one organisation which can claim to have been a catalyst for a different kind of work culture, it is Maruti’ (2014, 163). For three decades, India’s public sector institutions were in disrepute for their stifling bureaucracy, inefficiency, and aversion to change. With Maruti, Gandhi sought to transform the image of state-run projects by aligning their work culture with best practices followed in the developed world. As Krishnamurthy stated early on, ‘[Maruti] may be owned by the government, but we have no intention of running this like a government company’ (ibid.).

In particular, the collaboration with Suzuki exposed Maruti to what is popularly understood as the Japanese management system and its core philosophies centred around the worker. In his comprehensive study of management practices at Maruti, Chatterjee examines the influence of Japanese thought on Maruti’s work culture in its formative years. First, Chatterjee outlines the similarities between the Japanese and Indian socio-cultural milieux, particularly the relevance of ‘traditional values and ideologies inherited from their past’ which made it easier for Indians to adopt certain practices (Chatterjee 1990, 2–5). Noting its history of feudalism, Chatterjee compares Japan’s rigid and hereditary class-based hierarchy to the Indian caste system, noting:

Thus, within each social group, the individual knew exactly where he stood in relation to the others, as his status in society was clearly determined by his occupation, age, sex, marital status, wealth, position in the family, and soon his class and sub-class were limited by different sets of elaborate regulations defining political status and responsibilities. (6,7; see Ghose 2005, 318)

In both contexts, individuals were made part of a ‘collectivity-oriented’ society, and the ‘norms and standards of collectivity’ formed ‘the basis of thought and action for every member of the group’
This was in contrast with the Western worldview understood as being centred around the individual. Following this principle, the ‘world of the Japanese salaried worker’ was also ‘monolithic, orderly, and group-oriented’ (19). The worker was inducted into a family-like work complex where his position was based upon seniority and commitment to the company. The worker was encouraged to develop a personal relationship with the organisation, and act with the belief that the two shared ‘the same fate’ (39). This was reiterated by Krishnamurthy in a newspaper advertisement where, speaking about Japanese management, he noted, ‘Individual excellence is subordinated to organisational excellence. The main thrust of an individual’s activity is towards contributing to the performance of the group he belongs to.’ (Times of India, 10 November 1983, 23).

Another central tenet, curiously adopted alongside an enforced hierarchy, was that of egalitarianism. In Maruti, this was associated with the act of treating everyone with dignity regardless of one’s job title. Krishnamurthy writes that there was no class distinction at Maruti – ‘If a rule applied to a worker, it applied to everybody, including me as well. The hours of work, number of holidays, medical benefits, and comforts at the workplace were the same for all categories of employees’ (2014, 166). This general principle is followed to this day and is visible in Maruti’s unique practice of enforcing common uniforms, common canteens, common toilets, and open offices without partitions.

Crucially, the Japanese insistence on punctuality, discipline, and discipline-linked productivity was strongly enforced in Maruti (Krishnamurthy 2014, 163). This took several ‘Japanese-style manifestations’ such as arriving at the workplace fifteen minutes early, morning ‘limbering up’ exercises, regimented time clocks, and making attendance a criterion to determine promotions (Chatterjee 1990, 39). Although these practices were not coercive, they were communicated clearly in weekly meetings and circulars personally drafted by Krishnamurthy. Chatterjee notes that official circulars were distributed once every two or three months, and addressed a wide range of subjects ‘which collectively formed the core of a well-defined and distinctively ‘Japanese Maruti Culture’ (41-42). In one circular, Krishnamurthy enlisted its basic philosophies:

Dear Colleague … A compliance of the work culture with the organisational objectives is very essential. In order that we comply with the basic objectives adopted by Maruti since its inception, viz., fostering efficiency, productivity and team spirit, we have to start with the basic pre-requisite of creating an environment where only a ‘we’ feeling dominates – where each one of us considers himself/herself to be an important member of one large Maruti family. (Krishnamurthy 2014, 92–94)

On the concept of ‘Maruti as a Family’, he noted:

Remembering that each of us is a member of a family – either as a father, mother, son or daughter – our task is to adhere with those very familial norms at our place of work – of each member helping the fellow-workers with their work and problems, building a congenial atmosphere of openness and developing a sense of pride from being a member of the Maruti family. (ibid.)

Another circular explained other Japanese principles worthy of emulation such as ‘discipline’, ‘time management’, and ‘combined responsibility’ (99-101).

Interestingly similar instructive phrases were vocalised by the Congress Party during the Emergency, both to justify it and give it legitimacy. When the Emergency was proclaimed, it was justified as necessary to reinstate economic and political stability. The lack of collective discipline amongst hoarders and smugglers in the black market, and others who had carried out numerous strikes, bandhs, and lock-outs was viewed as a serious challenge for the economy which had to be put back on track (Rajagopal 2011, 1021). Thus Gandhi’s ‘Twenty-Point Programme’ was announced with its focus on the economy, and punishment of tax evaders and smugglers. Disciplinary rhetoric was reproduced in the public sphere as imaginative visual campaigns ‘framed in such a way that one was expected to agree and, perhaps, pass the word on’ (Rajagopal 2011, 1026). Rajagopal examines a series of Emergency-era posters that conveyed statist dictums garbed in the language of national progress. Describing the images, Rajagopal notes how ‘The nation was ‘on
the move’ and there was much to be done (1026-1027). A popular phrase urged, ‘Iron will and hard work shall sustain us’, whilst another reiterated Gandhi’s ‘Call for National Unity and Discipline’:

This is a time for unity and discipline. I am fully confident that with each day the situation will improve and that in this task our people, in towns and villages, will give us their full support, so that the country will be strengthened. (1030)

Rajagopal argues that these slogans were ‘genre-crossing, government propaganda’ meant to be interpreted as ‘conditions’ to be obeyed by all (1034).

In the same spirit, Gandhi declared 1982 as the ‘Year of Productivity’, identifying a set of tasks to be fulfilled by responsible citizens. However, this time the message of discipline, hard work, and collectivity was repackaged and given legitimacy through positive national projects like Maruti. Unlike the Emergency, the message was not coercive but rather persuasive and applied in the right setting, not as propaganda but as an emotive appeal to the influential middle class. In its formal vocabulary, the company replaced the nation, and the worker was now the consumer-citizen of the very object he had produced. What remained unchanged was the idea that discipline and hard work would sustain the nation, and in this case the family-like work complex of the company.

Notably Japan emerged on top in multiple opinion surveys conducted in the 1980s on the domestic ‘image’ of countries. It consistently ranked before the U.S.S.R., U.S.A., West Germany, and the U.K. In numerous advertisements, Japan was credited for its unique post-war capitalism which combined ‘high technology and an unflagging willingness to work hard’. For instance, an advertisement for the Maruti 800 noted:

At the end of the second world war, two atomic bombs very nearly blasted a tiny island out-of-existence. Not a single citizen of that country sat back amidst the rubble and destruction and said ‘what can I alone do?’. Instead, they got to work right away. Licked the wounds of their battle scarred nation and rebuilt it from scratch, each one chipping in. Today, Japan leads the world in virtually every sphere. (Times of India, 16 December 1983, 8)

The adoption of Japanese management practices at Maruti led many to recognise the government’s attempts to change the image of public sector institutions. One reader in the Times of India perceptively noted this conscious ‘move away’ from the ‘Western’ model:

Maruti’s real significance lies in the hitherto under-emphasised fact that it is the first high-profile, heavy industry – and that too in the public sector – which is acquiring not merely Japanese economic and technical assistance but also adopting in a big way the Japanese style of management, production and organisation. Indeed, it represents India’s first major attempt to move away from the industrial stereotypes of the West and experiment with methods that have ushered in the most spectacular economic success of the latter half of the twentieth century. (‘Importance of Maruti’, Times of India, 16 December 1983)

Introducing Japanese work ethic to the Indian socio-cultural setting was an ambitious task. However, Japanese methods were adopted relatively easily as most recruits were young graduates with no prior work experience. As Chatterjee observes, the average age of the Maruti employee in 1983 was only twenty-six years:

Youth, with its lack of rigidity, openness of mind and willingness to accept new ideas, readily took to the novel concepts propounded by the Company, and accepted them enthusiastically … Maruti’s new, novel, utterly modern plant and work practices captivated their imaginations and instilled in them a sense of pride and total commitment. (1990, 41)

Krishnamurthy similarly notes that young recruits had no preconceived notions about working hours, overtime, and ‘other hang-ups’ common amongst blue collar workers at the time. He was thus able to introduce a range of ‘good practices relating to discipline and professionalism’ (2014, 164).

As part of their training, employees were sent to Japan to gain first-hand experience in a traditional Japanese setting. The training included a language learning programme and residency with locals to encourage learning about Japanese family culture. This ‘grooming’ was part of the dream job at Maruti for hundreds of graduates who were carefully selected from the best
technical institutes in the country. As former managing director of Maruti, Jagdish Khattar, reveals:

In the mid-1980s, it was indeed special for a young man to work in the company, enjoying as it did Gandhi’s patronage and the enthusiastic response from the market, not to speak of Maruti’s large ‘family’ of dealers, workshops, and suppliers. (Khattar 2013, 176)

A current employee who joined Maruti in 1985 recalled the thrill of traveling to Japan for the first time and forming many long-lasting friendships with a select group of engineers from across Asia. For many, even more memorable was the abundance of every consumer good imaginable – cameras, video recorders, and calculators – that filled suitcases on their journey back home.

**Conclusion**

Recent experiments with authoritarianism in India have led to a resurging interest in the Emergency and its various socio-economic programmes. Yet Maruti 800’s conceptualisation as the ideal car for a middle class family has received little academic attention despite its obvious association with Sanjay Gandhi, the Emergency, and family planning. As this article suggests, in the 1970s an influential segment of the middle class upheld the small family norm and articulated it in its demand for a small ‘people’s car’. This segment of the middle class was largely urban, upper-caste, engaged in professional services, championed the nuclear family concept, and supported the Emergency’s family planning programme. Indeed, as Fernandes and Heller (2006, 503–4) observe, the Emergency was an extreme example of the state’s ‘exclusionary measures’ to cater to this specific fraction.

Importantly, the article has argued that the positioning of the Maruti 800 as an object of desire by this influential segment was crucial to its adoption amongst other social groups. In 2008 another Indian brand, Tata Motors, attempted to follow Maruti with the launch of its own small car, the ‘Nano’. The Nano, as Nielsen and Wilhite (2015, 8) argue, was ‘promoted and represented to tap into, and become iconic of, the ideas, desires and aspirations of ‘New India’, or broadly of its burgeoning middle class’. From the outset, the Nano was advertised as an ideal, small and fuel efficient car for Indian roads. It claimed to be the cheapest passenger car in the market at the time, specifically targeting the lower middle class, or ‘motorcycled’ families looking to purchase their first car. It,
However, failed to capture the ‘upper middle segment’ or the ‘dominant fraction’ of the Indian market which ‘exerts a greater influence in terms of defining standards’ and aspirations for other fractions of the same class (ibid., 11). It was precisely due to its ‘cheap’ image that the Nano came to be associated less with affordability, and more as the poor man’s vehicle. Crucially, the anxiety ‘about the possibility of downward mobility’ (Jeffrey 2010, 5) by owning a car that was seen as ‘less than everybody else’s car’ was a major factor in the project’s failure (Nielsen and Wilhite 2015, 11). The shifting nature of identity-defining objects in twenty first century India, and the image of the Nano as the ‘people’s car’ or the car for the masses, precluded it from seeing success the way the Maruti 800 did in the early 1980s. Today Maruti Suzuki also seeks to reach beyond its established market demographic of lower middle class families by attracting a premium segment of younger, luxury-seeking buyers who aspire to own larger SUVs. The company has recently opened a line of special showrooms which only sell ‘spacious’ luxury cars in exclusive urban centres. The desire to own larger cars incidentally mirrors a continuously declining fertility rate and a smaller family size observed amongst all sections of the Indian population (Government of India 2021). Production of the Nano was halted in 2018. In February 2014, at the grand and spectacular ‘Auto Expo’ show in New Delhi, the Maruti 800 was also given a rather unspectacular ‘quiet and solemn burial’ (‘End of road for India’s beloved Maruti 800, company stops production’, Hindustan Times, 14 February 2014). It was an event of ‘emotional relevance’ for many who knew the Maruti 800 as ‘the car that taught India how to drive and made Maruti what it is today’ (ibid.). As Jain concludes in her article on automobility in India:

If the dominant industrial regime of the mid-twentieth century was ‘Fordist’, the primary harbinger of economic reforms in India, and its passport to participation in a ‘global’ regime of the sensible, was Maruti-Suzuki. (Jain 2016, 330)

Punathambekar and Sundar (2017) have argued that the 1980s have traditionally been regarded ‘as a minor interlude in the nation’s shift from one imaginary (Development) to another (Globalisation)’ (402). This article has engaged with these debates on the state-sponsored ascendency of India’s ‘new’ middle class predominantly associated with the post-liberalisation period by focusing instead on the crucial years leading up to it. Indeed, as the article contends, Maruti’s story is one of triumph of a new model of state-led development which embraced the global, simultaneously legitimising a ‘new’ middle class consumerist identity for the first time. Alongside the embrace of consumerism also emerged a logic of working more to consume more. Maruti reintroduced familiar dictums of discipline, collectivity, and hard work borrowed from the preceding ‘socialist’ era to a new professional setting. The state now consciously emphasised choice over coercion, whether in private matters of family planning or in the workplace. This new language spoke to a new consumer-citizen who would be the state’s ally and primary agent of change in this crucial decade.

Notes

1. Rodrik and Subramanian (2005) characterise the state’s ‘attitudinal shift’ in the 1980s as pro-business rather than pro-market. According to the authors, the latter places emphasis on removing impediments to markets and promoting competition, which did not happen until the reforms of 1991 (4). Reforms in East Asia were similarly pro-business and not pro-market. The authors acknowledge Maruti as an example of liberalisation in the 1980s albeit in a limited sense of easing access to foreign capital and technology on a case-by-case basis (37).

2. A report by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (Government of India 1985b, 9;7;123-4;141-2) noted that in 1984, these newspapers and magazines enjoyed some of the highest readership amongst all dailies and periodicals in the country. A public opinion survey of 1,000 respondents conducted by the Indian Institute of Public Opinion (1984a) also revealed that 38.1% of newspaper readers across Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras read only English papers whilst 40.5% read both English and ‘Language’ papers.

3. Within the highly diverse and heterogenous Indian middle class, Fernandes and Heller (2006) define the ‘dominant fraction’ as comprising those with advanced professional degrees, cultural capital and networks, and occupying positions of authority in various institutions. This group’s interests are aligned with those of upper class elites (500).
4. The aspirational association between car ownership and middle class identity is a common feature of emerging or developing economies. For some reflections, see Under and Gungordu’s (2016) study on Turkey, and Hansen’s (2016) account of the development of the automobile industry in Vietnam.

5. The first Maruti 800 cars were allotted randomly based on a computerized lottery. Interested buyers, which included ‘VIPs’ and politicians, entered the lottery by registering with dealerships well in advance.

6. Advertisement on Carwale website, accessed at https://www.carwale.com/news/end-of-an-era-family-car-maruti-suzuki-800s-production-ends/ (12 December 2020)

7. Maruti Suzuki Esteem advertisement accessed at https://www.team-bhp.com/forum/indian-car-scene/58995-ads-90s-decade-changed-indian-automotive-industry.html

8. The company awarded employees with high attendance records during annual ‘Family-Day’ celebrations. The awardees were often given opportunities to travel to Japan for further training.

9. See, for instance, Indian Institute of Public Opinion (1984b).

10. Personal conversation (December 26, 2016). New Delhi.

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