

INTERVIEW

Rajiv Bajaj

MANAGING DIRECTOR, BAJAJ AUTO

On the move from three to four-wheelers but still being anti-car, solving personal intra-city travel pains, issues of safety and the quadricycle controversy.

Bajaj is a two- and three-wheeler manufacturer. What made you look at quadricycles?

We believe conventional cars are too big, heavy and fast for most personal intra-city travels. This leads to pollution, congestion, and safety concerns that burden the globe. As the world's premier three-wheeler maker, we felt Bajaj Auto had the ideal mix of expertise and cost control to offer a perfect alternative through our small, light and speed-restricted Qute.

It is alleged that in the early 2000s, Bajaj was against Tata and TVS developing quadricycles. How do you justify opposing the concept then and embracing it wholeheartedly now?

Any such assumption or allegation is entirely fallacious. First, I am not the Prime Minister of India; neither is Bajaj Auto the ministry of industry. How exactly then did we stand in anyone's way? Did we hold a gun to their head? Did we bribe someone influential? Did we sabotage their facilities? Also, Tata and TVS are competition, so other than media reports and informal conversations, how was I privy to any of their quadricycle plans?

When Bajaj wished to make the Qute, we simply went ahead. Why didn't others do the same? Are they suggesting that they sought my approval? I thought we lived in free markets where the law frowned upon cartels. In hindsight, it appears to me that Tata had a very different approach from ours. In the Nano, it intended to make the world's cheapest car, while in the Qute we conceived the world's most sophisticated four-wheeler. The two ideas have nothing in common.

As for TVS, if they're suggesting that they didn't make a quadricycle in deference to our wishes, I thank them for their consideration and request that they consider extending me that courtesy with bikes and three-wheelers too. It's all too easy to blame someone else for your own lack of courage and imagination.

What's your view on the opposition the Qute is facing which has prompted you to launch the #FreeTheQute campaign? Is it having the desired effect?

It's well known that one competitor has leveraged the pathetic pace of law in India to delay the Qute's launch in this market. Frankly, we are happy exporting to the rest of the world. Pakistan, for instance, is a large bike market that Bajaj cannot address due to political issues, but it's a big world out there. We focus on most markets that are accessible to the Qute, and don't worry about the odd one or two that aren't for the moment. I believe it will all fall in place in due course.

Do you think there's a bit of tit for tat with some of the opposition you are facing now? Ask them!



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How do you see the Qute panning out as an alternative to a rickshaw? Will it really be one or will the Qute and rickshaw co-exist in the future?

In principle, any large market segment ought to be characterised by at least a three-tier structure. Hence, I believe the Qute and three-wheelers will happily co-exist as each represents a distinct point of performance and affordability, even if it is used largely for the same purpose.

Safety standards for quadricycles have always been a prickly issue. How do you counter the perception that it's not as safe as a car?

It's my unwavering conviction that safety is a matter of less being more. Smaller, lighter, slower vehicles are intrinsically benign. All the airbags and crash protection built into increasingly big, heavy, fast cars

are of little help to anyone other than to the occupants, if at all. What about the safety of all the pedestrians, cyclists, scooterists, bikers and three-wheeler passengers that such cars regularly maul? We need to take a more holistic view of safety if we are to shed our dubious distinction of being the road fatalities' capital of the world.

There are talks of the Qute being a backdoor entry into cars. Will you consider getting into the passenger car space in the future? Will there be a Qute for private buyers?

Bajaj's position in the market is that of an anti-car company. We exist to provide superior alternatives to cars through our bikes, three-wheelers, and quadricycles. We can't run with the hares and hunt with the hounds as it wouldn't be credible to anyone outside or inside the company.

Was it easy or a natural progression going from three-wheelers to four-wheelers?

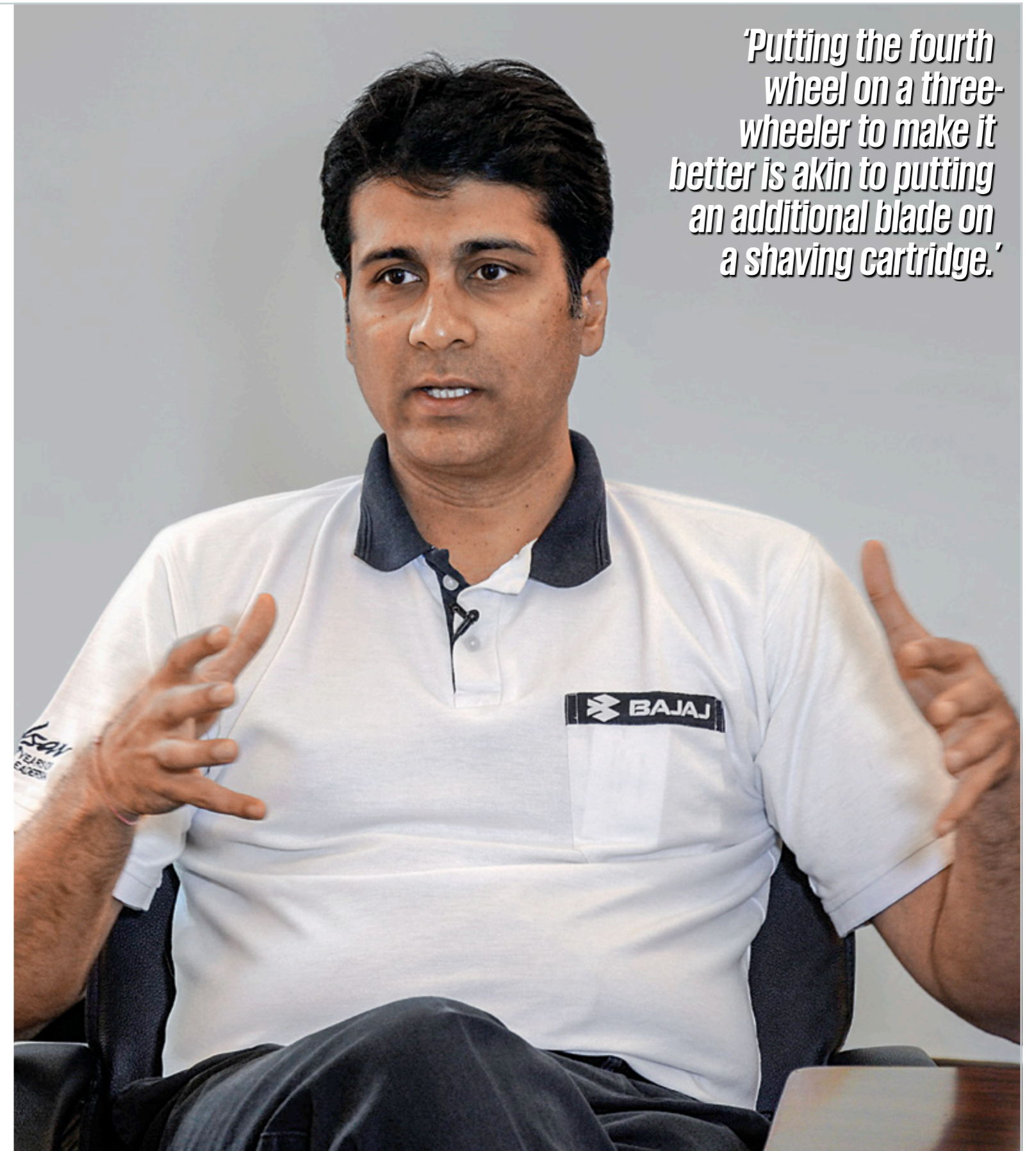
Absolutely. Putting the fourth wheel on a three-wheeler to make it better is akin to putting an additional blade on a shaving cartridge for the same purpose.

Aren't the dynamics and nuances of developing a four-wheeler with a steering wheel quite different?

No two products are ever the same even if they have the same number of wheels. However, the principles of physics are entirely valid across categories. So, while three-wheelers and quadricycles are similar in the design lab and on the assembly line, they're very different in the mind of the customer and on the road. Jack Trout (marketing guru) taught us that products are built in the factory, and brands are created in the mind. So, in real terms, they're the same, but the perception is different. And perception trumps reality in business, perhaps in life too.

HORMAZD SORABJEE

➤ **First Look: Here is an exclusive peek into the Bajaj Qute p50**



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