

The brute's sporty brother



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Mitsubishi's India strategy has been sporadic and bereft of significantly successful milestones. No doubt, there have been sparks every once in a while and there have been some great cars and strong sub-brands that the partnership - HM-Mitsubishi - brought to the Indian market. But to say that that the company has had a coherent



in all three rows of seats in the 7-seater version. The dashboard has a simple layout with the centre stack topped by a very useful information display. Rotary air-conditioner control knobs and the integrated music system feature below the display. The 3-spoke steering wheel fits nicely into my hand and has a chunky, healthy feel to it. Audio controls have also been integrated into the steering wheel. Circular dials with chrome lipping give the

strategy to completely floor the buyer here in any one segment from the start, wouldn't be correct.

And just look at the calibre and the international reputation of the car brands that the company brought to India - Lancer, Pajero, Evo X, Montero and the Outlander. But, there has been confusion in the minds of the buyers because of a lack of consistent strategy and because of a bit of laxity in the past amongst the company's dealers. There was also not a clear price/ marketing strategy for some of the brands. The classic example here being the Pajero.

Mitsubishi's reputation in designing and developing strong vehicles in the pick-up trucks, utility vehicles and SUV segments is legendary and even kids will be able to point out a Pajero as being special. But, the gap between launches has been so wide and timed out that Pajero has slipped to the back of the minds of most buyers. In the meanwhile, the Ford Endeavour and the Toyota Fortuner have been ruling the roads.

That will change since the Pajero Sport has finally been introduced, though after much delay. We took it out on an extended test drive to get a feel of the newbie. The Pajero Sport is the new generation model and is totally different from the Pajero SFX 4X4 that we are very familiar with. The latter continues to be available at HM-Mitsubishi dealerships. The old workhorse Pajero despite its dated design still has a certain charm about it and you can still picture it immediately in your minds eye as being at home on sand dunes and rocky terrain.

Design

The new Pajero Sport, however, is more of a crossover design, albeit one that is not compact and that still manages to give the vehicle a muscular stance. The Pajero Sport is the modern interpretation of the brand. It will help infuse some youthfulness into this brand, which already has considerable amount of street cred amongst buyers.

At the front, the new Pajero Sport has the classic Mit-



subishi slanted grille and headlamps that seem to have together been inspired by the company's rally sport vehicles. Otherwise, the Pajero Sport's front design is dominated by the huge airdam, the high front approach angle and the massive flared out wheel arches. Overall, the design is meant to impress buyers who are looking for a vehicle with a stonking road presence. Finally, the Toyota Fortuner has a competitor that can match its road presence. From the side, the new Pajero Sport reveals a bit of its pick-up truck lineage. The bonnet line and the roof line are almost parallel to the road except at the edges and the rear overhang is about 1,100mm. You see, the new Pajero Sport here is actually the second generation Mitsubishi Challenger in many other markets and is sold as the Montero Sport in markets like the Philippines where it outsold the Toyota Fortuner. This vehicle is based on the same ladder frame chassis that the Triton pick-up truck is also based on. Competitors in this segment like the Ford Endeavour and the Toyota Fortuner are also based similarly on pick-up truck platforms.

However, while the UV lineage is all too evident in the over-raised stance and narrow body structure, the Pajero Sport's exterior design is still quite appealing. Sedan-like headlamps and tail-lamps and chrome detailing boost the new vehicle's appeal. The rear hatch is fairly compact for a vehicle that is about 4.7 metres long and weighs over two tonnes (unladen). The ground clearance is a yawning 215mm and raised suspension also leaves huge gaps in the wheel arches, which the 17-inch rims and the 265/65R17 tyres unsuccessfully attempt to fill out.

Step into the Pajero Sport's cabin and you are greeted by a crisp, clean and functional dashboard. Leather seats are firm, neatly finished and offer good support for passengers

instrument cluster a premium look. There are wood and matt metal inserts all around the dashboard and door panels.

Overall, the cabin exudes a premium feel and there is no sense of any corners being cut in ensuring that the quality of materials used is the best. There are a number of storage options in the cabin. With the third row of twin seats in use, there is not much space left for luggage. The third row itself maybe a bit cramped for adults, though accessing it is quick and easy. The two stalks sticking out of the floor of the centre console is the gear stick and the four-wheel drive selector.

Performance

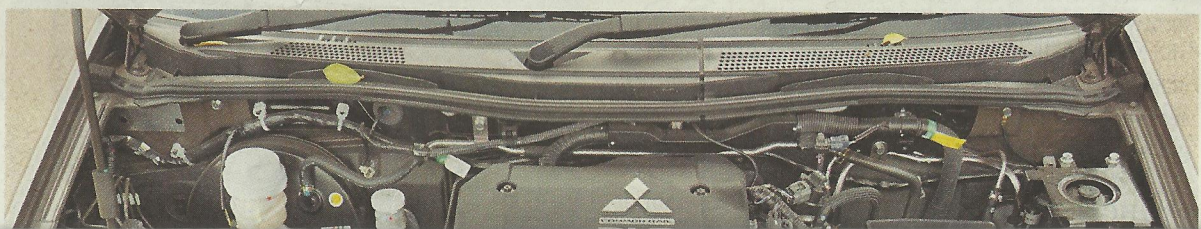
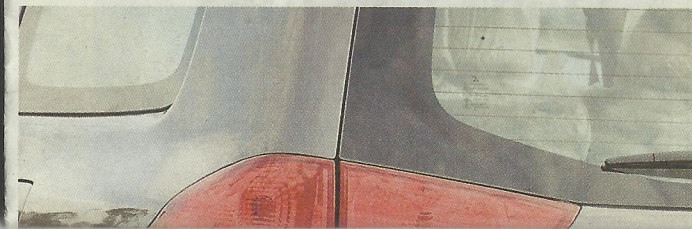
The Pajero Sport is offered only with a diesel engine, just the fuel of choice amongst buyers in this segment, anyway. The engine is a 2.5-litre, 16-valve common rail diesel unit, which is combined with a variable geometry turbocharger. The 2,477cc engine manages to generate a peak power of 178 PS at 4,000 rpm, which is about 5 per cent more power than what the Fortuner's 3-litre diesel engine produces. The Pajero Sport's engine also develops a peak torque of 400Nm in the 2,000 to 2,500 rpm range, again about 18 per cent higher than the Fortuner's peak torque of 343Nm.

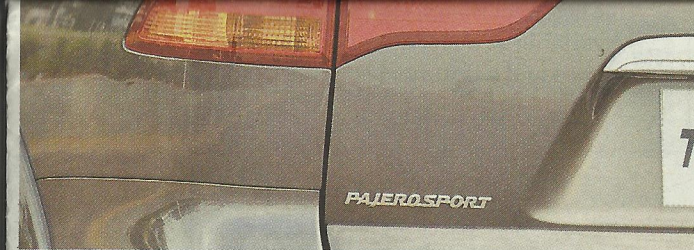
The engine pulls clean only after the engine rpm crosses the 1,500 rpm mark. So, there is discernible turbolag, but the short gear ratios of the 5-speed manual gearbox manage to make up for some of the lack of pulling power. But keeping the engine in the healthy, performance rpm range is easy and once you are in it, there is enough power available to really the push the Pajero Sport easily upto highway speeds. The gearbox is a good pair with the engine, but the long throw gear stick is a bit tedious to engage and there is quite a bit of play in the stick even after the gear is slotted. The slotting itself is precise.

The Pajero Sport also features Mitsubishi's Super Select four-wheel drive system with the option of locking the



Photo: S. Muralidhar





centre differential while 4WD is engaged in high or low. It also offers shift on the fly from two-wheel drive to four-wheel drive high. There are enough other pointers to indicate that the Pajero Sport has the prowess to tackle the rugged outdoors, including its 36-degree approach angle, but almost none of its Indian buyers are really going to put it through such terrain. But it will be good to know that the vehicle is capable. However, bragging rights don't come cheap.

With the suspension setup at the rear being a 3-link member with coil springs, the ride quality in the Pajero Sport is pliant when you are on predictable, broken tarmac. The suspension soaks up most of what bad roads have to throw at it. There is a bit of body roll when you chuck the Pajero Sport about on black topped roads, but that is to be expected with its raised off-road stance. Stabiliser bars at the front and rear offer more peace of mind at high speeds. But cornering at high speeds is not something that is part of its repertoire.

Bottomline

The Pajero Sport is being priced at about Rs 24.5 lakh (ex-showroom) and is available only with the manual transmission. Most owners will not miss an automatic, since in most cases it will be chauffeur driven. But more choice will surely be welcome.

Finally, Mitsubishi has a strong challenger to take on competitors like the Fortuner.

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