

Business Standard

Fake parts, poor servicing may cause fire in cars: Experts

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While the need for a mandatory vehicle recall policy has been upheld by many to safeguard consumers from possible manufacturing defects, retrofitment and repair of components from service workshops in the unorganised sector could be a major causes of vehicles catching fire, say industry experts.

“There could be issues of design in certain batches of vehicles. But it often happens that lack of proper maintenance or fitment of components from roadside workshops compromise the safety of vehicles. You cannot be assured about the quality of parts that are being used in such places and that impacts the safety of your car,” said Abdul Majeed, partner in the automotive practice of PricewaterhouseCoopers, an audit, tax and consultancy firm.

According to industry estimates, as many as 54 vehicles caught fire in New Delhi alone over the past year, raising questions about the owners’, service workshops’ and manufacturers’ role in such incidents.

Puneet Gupta, associate director of IHS Automotive, an automobile industry consulting firm, said, “The problem in India more often than not is consumers opt for after-market accessories such as stereos, reverse parking sensors and security systems. The worker may snap a wire while fitting these accessories and this is usually the main source of sparks or short circuits in vehicles. Additionally, after the first few free servicings, customers choose to go to workshops in the unorganised sector that are not likely to have skilled labour. They may cut wires or not fit a bolt properly and this can lead to safety hazards.”

Majeed and Gupta, however, agree that safety lapses can also stem from manufacturing defects. “A mandatory vehicle recall policy will help address this problem as it would help in stepping up surveillance and put in place a proper mechanism to determine how, when and in what time-frame vehicles should be

recalled in the event of technical glitches,” Majeed added.

Majeed’s contention is supported by S P Singh of the Indian Foundation of Transport Research and Training (IFTRT) who said, “The Toyota Etios that caught fire on May 7 had been serviced on schedule. It still went up in flames. There is no proper mechanism at present to determine whether or not the incident happened due to manufacturing defects. The police do not have the know-how to investigate. In absence of concrete evidence regarding the cause of such accidents, investigators tend to fix blame on the driver or owner. A mandatory recall policy, along with product liability laws, is required immediately to safeguard consumers against technical and safety glitches arising at the manufacturer’s end.”

Manufacturers, however, recall vehicles voluntarily to fix defects. “There is sample checking done regularly by manufacturers to ascertain the quality and performance of vehicles. The specifications are pretty high and a lot of testing is done at every stage of fitment, especially for critical components like brake pipes, fuel pipes and brake drums to ensure vehicle safety is not endangered. If there are glitches after all this, companies recall vehicles and fix problems,” Gupta said.

The debate over safety of Indian cars has been sparked by two recent incidents of vehicles catching fire in the capital. An Audi Q7 (bought in 2011) caught fire on May 12 in a parking lot in South Delhi. Earlier, on May 7, a Toyota Etios caught fire in Mangolpuri (outer Delhi), killing driver Amit Moga. Initial reports show the car was properly maintained and serviced.

Earlier last year, a Toyota Corolla Altis belonging to Vikram Yadav, chief executive officer, Moveability Management Services, went up in flames after being parked for two days. “The manufacturer and the insurance agencies did not find any proof of the car being tampered with. Toyota did offer to repair the car but declined to give a written assurance that such an incident would not happen again,” said Yadav, whose car was on the road for six-seven years before the incident took place. The car had been regularly serviced, first at company dealerships then at petrol pumps offering such facilities.

Moga had bought his car from Galaxy Toyota in Moti Nagar in March 2012 and had driven only 11,941 km. The head of the dealer’s service team Ashwini Upadhaya confirmed that the diesel car was maintained to schedule, and the manufacturer would be informed about the incident.

Moga’s post mortem report has ruled out foul play and the police are investigating whether the fire started from a short circuit or a defect in the engine. Preliminary reports revealed the Etios was nudging another car shortly before bursting into flames. This lends credence to the contention that the fire was sparked by a short circuit.

“The fire may have started in the wire harness below the dashboard after serious overheating. This could happen due to technical and mechanical defects,” Gupta

said. But other vehicle safety experts said a short circuit in the engine bay was a more likely cause as the combustion chamber of a vehicle usually does not catch fire even if it overheats.

RISKY WHEELS

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