

“Baazigar” is what he said his name was. What kind of a name is that? Surely, this is not your real name, I asked. “Of course not! But this is the name given to me in the market. My real name is Jamo Singh and I am from Bengal.” It was 3 pm, on a hot April day and I was standing trying to get the bumper of my Maruti repaired at the local car market. And what I saw that day convinced me that no matter how much the Chinese, Koreans or Japanese dominate our markets, our great tradition of jugaad was alive and kicking!

Baazigar operates from under a tree; his tools fit into a small canvas bag of the kind that used to be staple of all school kids till cheap backpacks from China took over. One look at the bumper and he tells me that he will repair it in about an hour and it will cost me Rs 100/-.

The bumper had come off the car when a young brat, driving a new Zen, which was obviously “Papa’s Gift”, rammed into it and as expected, sped along without a second look. The locks and the holes which bolted the bumper onto the body had broken and it looked hopeless. I had cursed the Japanese for making such flimsy bumpers which can’t take a nudge from an energetic youngster and mentally prepared myself to shell out a couple of thousand rupees to replace the bumper. So, a mere hundred rupees seemed worth the gamble. But I was not convinced that anything could be done to the bumper. After all, it was some special plastic and the Japanese must have spent a lot of thought in designing it.

Baazigar got onto the job. An old primus stove, the kind where you need to pump the air, is lit and from the bag, out come four different shaped iron spatulas which are placed in the fire. Then he took out pieces of black plastic and started repairing the broken parts of the bumper. This much seemed plausible. But then he took out a thin steel strip and moulded it into the plastic for reinforcement! All this with just a couple of iron spatulas and a screwdriver! The reinforcement meant that a minor nudge would not dislocate the bumper now. At the end of the hour, the bumper was repaired, reinforced and as good as new! The rough edges of the transplanted plastic were smoothed out and brought to the correct curvature! It was a masterpiece repair job!

I was truly impressed- and understood why Jamo Singh had been given the moniker of Baazigar! He was truly a magician! He had, it turned out, worked for many years in a plastic factory in Calcutta. Then, deindustrialization of the eastern region took its toll and he was left jobless. He tried his hand at several jobs before settling down to this one. The long years in the plastic industry gave him the required knowledge and the metallic bumpers of Fiats and Ambassadors were being replaced by the flimsy plastic ones of the new generation cars. So Jamo’s business flourishes- he has no overheads, no assistants and is much sought after.

I was completely floored by his skills and thought about how we have survived for years on jugaad- a word that does not translate easily but tinkering possibly comes close to it. Whether it is using a diesel generator to make a rural vehicle in western U.P. (lovingly called Maruta) or using washing machines to make lassi in Punjab, our ingenuity in using technology is unmatched. So why is it that industry does not learn anything from it? Why is it that, Maruti cannot reinforce the locks of its bumpers. Obviously these are not required in the orderly traffic of Tokyo but surely for a car designed for India, where bumpers suffer a lot of abuse because of our excellent driving habits, this should be done.

Maybe, the real reason is that industry wants a built in obsolescence- a newer better car every other year, a fancier cell phone every few months. Buy it, use it, throw it! The only thing, the fancy managers haven't factored in their spreadsheets is the magnificent Indian obsession of never throwing anything away! That and the ubiquitous jugaadu mechanic who is easily available to fix things. The whole country abounds with Baazigars! More power to them!