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For most Indians who are mute witnesses to much worse, the relatively thin traffic on the four-lane highway between Delhi and Jaipur is such a breeze to negotiate that the 260 km separating the two cities can be quite an uneventful drive.

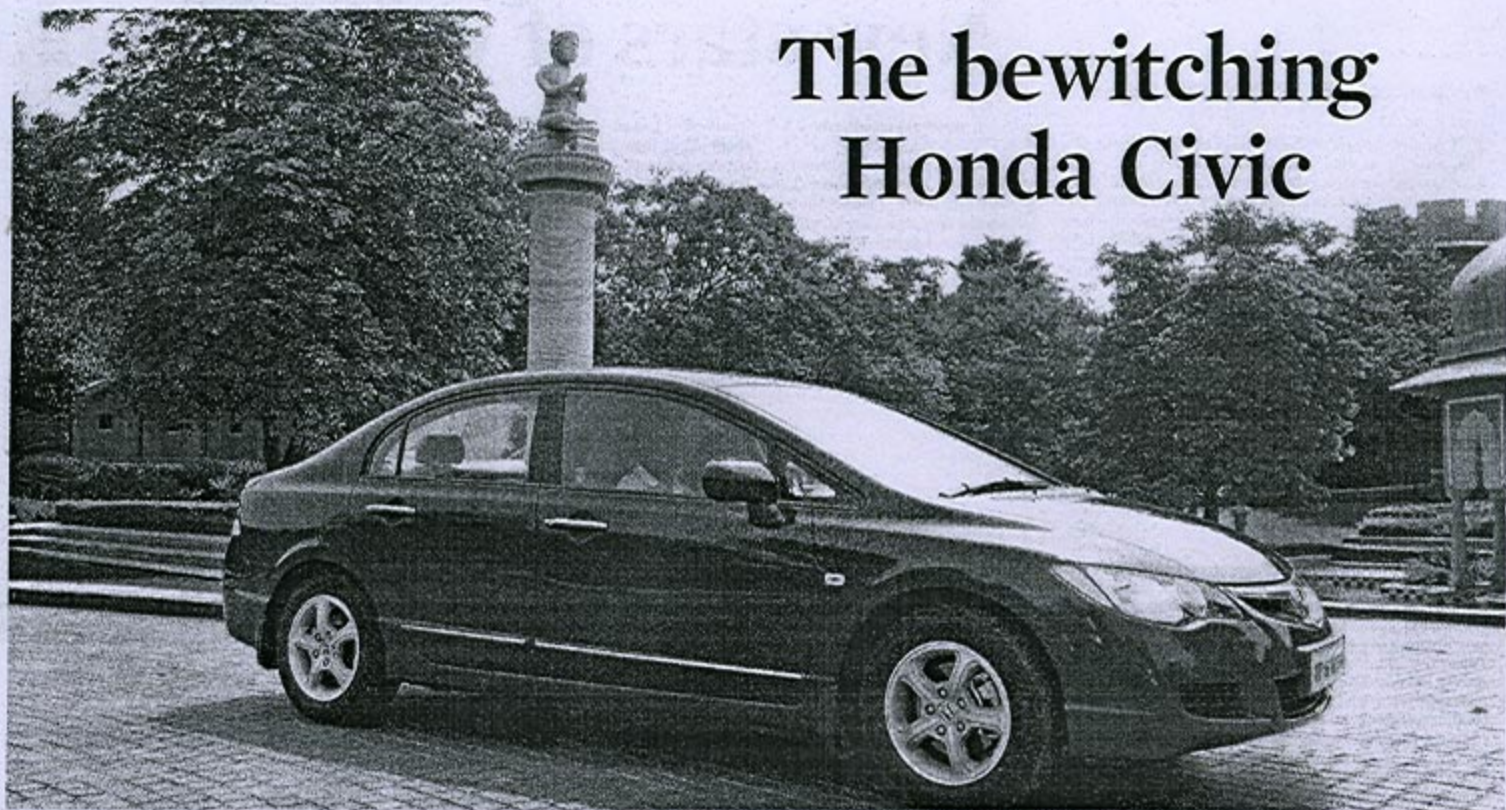
But when Honda organised a test drive for a group of predictably overenthusiastic motoring journalists, the weather gods decided to play along and what may have been a humdrum drive turned into a full blown road test for the new car — the Civic. After crawling through unruly city traffic, slowed by rain well into the Delhi-Jaipur highway, the Civic eagerly ate up some bit of wet, open tarmac after crossing into the business district of Gurgaon.

That was just before the real test began. Despite the dreary weather outside, the convoy of spanking new Civics was setting in. But just as we were expecting to cheerfully zip through the sparsely populated stretches of one of NHAI's showpieces, rain-soaked reality hit us. With water overrunning a portion of the highway, we were faced with a roadblock that the highway police had put up. We were promptly redirected into a loop that would enable us to rejoin the highway at a point farther away from the potentially damaged area.

The 20-odd km detour seemed to take an eternity to complete and took us through some of the worst (not just in contrast to the highway) *kutchra* roads that would have been difficult to negotiate even on a sunny day. And so it was that we had to drive on what seemed in many places to be patches of road in the midst of a sea of potholes, rural lanes with fields on either side and flooded knee-deep by the rain, speed-breakers that were actually mini walls (yes, one of them did scrape the Civic's bottom) and even over a section of the road that had been washed away.

To the regular commuter and traveller heading to Jaipur from Delhi this would have been one niggling stretch quickly forgotten, but for us motoring journos it was a 'slushfest' that was also

# The bewitching Honda Civic



really testing the Civic's prowess. It is possible that the Civic was just getting a taste of what driving in India might involve and it is entirely possible that it would meet with worse, but the best part of the torturous detour was that this new Honda car held its broad chin up.

#### MADE FOR INDIA

That really is the reason why despite the possibility of its sexy, youthful image (carried forward from the fantastic response it has had worldwide) overwhelming its practical, user-friendly side, the Civic will still be able to demonstrate that it is the most attractive amalgam of the two traits. Every feature of the new, eighth generation Civic seems to have been thought out to fit and feed

both the objectives – exciting design and extreme practicality.

On the outside, the Civic presents a pleasing countenance. Winky-eyed and with the bunny-toothed Honda logo sitting pretty on a curved bonnet grille, the Civic seems to grin with pride at its onlookers. Large, curvaceous, wrap-around style headlamps sit atop a sloping forward, oversized bumper. A sharply raked windscreen complements the sinuously shaped bonnet panel. A large airdam in the front bumper and the aerodynamically designed outside rear view mirrors on stalks stand out in the Civic's front profile.

The Civic incorporates the same cab-forward design style of that is also the trademark of the Honda City. However, un-

like the City, which seems a little disproportionately designed, the Civic's design is much more balanced and purposeful. So, with a relatively short bonnet sweeping up to form a wide arc to the back, the Civic design ensures a large passenger cabin area. At the rear, the Civic ends with a stubby, almost notchback style boot. A broad waistline starts from the front bumper, spreads over the bonnet, giving the Civic its classy squat, muscular looks and ends looping over the tail-lamps, giving the impression of a built-in rear spoiler.

Some of the likeable exterior features include the chrome-tipped front exhaust, the opposed front windscreen wipers and the twin circular tail-lamp design that makes the Civic's

rear look like a jet fighter at night.

#### SNAZZY INTERIOR

So, there is a lot of novelty to the Civic's exterior design making it a car that is at least really difficult to hate, if not easy to fall head over heels in love with. But the car's interior is a whole lot different in its ability to appeal to both young and old customers. Step into the Civic and the roomy, airy feeling surprises you. With a lot of glass area, thanks to the lazy upward slope of the roof and long windows, there will be ample visibility for the driver.

But even as you get into the Civic, you are almost hypnotically drawn to what Honda calls the multiplex meter. The dual-layered, digital-cum-ana-

log instrument panel is extremely attractive and clearly the eye-catching centrepiece of the Civic's interior. Here again, what Honda has achieved is two-fold – the novelty of the cool-blue backlit dual screen instrument layout and the practicality of providing key data at a mere glance. The special crescent-shaped display capping the regular instrument cluster provides important data in a digital read-out. So, without taking your eyes off the road for no more than a split second, you can get such key information as the speed of the car, the fuel level and the engine temperature.

Of course, the next most arresting feature of the Civic's interior is the three-spoke steering wheel. The futuristic,

compact steering wheel incorporates matt-silver inserts and plastic mesh-style spokes to give this Honda's insides a further boost. The only feature that may be missed by honking-hungry Indians will be easier access to the horn. Steering is adjustable for tilt and reach.

The Civic's dashboard layout is neat and gives the driver a cocooned-feel, allowing easy access to the key controls. The dash and door panels also share a dual-tone colour theme, giving the interiors a roomier feel. Controls for the air-conditioning and in-dash six-CD changer-cum-audio system share a symmetrical knob and switch combo. Overall, the fit and finish quality could well become the benchmark for the segment and be the envy of even Accord

## Shifting gears, F1 style

Honda has also launched the Civic with an automatic transmission variant, in addition to the five-speed manual gearbox. Here, too, Honda has shrewdly built in a considerable level of novelty into this more expensive automatic variant to make it the most attractive option in its class.

The Civic 1.8 AT (automatic) features an advanced five-speed auto gearbox that offers the regular parking, neutral, reverse and drive shift slots. But the most interesting part of the package is the inclusion of a sports drive mode, which allows the

driver to manually shift up or down the five gear slots with the help of a pair of paddles located right behind the steering wheel. Located conveniently behind the wheel, the paddle shifters (right to go up the slots and left to come down) are easily accessible to the driver (see photo).

Automatic gearboxes with sports mode and paddle shift are currently only available in high-end sports performance cars such as the Ferrari and Porsche. Of course, the inspiration for this feature originally came from Formula One cars.

The paddle shift mechanism not only adds novelty to the Civic AT, but is also tuned to offer an extremely engaging drive for the user. Unlike other triptronic type auto gearboxes that have an override mechanism to switch back into full auto mode, the auto gearbox in the Civic AT, while in sports mode, will continue to keep the gear slot chosen by the driver even if the redline is crossed and the rev-limiter kicks in. The exact gear slot chosen and currently engaged is displayed in the form of a digital read out as part of the instrument cluster.

In sports mode, the Civic AT

behaves exactly like a manual and can really be fun to drive. Both the single trim variants of the manual and automatic come fully loaded with safety features such dual airbags, anti-lock brakes, electronic brake force distribution, brake assist, keyless entry, immobiliser and security alarm.

Most buyers looking for an automatic are ready for a compromise in the fuel efficiency department and with this kind of uniqueness and practicality built in, the Civic AT will be the car to buy in the sub-Rs 20 lakh segment.

— S. M.



owners. Some of the cool features of the Civic interiors include the Z-shaped parking lever set neatly along with the gearshift lever in the compact floor console. Other practical tidbits are the centre console box, the large glove compartment, the height adjustable driver seat, and the audio controls in the rear armrest (very thoughtful, considering that most Indians who own this car will be chauffeured). Another feature that will be appreciated by owners with chauffeurs is the full flat floor at the rear. In the absence of the chassis spine running along the length of the car's middle, the floor at the rear is flat allowing easier entry and exit for rear passengers.

The only feature that we felt could have been better is the seat upholstery. Though seating comfort is not compromised much, the upholstery could have been chosen to offer a more premium feel. With the Civic being currently offered only with one trim level each in the manual and automatic variants, alternatives such as leather seats cannot be had as a factory-fitted option.

#### **MATCHING ENGINE**

Honda has again exercised carefully considered discretion in choosing the powerplant for the India-spec Civic. The 1.8-litre, 16-valve, SOHC engine sports Honda's celebrated i-VTEC technology (an earlier version is available in the City VTEC). The engine delivers a maximum power of 132 PS at 6,300 rpm and a peak torque of 17.5 kg-m at 4,300 rpm. The Civic's variable valve timing technology works to ensure fuel efficiency that should challenge the current segment benchmark, the Toyota Corolla. Though there is enough power, the torque build up in the Civic is a tad sluggish in the first couple of gears. Overall, the Civic's 1.8 litre is still a lot of fun and is extremely rev-happy with the redline set at a high 6,400 rpm. In the manual transmission version, the engine-gearbox combo is possibly the most refined and quietest one can get.

The Civic is equipped with McPherson strut suspension at the front and double-wishbone suspension in the rear. Suspension has been tuned to offer the rear passengers one of the best rides. While the package improves the car's stability and control at high-speed, a bit of increase in road feedback becomes inevitable due to the high profile 195X65 tyres. The 15-inch alloy wheels and the high-pro tyres, however, give the Civic a better side profile than the Corolla.

The Honda Civic has all the makings of a winner in this key-car category. Most Indian buyers in the D-segment expect novelty value, convenience features and low maintenance and running costs, all of which the Civic packages well. With pricing almost 'unlike a Honda' when the value of the package is considered, the Civic should present itself as the most attractive option amongst currently available cars in the Rs 11-14 lakh price bracket.