

Scala-ing up the experience



Photos: S.Muralidhar



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The current traffic situation on the roads of most Indian cities is proof that we are incorrigible value seekers even to a point of inconveniencing ourselves. While the auto-gear scooter revolution has swept through the country, the car buyer is still unwilling to pay for the comfort of an automatic gearbox.

There is a higher price to be paid for an automatic, and efficiencies may still be marginally higher in manual transmission variants. But, that mileage gap will be minimal in stop-and-go city traffic and the only unpleasant bit would be the higher sticker price of the auto variant.

The fact today is that for most city-based drivers the manual gearbox is increasingly a pain in the left foot. So, the day when the need for comfort trumps the price differential, there will be a wave of converts in favour of the automatic. There is already rising awareness amongst urban buyers who are now beginning to make that cost compromise and shed that urge to stay with the manual gearbox – in cars where the MT was the primary choice.

While Maruti slid out of automatics after having a first mover advantage and Ford stayed away from them for many years, Hyundai managed to capture the attention of the small segment of automatic transmission buyers by launching auto gearboxes in the i10, i20 and the Verna. The same is true with Honda, which has a whole complement of automatics, now starting with one in the Brio hatch.

Renault's latest which is all set to join the small portfolio of affordable automatics in the market is the Scala CVT.

The Scala is still fresh in the market after having been launched in the second half of last year. But with an eye on the seven per cent of the buyers who choose automatics in the premium A3 passenger car segment, Renault will soon be launching the Scala CVT. But, unlike Hyundai which launched an automatic variant of the previous Verna diesel first and then launched auto gearboxes in both the petrol and diesel variants of the new Fluidic Verna, Renault is launching its auto in the petrol variant only – for now. There will be two trim levels to choose from – RxL and RxZ – for the new Scala X-tronic CVT.

Build and performance

In terms of design, the new Scala CVT is identical to the Scala manual transmission version. There are absolutely no differences inside and out, with the only identification outside being the CVT badge on its boot lid and inside the cabin it is the auto gear shift stick with its P, R, N, D and L positions. The spacious cabin is otherwise the same as in the manual variant. The Scala's other likeable bits like the huge 490-litre boot, the legroom and the slightly more premium exterior redesign compared to the Sunny are all right there in the new auto variant too.

Buzzing under the bonnet is the same XH2 petrol engine that also powers the manual transmission version of the Scala. The 1,498cc engine has also been carried forward in the same state of tune, producing the same, healthy 99PS of peak power and 134Nm of maximum torque. The new bit in the powertrain is, of course, the new X-tronic CVT automatic transmission, which Renault



has borrowed from alliance partner Nissan Motor.

The CVT or Continuously Variable Transmission has previously been used in cars like the Nissan Teana, but has since been reworked for ensuring smoother shifting performance with a bias towards the Indian driving cycle. In fact, this version of the X-tronic CVT finds its first application in the Scala.

CVTs are intrinsically smoother shifting gearboxes and they are also more fuel efficient compared to conventional torque converter autos. The reason is that the CVT effectively has an unlimited number of gears that it can choose from based on the engine's conditions, whereas the torque converter has a fixed number of gears to choose from. The



CVT is also belt driven and so there is barely any discernible jerks or shift shocks while it moves from one gear to another.

To improve its durability and for further reduce the shift judder, Renault engineers have given this X-tronic CVT a steel belt. The combined effect is quite remarkable, if you are one of those who complains about the shift shocks in a conventional automatic. Depressing the accelerator elicits a clean climb across the engine rev-band with absolutely no feel of gears changing. It is almost like in an auto-gearbox scooter. I certainly missed a bit of the aural feedback of the engine aggressively changing gears when I floored the throttle.

The engine itself is much more audible and, often during hard acceleration, the noise from the bonnet seemed exaggerated compared to the amount of physical propulsion happening on the road. There is just that tiny bit of lag before the pressure of my foot on the throttle was transmitted to the brain of the gearbox, so some of that high revving on the highway was possibly the gearbox's way of keeping the engine ready for a spurt of action. Of course, some of the limitations also stems from the engine's state of tune and inherent prowess.

Bottomline

I drove the new Scala CVT from Mumbai to Kalshid and

back, a distance of about 350 kms. Along the way, it becomes quickly clear that the Scala CVT has been developed for being more apt for city roads than for the highway. While on the highway, the engine is a bit noisy and seems strained, the car just wafts along and manages the slow city traffic cycle quite commendably. Keep the engine within the low rpm bands and the smoothness of the new auto gearbox becomes evident. To offer a bit of a peppier option, there is a sports mode that can be activated by pressing a button placed just below the auto gear shift stick's head.

The quality of the ride in the CVT is very similar to the Scala manual, the raised stance and the bit of a jumpy suspension making it just that bit less comfortable on patchy highways compared to well-laid city roads.

The new Scala X-tronic CVT will be launched later this month or early February. The car will enable Renault to dip into the small, but emerging segment of AT buyers. For buyers in the segment, who will surely be urban owners looking to ease the pain from their frustrating daily commute, the new Scala CVT will be serious new contender to also consider.

Renault claims that the new Scala automatic manages to offer a higher rated mileage of 17.97 kmpl compared to the manual gearbox's 16.95 kmpl. This was part of the strategy to enable buyers to benefit from the efficiency of the CVT and ease one of their concerns. Lets hope Renault will also keep the price differential low (between the manual and the auto variants), that too is one of the big concern for buyers.