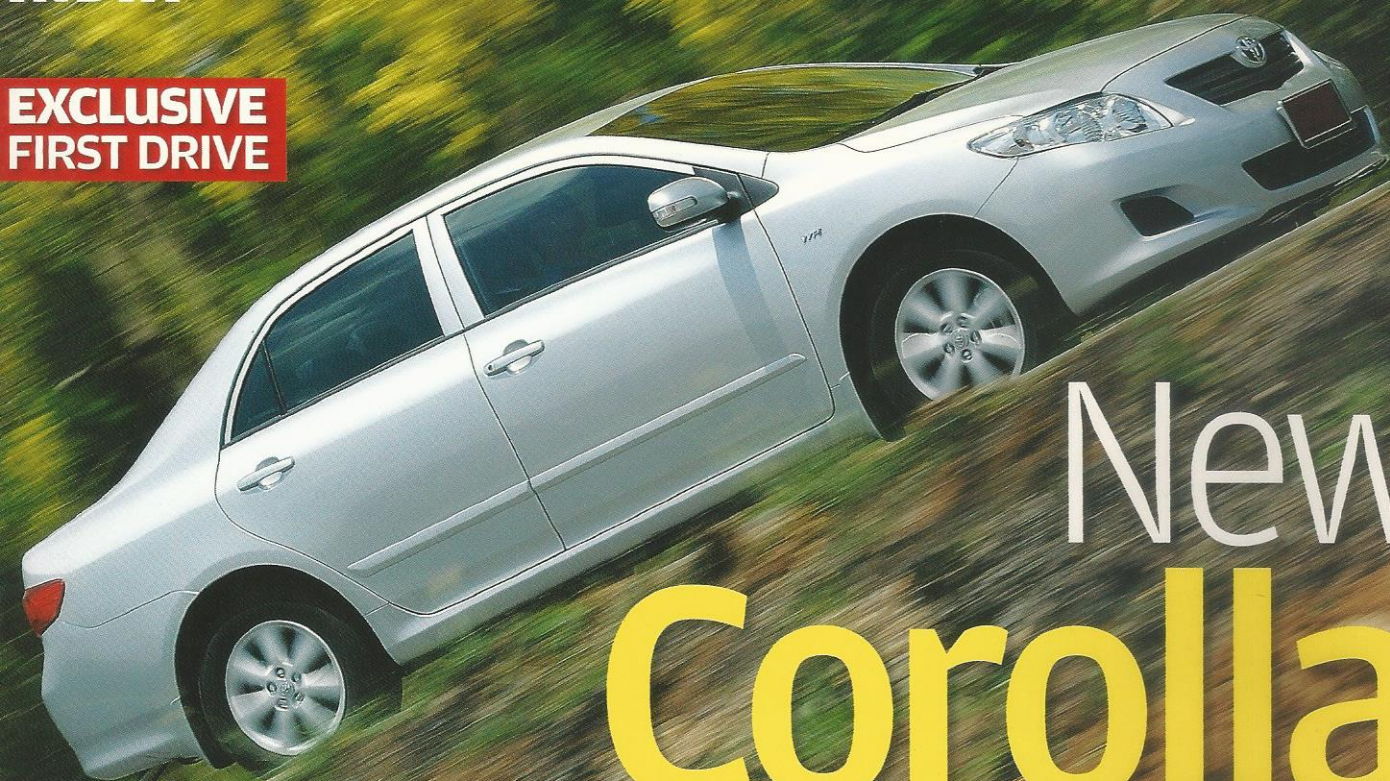


AUTOCAR

INDIA

VOL.9 NO.9 • MAY 2008

**EXCLUSIVE
FIRST DRIVE**



New Corolla

Better than ever, coming this August, but can it leapfrog the Civic?

SCOOP!



Tata Indicruz Crossover

EXCLUSIVE



Scorpio Hybrid driven

New Honda Accord driven
Class leader takes the game forward



DIESEL SHOOTOUT

Swift Dzire **v** Renault Logan **v** Indigo DiCOR



NOSTALGIA

OPERATION JONGA

The Jeep and the Jona were the workhorses of the Indian Army for many long years. We take a drive through history.

STORY JOY CHAUDHURI PHOTOGRAPHY HIMANSHU PANDYA



Google regurgitates 140,000 results in 0.32 seconds when I feed in 'Karl Probst'.

Never heard of him? I too hadn't till that Sunday morning when I was invited by the Heritage Vehicle Owners Club of Thane (HVOCT) for a little function to celebrate the spirit and history of the Jeep. In their presentation titled 'The untold story of Jeep', the speaker unveiled the story of an unknown, uncelebrated engineer named Karl Probst who was the man behind this celebrated vehicle. Has this man been unfairly denied due recognition?

The reason I was in Thane on a Sunday morning had nothing to

The name that spelled fear for the enemy in 1965 and 1971.



do with the history of the Jeep, but to drive a slice of Indian Army history. The vehicle takes its name from the acronym of Jabalpur Ordnance and Guncarriage Assembly – Jonga. The backbone of the Indian Army for over 30 years.

Powered by a four-litre six-cylinder in-line petrol engine, the Jonga was produced exclusively for the armed forces; in 1996, however, a hundred vehicles powered by four-litre diesel Hino engines were sold in the civilian market.

The DNA of the Jonga can be traced back to the Jeep, another favourite of the army. The Jeep was born from the US Army's requirements for a lightweight vehicle that could easily carry men and equipment through all

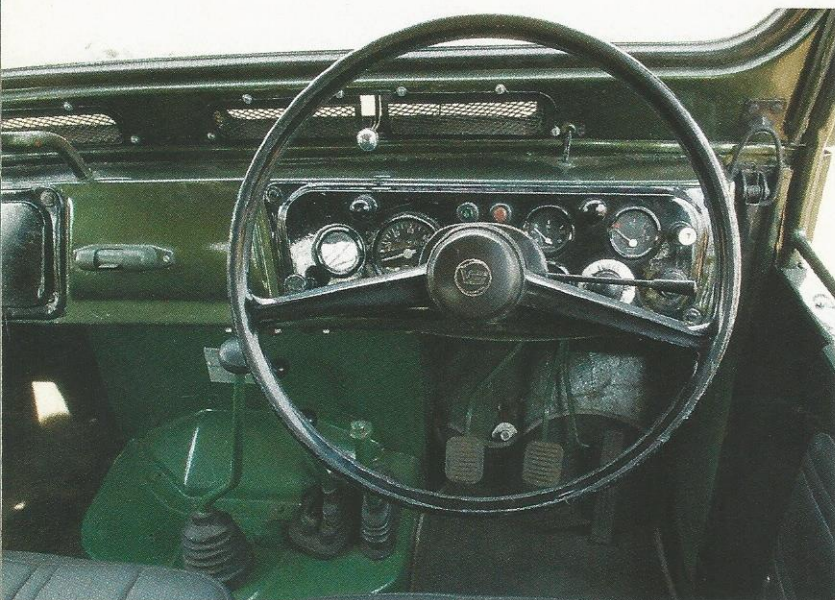
types of rough terrain. The US Army extended an open invitation to manufacturers to put together a prototype vehicle that could accomplish this.

Three companies responded – Bantam, Willys and Ford. This is where Probst comes in. The freelance engineer was hired by Bantam to help design the prototype. The Bantam vehicle was the only one to meet the deadline and came closest to the specifications. This was the vehicle that first had the features we today associate with the Jeep. The army tested the car to destruction. But both Willys and Ford were given access to the trials of the Bantam prototype as well as the engineering drawings.

Willys and Ford came out with their prototypes based on the →



HVOCT members, Abhilash Nambiar behind the wheel of his 1977 Jonga and Satish Upadhyay in his 1963 Willys, don't believe their sturdy pedigreed steeds need kid-glove treatment.



← Bantam model. The army decided that Bantam did not have the production capacity needed to meet the large requirement and awarded Willys the contract. But soon, Willys could no longer keep up with the growing demand for Jeeps and there was also a need to safeguard the supply of Jeeps against the Willys plant being bombed or sabotaged. So the army awarded Ford the contract to build the Jeeps to the Willys design specification from Willys drawings, which were based on Bantam's drawings.

Thus while Bantam was responsible for the first Jeep, the company never got to enjoy the vehicle's stupendous success.

JONGA ALL THE WAY

The 1977 Jonga in front of me owes its genes to this little history. It belongs to Abhilash Nambiar, who rescued it from a junkyard, and then took nearly a year to restore it to its original condition.

The Jonga is actually a Nissan. This was the Patrol 60 or P60 model introduced in 1960. The Nissan Patrol was inducted into the Indian Army in 1963-64, and built by the Vehicle Factory Jabalpur (VFJ) under an exclusive license from Nissan for the Indian Army. Production of the vehicle stopped in 1999.

The vehicle is powered by a six-cylinder 3956cc in-line petrol engine developing 110bhp at 3200rpm. Now

It took an army's budget to feed the huge 3956cc engine's appetite for petrol – it returns around 5kpl; the heavy steering and controls helped the Indian Army keep its soldiers fit.

that's not a lot of power for a four-litre engine, but then look at the next figure. Maximum torque was 26.9kgm at 1200rpm. That too from a petrol engine! The Jonga had a three-speed gearbox with a two-speed shift-on-the-fly 4WD transfer case. Put all these facts together and you can get a good idea about the *raison d'être* of this vehicle – to flatten mountains and go where no vehicle has gone before.

But before we proceed to demolish mountains, a little drive on more normal roads is called for. I fire up the ignition and the six pistons loudly clatter into life. Well, this is not a stealth vehicle that can sneak up to the enemy but rather scare the living daylights out of them as it loudly charges with guns blazing. And you do need the strength of a jawan to drive it. The clutch doubles up as a muscle-building exercise machine. The efficiency of the brake depends more on the strength in your leg than

'The *raison d'être* of this vehicle – to flatten mountains and go where no vehicle has gone before.'



hydraulics. The gear throw is long. And the steering takes me in the general direction that I want to go rather than the specific place I want to be.

There's not much traffic on the smooth broad highway, so I press down on the accelerator. At 80kph the Jona is a howling, wailing, shuddering brick wallowing down the road scaring the traffic in front. Scaring little Marutis soon loses its charm and I start to appreciate the men who spent hours behind the wheel with only a machine gun and rocket launcher for entertainment. This is not a vehicle you want on your Mumbai-Pune trip, or even for your daily trip to the office (though Abhilash does drive it to his office). Then what is this vehicle for?

The question is answered definitively 30 minutes later. We are in the middle of nowhere. A goatherd looks on incredulously, wondering

where this vehicle has come from. Beyond the Jona's bonnet all I can see is the blue sky as the four-litre engine hauls the vehicle up the steep hill, spitting out boulders and stones from under its tyres.

If this is what the Jona can clamber over, without even engaging four-wheel drive, I wonder what the low-ratio can do. I wish that it was raining, and the track was all slush and the gradient even steeper. I want to drive it up to Siachen. I want to take it to the Rainforest Challenge. This is just too wimpy for the retired army workhorse.

I have driven Gypsies and modern air-conditioned SUVs bristling with

FRIENDLY BATTLE

TODAY YOU have to drive 24km on tarmac roads to cross the Jalori Pass. In 1989 it was a seven-kilometre dirt track. When Captain Taranvir Singh lost the first and second gear on his Jona, while participating in the Great Desert Himalayan Rally, he simply put the vehicle into reverse gear and reversed his way all the way to the top of the Pass!

In the early days of Indian rallying, the Jona was a powerful competitor driven by Army and Air Force teams. Apart from the mandatory roll-cage, the Jona hardly needed any modifications to compete in this demanding sport.



driver aids over similar terrain. The lightweight Gypsy, while an excellent off-roader, feels like it'll shake itself loose after some time. The modern SUVs on the other hand, while very capable, are compromised in their off-road ability due to the demands of modern comfort and conveniences. The Jona was designed for one and one thing only, and nearly 50 years later there are only a handful of vehicles that can match its brute capability where the road ends.

So do armies across the world owe Karl Probst a debt of gratitude? I am not a car historian, but from what I can gather, it seems unlikely that there was a eureka moment in the birth of the Jeep. This much is sure — Bantam created the Jeep as we know today and Karl Probst was one of the people working on the project. But is Karl Probst the inventor of the Jeep? The jury is still out on this one. **AI**