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Zero tolerance on safety: Take action against truant EV-makers & overhaul the entire vehicle testing system

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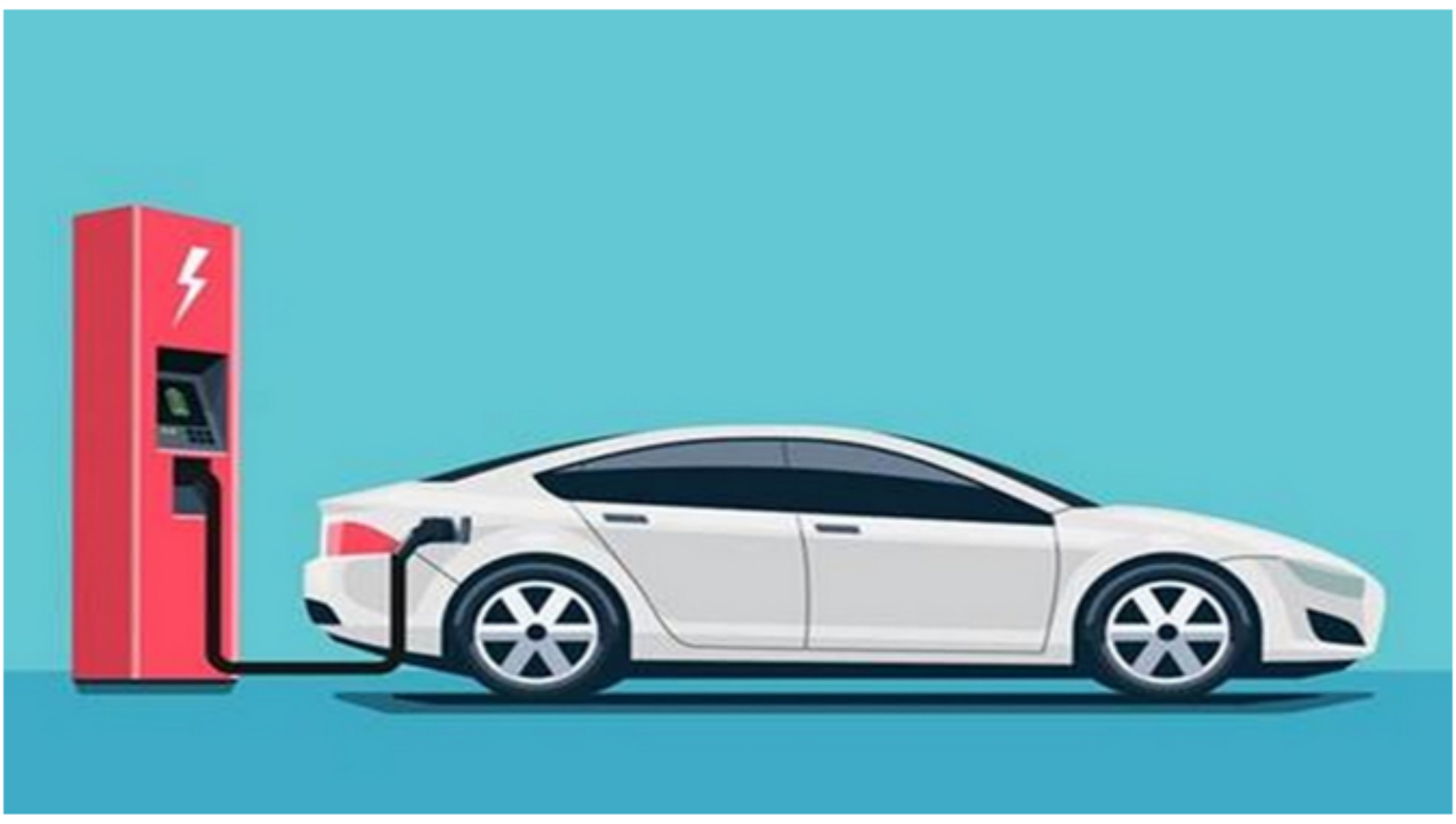

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Just about a fortnight after industrialist Rajiv Bajaj blamed the policy environment for encouraging "upstart" electric vehicle (EV) players who failed to ensure necessary quality checks leading to multiple instances of two-wheelers catching fire, a probe panel set up by the government seems to have validated his observations. The expert committee has reportedly found that even "basic safety systems" were lacking in the EVs involved in the recent incidents. They include missing "venting mechanisms" to deal with battery overheating and deficient battery management systems which failed to recognise cells getting overheated. The panel has also raised serious concerns as several of these manufacturers took shortcuts rather than prioritising safety. Though the panel's report is yet to be made public, the findings, if backed by enough evidence, are a damning indictment of scores of EV players.

Buyers would wonder whether some EV players made false claims about their research and development prowess and were more interested in cutting corners to score brownie points at the expense of unsuspecting consumers. Many experts believe that the R&D gestation period in the space is typically longer than that taken by some of the EV players between project announcements and launches. The shift from lead-acid batteries to lithium ion ones has shrunk the battery size, and has pushed up the energy density. This would call for superlative battery management systems, designed to effectively control energy flows. But if the desire to push products into the market fast and cut costs for greater uptake is what has been practised, the companies must be made answerable.

Many experts have also blamed poor testing protocols and the use of cheap and questionable quality batteries (especially those imported from China), etc. This could create a crisis of confidence among buyers leading to poor response to EVs, undermining efforts to make personal and mass transport less GHG-heavy.

Batteries, and EVs themselves, will need to be designed with Indian conditions in mind. It will be hard going forward as Li-ion battery supply, controlled to a great degree by China, falls short of rising demand. With a properly designed PLI plan, and exploring other battery technology options, India may yet emerge a contender in the space.

Even established players venturing into the EV space have had to deal with thermal runaway in batteries. However, watertight manufacturing and testing protocols make any allegations of malfeasance less sticky. That said, the government and the regulators will need to drastically step up their act. Following a few incidents of EV two-wheelers catching fire, the government has gone on an overdrive against all the players, forgetting that it is unfair to paint everyone with the same brush. This sledgehammer approach does not solve the problem. Besides, there is need for introspection. Media reports have pointed out that while some of the companies were submitting top-quality cells for testing and certification by the Automotive Research Association of India (ARAI), tasked with prescribing and testing standards, they could be using poorer cells in the vehicles sold, thanks to ARAI and other regulators lacking a mandate for surprise checks. While new standards—framed by the Bureau of Indian Standards—being proposed are good news, effective on-ground implementation is needed.