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## **Reva Seva**

**F**oreign leaders invited to George Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas are usually treated to a drive around his 1500-acre estate in his Ford F-250 with the President himself behind the wheel. The gas-guzzler offers a mileage of around 4.5 miles per liter, according the U.S government website [www.fueleconomy.gov](http://www.fueleconomy.gov). Russian President Vladimir Putin, one of Bush's charmed guests to ride in the mini-truck, returned the compliment last week by driving Bush around his dacha in his vintage 1956 Volga, whose mileage can't be much better. Those who study tea leaves or tire tracks may read meanings into their choice of vehicles.

Not having seen pictures or footage of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh behind the wheel, one isn't sure if he drives. But assuming he has in his days as an academic and a bureaucrat, here's an interesting thought. Is it possible that when Bush visits India this winter, Singh can drive him -- perhaps from South Block to parliament, since he has no ranch or dacha? And if he could, what vehicle should he use?

How about Reva, an India-made electric car that is winning rave notices in the west, including in automobile-saturated America? Forbes magazine called it exotic because it is made in India, "a nation which is becoming increasingly famous as a technological hub." And from Automobile.com: "As a technology showcase, the (Reva) concept car is a completely operational tool to demonstrate India's expertise in developing electric vehicle technology to the world...India's research and development is a case in point that the technology behind alternative-power zero- emissions vehicles is alive and kicking."

I won't belabour the encomiums and sound like a shill for Reva. But it's not so much the car as the concept that is driving me to make this far-out suggestion. At a time of growing energy crisis, at a time when India is

finally learning that the future lies in innovation not imitation, what better "body language" than driving the leader of the SUV nation around in a hip, home-made electric buggy?

The first Indian vehicles have already appeared on the American landscape. If you look hard enough, you will find a few Mahindra tractors in the American heartland (manufactured in Texas and Georgia). Bajaj two- and three-wheelers nip around some urban centers, mainly used to deliver pizza.

But there are no Indian cars on the roads dominated by American, Japanese and European vehicles. For that matter, there are not many Indian technologies in the USA. From spirituality to software, we export many conceptual products. But when it comes to nuts and bolts, chips and circuits, we are not on the screen.

Of course, don't expect Reva to be hurtling up Interstate 95 anytime soon, not in a country where families don't think twice about a 40-mile drive for dinner at Olive Gardens. A six-hour charge gives Reva a range of about 120 miles, which is quite a distance in India but could be a daily commute to work in the U.S. Heck, for that matter, it may not even work in India, because, as a friend cynically pointed out, who can assure an uninterrupted six-hour power supply?

But jokes aside, Reva and other innovative products like the simputer (even though it has bombed), speak to an Indian quest to break new ground. We may be cottoning on a little late to the manufacturing boom based on borrowed ideas and designs, but there is no reason why we can't have a head start on the technologies of tomorrow. Especially where it concerns energy and water, the two resources that are expected to cause most conflict in the 21st century.

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