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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Yes, They Could. So They Did.

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New Delhi

So I am attending the Energy and Resources Institute climate conference in New Delhi, and during the afternoon session two young American women — along with one of their mothers — proposition me.

“Hey, Mr. Friedman,” they say, “would you like to take a little spin around New Delhi in our car?”

Oh, I say, I’ve heard that line before. Ah, they say, but you haven’t seen this car before. It’s a plug-in electric car that is also powered by rooftop solar panels — and the two young women, recent Yale grads, had just driven it all over India in a “climate caravan” to highlight the solutions to global warming being developed by Indian companies, communities, campuses and innovators, as well as to inspire others to take action.

They ask me if I want to drive, but I have visions of being stopped by the cops and ending up in a New Delhi jail. Not to worry, they tell me. Indian cops have been stopping them all across India. First, they ask to see driver’s licenses, then they inquire about how the green car’s solar roof manages to provide 10 percent of its mileage — and then they try to buy the car.

We head off down Panchsheel Marg, one of New Delhi’s main streets. The ladies want to show me something. The U.S. Embassy and the Chinese Embassy are both located on Panchsheel, directly across from each other. They asked me to check out the rooftops of each embassy. What do I notice? Let’s see ... The U.S. Embassy’s roof is loaded with antennae and listening gear. The Chinese Embassy’s roof is loaded with ... new Chinese-made solar hot-water heaters.

You couldn’t make this up.

But trying to do something about it was just one of many reasons my hosts, Caroline Howe, 23, a mechanical engineer on leave from the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, and Alexis Ringwald, a Fulbright scholar in India and now a solar entrepreneur, joined with Kartikeya Singh, who was starting the Indian Youth Climate Network, or IYCN, to connect young climate leaders in India, a country coming under increasing global pressure to manage its carbon footprint.

“India is full of climate innovators, so spread out across this huge country that many people don’t get to see that these solutions are working right now,” said Howe. “We wanted to find a way to bring people together around existing solutions to inspire more action and more innovation. There’s no time left to just talk about the problem.”

Howe and Ringwald thought the best way to do that might be a climate solutions road tour, using modified electric cars from India’s Reva Electric Car Company, whose C.E.O. Ringwald knew. They persuaded him to donate three of his cars and to retrofit them with longer-life batteries that could travel 90 miles on a single six-hour charge — and to lay on a solar roof that would extend them farther.

Between Jan. 1 and Feb. 5, they drove the cars on a 2,100-mile trip from Chennai to New Delhi, stopping in 15 cities and dozens of villages, training Indian students to start their own climate action programs and filming 20 videos of India’s top home-grown energy innovations. They also brought along a solar-powered band, plus a luggage truck that ran on plant oil extracted from jatropha and pongamia, plants locally grown on wasteland. A Bollywood dance group joined at different stops and a Czech who learned about their trip on YouTube hopped on with his truck that ran on vegetable-oil waste.

Deepa Gupta, 21, a co-founder of IYCN, told The Hindustan Times that the trip opened her eyes to just how many indigenous energy solutions were budding in India — “like organic farming in Andhra Pradesh, or using neem and garlic as pesticides, or the kind of recycling in slums, such as Dharavi. We saw things already in place, like the Gadhia solar plant in Valsad, Gujarat, where steam is used for cooking and you can feed almost 50,000 people in one go.” (See: www.indiaclimatesolutions.com.)

At Rajpipla, in Gujarat, when they stopped at a local prince’s palace to recharge their cars, they discovered that his business was cultivating worms and selling them as eco-friendly alternatives to chemical fertilizers.

I met Howe and Ringwald after a tiring day, but I have to admit that as soon as they started telling me their story it really made me smile. After a year of watching adults engage in devastating recklessness in the financial markets and depressing fecklessness in the global climate talks, it’s refreshing to know that the world keeps minting idealistic young people who are not waiting for governments to act, but are starting their own projects and driving innovation.

“Why did this tour happen?” asked Ringwald. “Why this mad, insane plan to travel across India in a caravan of solar electric cars and jatropha trucks with solar music, art, dance and a potent message for climate solutions? Well ... the world needs crazy ideas to change things, because the conventional way of thinking is not working anymore.”

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