**Coaching colonels in Bundelkhand,Einstein Public School in Lalganj | The Indian Express**

Summary. Related. The talk,wherever you go chasing elections in Uttar Pradesh,is about education,jobs,better life,aspiration. Why we call this random series of writings from different and diverse parts of. India,often during the elections,<U+0093>Writings on the Wall<U+0094> needs repetition. So many years of training as a reporter-writer have taught me that one of the best ways of figuring out what is going on in our country,what is changing,for better or worse,or not changing at all,is written,literally,on our walls. So if you go to the most prosperous zones of India,take Punjab for example,you will find Mercs,credit cards,housing loans and easy visas and immigration to exotic destinations like <U+0093>Kanada<U+0094> being sold on the walls. You go to a flourishing new green revolution zone like coastal Andhra,and you will see the walls selling you tractors,cement,iron rods for construction (sariya). In the really poor zones,the wares displayed are usually more basic: snuff,itch cream. And then there are the poorest of poor zones that have no walls,so no writings to read. We also noted in several of our travels through the years,and chronicled in this series (find earlier writings in this series at http://www.indianexpress.com/news/writings-on-the-wall/713872/ ) that one of the big new changes sweeping the country,and evident in the writings on the wall,was the desperate hunger for modern education. The walls of Bundelkhand are not much of an exception. The bone-dry zone that begins generally 300 km southeast of Delhi and then spreads out in a 350-km radius across Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh,has been in the headlines lately since Rahul Gandhi discovered it for national politics. Bundelkhand is supposed to represent everything that has gone wrong with the Hindi heartland: casteism,de-industrialisation,mafia rule,destitution,serial droughts and desperate migration. A hopeless,depressing and dangerous Omkara-land,where a Vishal Bhardwaj could find plots for the rest of his life. But drive through Bundelkhand,as we,the usual motley group of journalists,psephologists,economists and finance whiz-kids,the self-styled Limousine Liberals did last week,and the reality seems a little bit different. Sure,Bundelkhand is drier,more sparsely populated and factory-less than the rest of the Hindi heartland. But roads are good,particularly the new,narrow but tarred village roads built under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY). There are government schools spilling over with uniformed children and plenty of private schools and colleges advertised on the walls. There isn<U+0092>t as much construction as you<U+0092>d find elsewhere in the country,but the three large modern constructions,coming up on the 100-km stretch of national highway between Jhansi and Mauranipur,are just what you<U+0092>d expect <U+0097> technical colleges. So there is demand,there is hunger and,beg,borrow or steal,there is inclination to pay. So what is new or different on the walls in Bundelkhand? There is something different,and you do not have to search too hard. Engineering,management,medical,dental colleges,wide-curriculum private colleges and universities,even English-medium <U+0093>convents<U+0094> you can find anywhere now. But where else would you find giant boards staring down at you on highways selling coaching for NDA (National Defence Academy),IMA (Indian Military Academy),SSB (Services Selection Board),Army,Navy,Air Force <U+0093>under the guidance of former senior officers<U+0094>? One of the more popular coaching centres is run by a group called <U+0093>Antar-Prantiya (inter-state) Brigadiers and Colonels<U+0094>. Another one has a picture of an assault commando in war paint,a big,bold <U+0093>josh<U+0094> printed on the top,and then a gallery of mug-shots of pupils selected for military academies in recent years. Now,you will see similar advertisements for IAS and IIT/IIM coaching schools. But military academies? If our armed forces are short of officer talent,this is where they should be coming. The composition of voluntary armed forces in democracies has its own sociology. They are the favourite route to empowerment for the underclass: just see the rising number of African-Americans and Hispanics in the US armed forces. Given such a hard deal by nature,and a crueller one by politics and caste,the Bundelkhandis have found their aspirational vehicle in the armed forces. So do not just fret noticing how many of the security guards in our colonies,all unskilled migrants in ill-fitting uniforms doing 12-hour shifts on minimum wages,are Bundelkhandis. For each one of them,there is probably one preparing for an exam that would earn him a proper uniform,pride,love and respect of the nation,pips of an officer and a very decent lifestyle. Five full days of travels through Uttar Pradesh<U+0092>s heartland and its distant Bundelkhand only underline the fact that the aspirational upsurge that we have seen envelop the rest of India is also vibrant here,never mind the state<U+0092>s broken politics where a mere 30 per cent vote share can reward you with a majority and 25 per cent leaves you a distant second. No wonder then that all the four vote-seekers,the SP,BSP,Congress and BJP,speak the same aspirational language,though the idiom and emphasis vary. Mulayam Singh Yadav and his very polite and affable son (the youngest key campaigner at 38),Akhilesh,are focusing on distancing themselves from a past they acknowledge nobody has any time for: a past of criminal,bahubali (as political mafiosi are called in UP) politics and of Luddite rejection of technology and English. So the party now promises free laptops and tablets to students breaking into senior classes,and they can choose the gadget in the language they prefer: Hindi,Urdu,or English. Akhilesh says the key to the future is public-private partnerships (PPPs),and one of Mayawati<U+0092>s key allegations against the Centre is that it hobbled UP<U+0092>s growth by not clearing her most ambitious PPP projects. The BJP would remind you that Vajpayee launched the road-building campaign and it would even turn around parched Bundelkhand by importing drip irrigation technology from Israel. Rahul Gandhi,in fact,is the only one not invoking the private sector,PPPs etc,in any way,but more than his message,his presence is aspirational in its own way,though less so as this campaign has progressed and old-timers in his party have broken his momentum by dragging in reservations for Muslim backwards. But more about that on Tuesday. If you stay on the beautiful new four-lane highway,the drive from Kanpur city through Kanpur Dehat (rural) into Bundelkhand can be quite misleading. Because the country is lush,flat and deep,springtime yellow with blooming mustard,and less thickly populated as you go along. You get off that highway,and the story begins to unfold. At Derapur<U+0092>s buzzing village haat,freshly harvested gobhi,tomato (Rs 18 for 5 kg),green chillies and cabbage sell with mostly Chinese manufactured goods and churans (powders) that fix everything from flatulence to premature ejaculation. But shopkeepers and buyers all collect around any talk of politics. A straw poll tells you not a single Dalit is voting any way other than Mayawati<U+0092>s. Muslims,if you generally added those spoken to by 20 of us,are divided seven to three between SP and Congress. The three who are breaking rank from the SP are all college students and are doing so because of the promise of reservations. Several of Mulayam<U+0092>s old voters are returning to him,convinced of his promise to give up on <U+0093>goondai<U+0094> as politically protected mafia rule is described here,but many others aren<U+0092>t. Everybody acknowledges that Behenji has restored order and sorted out the thugs,but has she done enough for all? No. And what about Chief Medical Officers murdered inside her prisons? Similarly,everybody also acknowledges that Rahul Gandhi has worked really hard and looks sincere but also that neither he nor the BJP is in the race. The Congress in particular seems to suffer from an utter lack of organisation on the ground to build on the initial momentum Rahul had created. It is also let down severely by some of its stars,notably its Lok Sabha MP Anu Tandon from Unnao,not far from here. At Dostipur,a tiny rurban sprawl on the outskirts of Unnao,a huddle of men talks indignantly of how they were fooled by the Congress and Anu Tandon,though they do not quite use polite language,preferring instead the expression a brave actor like Vidya Balan in Ishqiya or Saif Ali Khan in Omkara would have spoken with such panache. <U+0093>Congress aur Anu Tandon ne hamaara khoob ch\*\*\* banaya,<U+0094> is the refrain,as she <U+0093>promised<U+0094> to bring Reliance factories here but never even showed up after that once. And this was a group of Brahmins that voted Congress in 2009. Because this is a relatively new part of the village,castes inter-mix here rather more than in the usual old setting,with Dalits,Brahmins and OBC gadariyas (graziers) sharing boundary walls and compounds. But caste is still intact,and just how it works is demonstrated devastatingly in the covered verandah of a pucca old house just yards down the same dusty lane flanked by two black,open,clogged drains,so typical of semi-urban India. What is the old,slight gentleman doing standing there in a clean,rather crisp shirt,but in just striped,cotton,stringed underwear below it? Then you see his trousers. Mr Shiv Narain is a bania and sells trinkets on a cart. Now he is going out to visit relatives. So Bhanwari is pressing a razor-sharp crease on his trousers with a coal-fired iron,and never mind that it is rather too big for her thin arms and slight frame. She is from the dhobi caste,on the lower rungs of the Dalit pyramid,but there is no awkwardness between her and the bania with his pants down. This is a classical example of caste-determined economic interdependence and both coolly chat us up,Limousine Liberals. Bhanwari has a pile of neatly ironed laundry behind her,and tells us she makes at least Rs 200 a day. So there is a market for ironed clothes even in Dostipur. And why must she work so hard? Because three of her grandchildren now go to college. Somebody has to pay for them. The talk,wherever you go,is not about food or starvation. It is about education,jobs,better life. You still have doubts? Come with us to Lalganj,a bit far to the northeast from here,on the road between Rae Bareli and Pratapgarh. At a local <U+0093>kitchen-se-coronary-tak<U+0094> type restaurant of sorts that serves chowmein garnished with freshly chopped dhania and garam masala and deadly fluffy bhaturas,and displays Diet Coke,we are joined by romancing young couples who exchange coy glances and whisper over gulab jamuns in donas (leaf plates),a little in the manner of the old <U+0093>Muslim socials<U+0094> of Hindi cinema that went out with Rajendra Kumar and Sadhna. You can<U+0092>t even think of intruding. But two young boys,schoolbags and all,draw us into conversation. They are both Shuklas,though not related,speak excellent English,of the kind Hindustan Times matrimonials would describe as <U+0093>convented<U+0094> and study in a local school,called,check it out,Einstein Public School. It so happens that their headmaster is a Shukla too,but they say the school has pupils from all castes and,<U+0093>more importantly<U+0094>,an English-speaking faculty drawn from all over the country that <U+0093>even includes some Bengalis<U+0094>. They both want to go to IIT,and are already pursuing special coaching from a Kota-based institute by correspondence. Do they feel they can compete with those living in big cities? <U+0093>Ya,ya,<U+0094> they say. <U+0093>No problem. Einstein (the school) has Internet,computers,uninterrupted power.<U+0094> Tiny Lalganj may indeed have its aspirational gem in Einstein Public School,but you cannot pass a single habitation that does not boast of something called a convent. <U+0093>Convents<U+0094>,named after Hindu gods and goddesses,from Lakshmi to Shiva,Ram to Hanuman,Sikh gurus,sometimes simply after some owner<U+0092>s own father,flourish everywhere as government schools rot. At Orai,in the Bundelkhand district of Jalaun,you even find a signboard that invites you to <U+0093>Lettle Angels<U+0094> English medium school near <U+0093>Hallypad<U+0094>. You can laugh at this mushrooming private business in schools,but when you want your children to break out of a place not going anywhere,and join the vast,new booming world outside,you need English. In the Dalit quarter of Kallupuruwa in Rae Bareli,a woman,a mother of two,is severely indignant when asked if she can feed her children properly. <U+0093>Of course,we feed them,and feed them very well,<U+0094> she says,<U+0093>the problem is,we are not left with enough money to send them to a really good English medium school as the fee there is Rs 300 per child. We send them to the one with 120-rupee fee.<U+0094> And what about government schools? Urmila smiles that smile of vicious disdain,as if to say,you send your children to government schools. Leave mine to me. Back to Bundelkhand,the land of so much history,folklore,politics and now hopelessness and headlines. BJP<U+0092>s Sudheendra Kulkarni (and a Sunday Express columnist),campaigning here,tells us Bundelkhand has more monuments than all of Rajasthan,and you can believe that,as the region,ruled for a millennium by the Bundelas and the Chandelas,stretching from Gwalior to Jhansi to Orchcha to Kalinjar to Khajuraho,packs so much history and heritage. And oodles of creativity. For evidence,come to Jhansi railway station late at night and read the inscriptions below the dimly lit busts of Maithili Sharan Gupt,Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi and Vrindavan Lal Verma,three of the most towering figures of contemporary Hindi literature,all sons of Bundelkhand. What it does not have is water. And the one scheme that could have changed its face,the interlinking of the Ken and the Betwa,two rivers in the same Yamuna basin,became a casualty of the UPA<U+0092>s early phase of unquestioned environmental activism,in spite of the fact that the three riparian states,UP,MP and Rajasthan,had already signed an agreement on it. If Bundelkhand became a state,as Mayawati wants,Jhansi would be its capital. Jhansi,with its imposing citadel and the history of the famous national heroine of 1857. You would expect the immortal lines from Subhadra Kumari Chauhan<U+0092>s tribute to the Rani of Jhansi,that all of us had to memorise in our school Hindi classes,to be repeated in every campaigner<U+0092>s rally here. Not surprisingly then,as Sonia Gandhi arrives to address a reasonable-sized rally on a burnishing afternoon,the crowd-warmer is reciting the most familiar lines from that ballad: <U+0093>Boodhe Bharat mein bhi aayi phir se nayi jawani thi… Chamak uthi sun sattavan mein woh talwar purani thi (Tired,ageing India had risen with youthful rejuvenation,the rusted sword of the old was gleaming again in 1857)<U+0094>; and then he carries on,utterly unselfconsciously,<U+0093>door phirangi ko karne kei,sab ne man mein thani thi (everybody was determined now to throw out the firangi,the foreigner).<U+0094> Exactly at that moment Sonia Gandhi ascends the stage to the chants of <U+0093>Zindabad<U+0094>. This is India during an election,this is quintessential India,anytime. Intriguing,incredible and never without a surprise or an irony. (Part Two on Tuesday: From Lohiaite doggerel to modern mantras,a master-key to power and a touch of Taare Zameen Par,though not exactly what you think)