**On the wall,off the road – 1 | The Indian Express**

Related. How do you ever figure out what goes on in India? You can read newspapers and books,imbibe unlimited (and usually repetitive) gyan from a cartel of about a dozen talking heads who control the opinion industry on the newspaper op-ed pages and TV channels,talk to experts,listen to politicians,professors,godmen or astrologers. But having tried all of these and more,some from both sides,I have come to the conclusion that there is no better teacher of whats going on in India,particularly if you love travelling by road,than reading writings on the wall. This is particularly true of the India,or Bharat,that we usually know so little about. In decades of travelling,I have figured that if you keep your eye on the walls as you (if you are on a decent strip of asphalt) sprint past them or (if it is the usual north Indian minefield of a road) bounce up and down and move a mile in five minutes,you know what is going on,what is changing and what is not. So if you go to a really rich part of India,say,Punjab,the walls will display advertisements and messages from airlines offering cheap tickets to England or Kanada,discounts and freebies for buying mid-sized cars,even services to fix your visas and passports. You go to the slightly less rich regions,and you find the writings on the walls selling you tractors,fertiliser,cement,farm loans. Even poorer regions will have walls displaying advertisements for snuff,itch creams,bidis. And the really,really poor,will either have no walls (as in parts of Bihar and Orissa) or will either have no messages or,wherever a little awakening is now visible,particularly since the arrival of Nitish Kumar,advertisements for the one industry that signals a national renaissance in howsoever twisted a fashion education. So you see English-medium schools and IIT-IIM-medical college entrance-test coaching centres advertised in places where walls would have been blank a few years ago. So when I travel,particularly as a member of a small and motley group of journalists,TV anchors,psephologists and economists the self-proclaimed Limousine Liberals in an election I search for the message of change (or the lack of it) from what is written on the walls. As I did in the course of this election campaign,while driving from the driest regions of India (northern Karnataka and a stretch of Rayalseema in Andhra) to some of the lushest (coastal Andhra) and from our most resurgent cities (Bangalore) to our most wannabe (Hyderabad). Fertiliser and cement were still there,but in the drier zones,where there had been almost nothing earlier. So were farm loans,motorcycles,even the odd refrigerator. It was evident,therefore,that some kind of irrigation a two-crop system that produced some surplus and made the farmer think of investing so he could move from subsistence to (agricultural) market economy had arrived in a region which God had decided to place under a terrible rain shadow. Of course much of whats depressing with. rurbanising (the rural equivalent of gentrification in cities) in the rest of India was also visible on the road skirting Cuddapah: filth,rotten infrastructure; putrid,stinking. water-courses and encroachments. But in the middle of all this,Dhoni and Deepika Padukone selling you soft drinks were not the only ones providing some colour. There was also,quite incredibly,branded chicken. At grocery shops in village after village,at tiny butcher shops,on top of carcasses of freshly-slaughtered goats,you find hoardings and boards selling branded chicken: Suguna,Venkys,and more. So even the butchers shop in Srikalahasti,a tiny place not far from Tirupati which boasts a cute railway station of the kind you see in southern movies,with LCD display panes,clean toilets and cafeteria,the sort you will NEVER find in a village in Bihar from where almost all our rail ministers come the local Mr Butcher works from a wooden shack sitting on an obvious encroachment; but he has a small refrigerator,a power connection and even a Honda generator in case power goes off,to preserve his unsold meat and,of course,branded chicken. Branded chicken in a chronic drought and poverty zone where NREGA has been a life-saver may be a stunning paradox. But so is the man who so generously invites us for dinner in coastal,and much richer,Nellore,nearly 200 km to the north-east. Chandrababu Naidu was once the darling of reformers,of free-market economists,the Indian and foreign media and of course the larger,liberal intellectual class. All of which,he now tells us over a multi-course and fiery coastal Andhra meal,were the reasons why he lost power. I got so obsessed with praise from all of you,that I lost contact with people, he says. And then goes on to explain with the sort of candour and articulateness you wouldnt expect from an Indian politician,particularly a regional,third-front type: I became a nationalist,a statesman,and got obsessed with that image. I forgot my villages,the voters,and I will never make that mistake again. Five years out of power have been terrible. I have really suffered and struggled. He then unveils his modified reform thinking. Pro-market reforms,he says,must continue,but you cant wait for trickle-down as I did the last time. Reform will create wealth,he says,but the state must distribute it immediately. His solution,however,is more immediate than you would have imagined: he carries an ATM machine with him and tells voters how he will give cards to all the poor so,once a month,all they need to do is push the card into the machine,and Rs 2,000 will come out,and this is how. At a fairly energetic campaign meeting in the heart of Nellore that has at least a dozen OB vans (all from local,Telugu channels; most of them owned by politicians) in attendance,he gets a response when he explains his cash transfer scheme. As he would,at least initially,from reform economists who have been asking for just this in place of the usual government schemes for years. Except he wants this to be in addition to all the rest,including NREGA. And from where will he get the money to finance these? Naidu has some ideas that come straight from hell. He would impose a stiff inheritance tax and estate duty. After all,Why should a rich mans children get all his wealth without having earned it? This,of course,will be in addition to much higher income taxes in his new,confiscatory economics and because India cant have more billionaires than Japan. And he is not willing to listen,howsoever much you argue against his ideas on merit. Sir,I listened to people like you,and lost power. I will never do that again, he says with a smile that is half-determination and half-apology,even as somebody realises that it is 12 midnight and therefore time to wish Naidu a happy birthday and leave him to a few hours of hard-earned sleep. But,if sleeping late and little is the hazard of a politicians life,nobody is better trained to handle it than the film star in this case,Chiranjeevi,whom we catch up with in Palakollu,his parents-in-laws town,not far from coastal Rajahmundhry and one of the two constituencies he is contesting from. He invites us to dinner at one of his friends (a film producer) plush home but turns up himself only well past midnight,fresh and on-the-go as if another days work was just about to begin. He is too simple and uncomplicated to be a politician yet. Born Konidela Shiva Shankara Vara Prasad to a police constable,he says he changed his name to Chiranjeevi after a dream. Then,having spent more than two decades thrashing the baddies and inevitably destroying all evil,he has now jumped into politics,with pretty much the same intention. But he acknowledges real politics is not like the movies and the victory of good over evil is not pre-ordained. He admits he has not been able to build a real organisation,is not sure if his politics is anything like the Robin Hood socialism that many of his movies portrayed,but between Chandrababu Naidu and Rajasekhar Reddy he seems to know who is the greater evil,even if he wont say so in so many words. Reddy,he says,started out so poor he had to mortgage his house to contest the first time. Now,he has so many houses. And Naidu? Dont ask me to use a word I do not want to use, he says. Then,chin up,eyes rolling to the far corner of the ceiling,lips puckered in an outrage that crores of his fans understand,love,and instantly share,he pronounces: Jackal! (Pronounced,rather more dramatically,as Jauckaaal.) Now I do not know if in Telugu sub-culture the Jackal was Foxier than its more-maligned cousin elsewhere in the country,but maybe it is the name of some serial villain in Telugu movies,much like Kulbhushan Kharbandas immortal Shakaal in Bollywood and if you watch Telugu movies,and know this to be true,please do send me a mail. Reading the walls may be easier,and safer,than reading politicians lips,but you can sometimes try their body language. The same politicians who maintain,even when counting trends indicate a rout,that they are going to win in the end,will always tell you if you have an experienced eye with their body language if they sense trouble or joy. Body language sometimes also tells you whats working for them and what isnt. The two incumbent chief ministers we meet on this long drive,Yeddiyurappa of Karnataka and Rajasekhar Reddy of Andhra both have the look-feel of politicians who know they are doing fine. For Reddy,whats working is his schemes,and he dismisses with a wave of the hand a suggestion that Naidus cash-transfer may be finding traction with the poor. He has no credibility, he says,I do not even need to counter it. But he knows what is also working for him is the Chiranjeevi factor. He is taking away most of his anti-incumbency vote which,in a way,is drawing away the venom to save his life. Because if the same vote had gone to Naidu,he would have been looking at a real disaster. For five years,he has been the Congress partys most effective chief minister,and undoubtedly the one most autonomous of the high command. There are charges of corruption wherever you go,but nobody calls him incompetent. What you invariably hear is that he may have made ten rupees for himself,but they all do… the difference is,he has also passed at least four to us,the people. In the Congress tradition,YSR is an unusual chief minister, almost sui generis,seeking votes in his own name and for his performance. Of course he more than adequately compensates the First Family by naming almost anything his government,or sometimes even a private company (like the new cricket stadium in Hyderabad),builds after a Nehru or a Gandhi. The other one confidently on a winning course is Yeddiyurappa. But he is still more childlike in his earnestness,even innocence. You ask him,who is the second-most popular leader in Karnataka after him,of course. He is stumped for once,then pauses to recover and then gives you politically the most correct answer: Ananth Kumar,his BJP comrade and one that political correspondents would describe as his bete noire,as if that was his second name. Now dont read Yeddiyurappas lips. Watch his eyes and cheeks,and catch that smirk. Or read his entire face,as it lights up,and hands,as they go tossing up in excitement,when you ask him which issue is really working for him this campaign and he tells you,with joy of the kind he will learn to hide as he spends more time in power: terrorism. But hang on,we started this saying we found wisdom from writings on the wall. So let us go back to one,at a dhaba on National Highway 5 at a place called Hanuman Junction,not far from Eluru. The owner,a woman,is a Kamma,a TDP voter and has a picture of NTR by the cash box. The three employees who serve us a brilliant meal of rice,sambhar and curries will all vote Congress and nobody is threatening to fire them. On the wall of the dining area are three framed pictures,each representing a faith: Lord Balaji,the Kaaba with a night-time crescent moon and Jesus on the crucifix,all together. Sure enough,one thing that is not an issue in this election in Andhra Pradesh is religion or communalism. If that albeit happy writing on the wall wont teach you something about Indian democracy,the mind of the voter in real India,what else would? Postscript: I cant conclude a report from the roadside without listing my favourite reading of all. We leave the KCP Sugar Mills campus 40 km from Vijayawada after listening to a group of richer,progressive farmers who complain about NREGA having taken away their labour,and find,in a town of maybe 50,000,Mother Teresa Dance Academy. If youve seen something better than that lately,please do write to me and we will publish it rightaway.