



Beyond the Taj

Sumant Batra's coffee table book *The Indians* captures the essence of India through commoners like *presswallahs*, *dhobis*, street-side cooks, *chaiwalas et al*, says Divya Kapoor

Think of a coffee table book on India and the first thing that comes to mind is the breath taking pictures of the Himalayas, the Taj, great rivers et al. But corporate lawyer Sumant Batra has taken the idea further with his coffee table book *The Indians*

"What people do not get to see is the contribution which an average Indian makes to the economic growth of the country. I strongly believe that it is the Indian people

who are sustaining the economy of the country. Without the masses, their energy and spirit, the growth would not have been possible. This is precisely why you will not find a single picture of Taj Mahal or Himalayas in my book. I wanted to capture the essence of those Indians who are omnipresent but whom most of us tend to see-through," says Batra.

The book has over 300 photographs and 21 chapters on people like *presswallahs*, *dhobis*, street-side cooks, *chaiwalas*, *paanwalas* eunuchs, wrestlers, children and many more.

Batra, who is a consultant to the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), completed the book in

a span of six months. "My collection of thoughts and assembly of ideas have been fused together with a common philosophy - the spirit of India. I have tried to show the resilience of common people, their age old civilisation, heritage and culture which gets reflected in their day to day actions, their belief in god, their ability to negotiate with the hardships of life without giving up and their belief in a better tomorrow. They are the backstage of India and this book is a tribute to them," says he.

This book puts itself above the rest in terms of traditional value. "It's a book which when children would pick up 15 years later, will remark, 'this is what real India is all about' Like there

is a chapter that describes the significance of mundan (head shaving) and *janeu* (thread ceremony) in India. Similarly, there is a chapter on *chai* (tea). Now, one might argue how it fits into this book but *chai* is not just a drink but a part of our culture now."

A seemingly high price of the book (Rs 8,500), Batra says is justified keeping in mind his standards, hard work and involve-



ment in the book. "If I may say, at the cost of sounding immodest that my standing as lawyer and my current position is such that I couldn't have done a book that was priced ordinarily. A lot of hard work has gone into the writing and research which I think is far more valuable than the money that has gone into the making of the book. It is not a commercial project but a passionate one," says he

Doesn't he think that the book will be unaffordable for the very people that it hails as the economic power-houses. Batra has a solution for this problem. "I think those can afford it should buy it and gift it to those who cannot pay

for it. It has been priced high but I am not going to keep a single penny from the profits. The profits from the sale of the limited edition (approximately 2,000 copies) will be used by The Loomba Trust for the education, school uniforms, bus fares and lunch of the children of needy widows," says he.

The foreword of the book has been written Cherie Blair, wife of Tony Blair, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. In it she notes how 'perfectly the book encapsulates the many and varied qualities of the extraordinary people of India'. "Cherie Blair is the President of the Loomba Trust and when I told her about this book, she said she would be delighted to write a foreword for it," says Batra.

photo Pradeep Gaur