

Sumant Batra's real India

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WALK down a busy Indian street and what do you see? A feast of activity, a sea of faces. There are people selling things, drinking chai, plying rickshaws and carts. You will find children, barbers, a street astrologer, a cow ambling past. Superimpose these images on paper and you get a book that is quintessentially Indian.

That's what Sumant Batra, has done. He saw the extraordinary in the life that ordinary Indians live. He tells this story through a tapestry of pictures in his book, appropriately titled, *The Indians: Interesting Aspects, Extraordinary Facets*. It was released this month by Dr Karan Singh.

Batra is a corporate lawyer and much sought after. He is consultant to the IMF, the World Bank and the OECD. He sits on the board of prestigious global and national bodies. Why would he spend precious time doing a book like this one?

Well, Batra is emotional and deeply patriotic. He grew up in Hisar, a small town in Haryana. He studied law in Punjab University and slogged his way up, starting his own law firm, Kesar Das B & Associates from a basement in cramped Lajpat Nagar. Batra now has 40 lawyers working under him. He says he has a long way to go, but you can see he's arrived.

You would think a globe-trotting lawyer would lose his soul to jetlag and the good life. But not Batra. It disturbed him that India was typified by just a few symbols: companies that had gone global, cricket, Bollywood and, very recently, the Oscars. Nothing wrong with this, but there was so much more to India.

"I never wanted my human side to get lost," he says about his climb from oblivion. "I hung on to my sensitivity, kept my feet firmly on the ground and tried to be a responsible citizen, working for



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donor agencies at low costs. I wanted to do something for society," he explains.

"People don't realise that behind every successful Indian face there is a sea of ordinary people working backstage day and night to make it happen, contributing to India's GDP," he says.

He made it his mission to bring missing India into the limelight. Batra got a young team together. He travelled with his photographer, 26-year-old Sonhal Nachani, explaining his vision of the book as they went along.

LAKSHIMAN ANAND

He even rejected two publishers. One wanted to flirt with his idea, the other wanted the book to be released only in September. "I didn't care," says Batra. Finally, it was his sister-in-law's publishing firm which was given the responsibility of bringing out the book.

Indians is not loaded with copy. It tells you what you need to know. The book has attractive and meaningful pictures and takes you on a virtual journey into India's busy towns and redolent countryside. There are 21 chapters, thoughtfully chosen, on topics like rituals and ceremonies, gurukul, madarsa and pathshala, garam chai, coolies, shaves and haircuts on streets, headgear, desi khana, the ironing man and dhobi ghat, bazaars and pheriwalas, childhood games, paan mania, Bollywood and so on.

The book is a tribute to India's unity and diversity. There are aspects of Indian character which Batra has sought to highlight: the tolerance of the average Indian despite deprivation, the optimism of a better tomorrow, the deep faith in self-respect and dignity which spurs people to work hard.

"I wanted to show all this as part of normal life, not ornamental life," says Batra.

He also felt now is the right time to capture India's amazing landscapes, before they disappear. Towns and cities are changing rapidly. What we see today may not be visible tomorrow. So a book like this would have heritage value.

Indians has a foreword by Cherie Blair, wife of former UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair.

Sumant is associated with the Loomba Trust, Cherie Blair is its president and she agreed to write the foreword.

There is more to Batra than his successful law firm. He is a socially conscious individual and has pledged the money the book will bring in to the Loomba Trust, which works for widows in India.