

The extraordinariness of being ordinary

face-to-face Nawaid Anjum

THERE IS something extraordinary about ordinary Indians, the nameless, faceless, amorphous multitude who collectively symbolise the idea of India, giving the country its diverse, heterogeneous identity.

It is this identity of the country defined by the common man that gets splashed across the pages of a new coffee-table book, *The Indians: Interesting Aspects, Extraordinary Facets* by Delhi-based lawyer Sumant Batra.

Batra, 43, "salutes" the common man in the book which captures the myriad shades of Indianness in all its riotous, resplendent glory. The book celebrates the "diversity, richness and the vibrancy" of India.

Batra, who loves to explore his abilities, says he keeps "testing my various skills". He says: "Something which should have come very naturally to me would have been a law-related book. But, then, everyone would expect a lawyer to come out with a legal book. The challenge is to do some-

The Indians, a tribute to the common man, celebrates India in all its riotous, resplendent glory

thing which is different."

He wanted to work on a book, but it had to be a book which went "beyond writing". He bounced off his idea with his wife, Asha Batra, and decided that it had to be a coffee-table book. His younger sister-in-law, Jyoti Barmola, was also brought on board to assist in the production and for her creative inputs. According to Batra, the subject for the book was "well-thought, well-debated, and well-considered".

He wanted this coffee-table book, which carries a foreword by Cherie Blair, to be "different". This wouldn't be "ordinary" as he wanted to do something "extraordinary".

In his quest to find something "extraordinary," he decided to focus on the ordinary. "In our



Sumant Batra

PHOTO: G.N. Jha

desire and striving to do the extraordinary, we often tend to overlook the ordinary. We don't realise that even the ordinary can be so extraordinary," he says.

He asked himself what

was the most ordinary in India and yet extraordinary? His answer: the common man. And this gave shape to the book.

But then India is so vast and Indians so varied. The challenge before him was

to narrow down on a set of images that matched his vision of the book. These images were, of course, of the scores of ordinary Indians — from a priest to a *paanwala*, from an astrologer to a



**THE INDIANS:
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**By Sumant Batra
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snakecharmer.

Batra says: "It's the common, unrecognised people of India who are playing an important role in the economic growth, in bringing India to the centrestage of the world economy. They are the ones who are pulling the centre of gravity from the Pacific ocean to the Indian ocean."

The book, Batra's "tribute" to the ordinary man, has a "certain heritage value". The author says:

"20-30 years down the line the young generation would see the images in the book and treasure them as the landscapes of cities are changing very fast and these images are fading away."

For Batra, this book was a "very passionate project". It was never a commercial agenda. He wanted to enjoy the making of a book as much as the end product. But when the book was ready, he was told that he could also "make money" with the book.

Batra, however, decided to donate the amount generated from its sale to the Loomba Trust (Cherie is its president) which works for the cause of widows. Batra was delighted when Dr Karan Singh, while releasing the book in New Delhi recently, spoke highly of the book.

"Dr Karan Singh is an authority on culture. He said it's a book with least predictable images. I am deeply grateful and satisfied," says Batra, a senior consultant to the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.