

SOME THOUGHTS AND PICTURES

An illustrated journey into slumdog India throws up some captivating images, writes **Kishore Singh**



The average visitor to India experiences a visual assault that is almost physical, one he or she cannot easily disengage from, a pulsating migraine that persists long after the tourist guides have done with their talking, the shopping is over, and the slums and cows on the roads have been photographed for posterity. The average Indian dispenses with the slums and the cows, almost as if to see through them is to wish them away, so only a shining India of shampoo and pan masala sachets, encroaching mobile telephony and neon-lit malls registers on the retina of desire. And Cherie Blair sees a "nation filled with people bursting with life and eager to seize every opportunity to prove themselves on this vast stage".

The Indians is that odd book that explores not the Taj Mahal, Kerala's backwaters or Rajasthan's palaces, but life on India's streets, warts and all. It is both occidental and oriental in its approach, simultaneously rooted and exotic, another addition to the illustrated books on your coffee table, but its surprise is that it includes in its pages so many things we take for granted, probably see every day, but exclude as part of our larger consciousness.

In what he refers to as "a collection of thoughts", the author — a lawyer in his day job and on the board of the Loomba Trust, which will gain from the profits of the limited edition copies — says, "I always felt

that we tend to ignore the common people of India, even though they are omnipresent and all around us. I wanted to highlight their resilience as they negotiate the hardships of their life." What comes across in the book is the vibrancy they bring to themselves and their surroundings, celebrating their lives instead of wallowing in the misery of deprivation and poverty. "I didn't want to show slums," says Batra, "but to highlight their belief in god, their smiling faces and positivity".

The joyousness of penury has been a particular cliché of those seeking the spiritual side of slumdog India, yet photographer Sonhal Nichani (not credited on the jacket) manages to add depth to his street pictures that "demonstrate the diversity of India and her people" according to Batra.

The Indians is not focused on urban India but has strayed into eclectic territory with interesting peregrinations into the world of street food — a shot of kachoris being fried is particularly interesting — and



THE INDIANS Interesting Aspects, Extraordinary Facets

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FOREWORD:
CHERIE BLAIR

PUBLISHER: TREEPIE

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(Limited Edition)

streetside tea vendors, of itinerant shoeshine boys and kirana shops, of kids being ferried to school in rickshaws, of handcart pullers and roadside barbers, of Bollywood posters and potential cricketers playing with a pile of bricks fashioned as wickets, of milk vendors and vegetable wholesalers, of railway coolies and traditional schools. Some images can be framed for their artistic quality — and simplicity: a straight frame of a rugged iron, the coal glowing red inside, is one such; a person sleeping on a pavement, unconsciously creating the colours of the Indian flag, is another.

"To get under the skin is not for the faint of heart or closed of mind. But once you take that deep breath and hit the streets, India reveals itself happily, throw-

ing quirks, oddities and the rituals of its populace and endless contradictions at every step," Batra writes in his preface. "It presents a picture of unity in diversity unparalleled anywhere else." It isn't the stuff of breathtaking prose, or even of great pro-

fundity, but Batra's heart clearly is in the right place. "I always aspired to do something like this," he says; "the book is a personal milestone for me."

There are oddities not just in the content but in the book itself. Such as some chapters that have an introductory text and others that do not. "Some pictures are so self-explanatory" — actually Batra says "self-speaking" — "that I decided to let the readers judge them for themselves." It is the reason why he and his team (the event management company Treepie) did not go to a traditional publishing house. "I've taken some liberties with the book, so it is my slightly unconventional concept that you see, which might otherwise have been strait-jacketed by a publisher," he says. "I wanted it to be our idea. There is no ambition to make money from the book for myself — the profits from the limited edition will anyway go to charity — but just to bring to readers something that is my point of view."

Even so, it doesn't quite manage to avoid the India chestnuts — the superstitions and rituals, sadhus, the eunuchs and wrestling pits and turbans — that crop up in every generic India book. Are they misplaced here? Perhaps not. India, writes Batra, "does not discriminate between the ancient and the modern, the exotic and the mundane, the sacred and the profane, the affluent and the poor; neither does it pass any judgement." Nor, perhaps, should we. ■