

JOHN KEAY

Shine & Squalor

Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Slum


By Katherine Boo

(Portobello Books 254pp £14.99)

India Rising: Tales from a Changing Nation

By Oliver Balch

(Faber & Faber 327pp £14.99)

 Following Fish: Travels around the Indian Coast

By Samanth Subramanian

(Atlantic Books 209pp £12.99)

These three books just about sum up modern India: nauseating in its indifference to social deprivation, tiresome in its obsession with globalised modernity, and utterly charming when least expected. The works of three journalists, one American, one English and one Indian, all of these books have merit; none disappoints and one positively delights.

Katherine Boo, a socially conscientious staffer at the *New Yorker* who is married to the Indian political historian Sunil Khilnani, elected to explore how the urban poor of her husband's homeland are being affected by their experience of 'juxtaposed inequality' and the 'infrastructure of opportunity'. She approached the subject cautiously, knowing no Indian language; far from robust, she was further incapacitated by a lung-puncturing fall caused by tripping over an unshelved reference work in her Washington home. 'Having proved myself ill-suited to safe cohabitation with an unabridged dictionary,' she writes, 'I had little to lose by pursuing my interests in another quarter.' No longer intimidated by a 'place beyond my so-called expertise where the risks of failure would be great but the interactions somewhat more meaningful', she set off for Mumbai. There, over a period of more than three years, she immersed herself in the lives and concerns of the inhabitants of Annawadi, one of that city's many slum townships.

Annawadi is penned back behind the perimeter fence at the far end of the domestic airport's runway. New high-rise hotels cast disdainful shadows in its direction; when glimpsed through an aircraft window, it looks more like a rubbish tip than

somewhere to live. In reality, it is both. Rubbish is what its hutch-like homes are built of and rubbish recycling is its *raison d'être*. Airports and international hotels generate top quality waste. Annawadians such as Abdul, the pivotal figure in Boo's cast of rather too many, live by scavenging or stealing, then sorting, separating and selling the travel trade's detritus. As a green solution to the disposal of discarded bottles, yesterday's newspapers, goodie bags and fag-ends, their enterprise deserves better than the revulsion and persecution it elicits.

With a title lifted from the billboards that flank the airport road advertising a superior floor tile, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* neither sensationalises the squalor nor judges those responsible for it. Boo's studied understatement, her obsession with authenticity and her almost painful empathy are eloquent enough. Corrupt police, venal health workers and extortionate officials prey on the slum-dwellers, while they in turn prey on one another. All do so out of necessity. Positions of advantage, however menial, must be purchased, then paid for out of the perks that they confer. Here justice and decency are themselves commodities, as brittle as bottle-glass and as soluble as cardboard. Honest and often deeply affecting, Katherine Boo's book deserves a place alongside the award-winning studies of North

Korea and war-torn Sarajevo by the *Los Angeles Times's* Barbara Demick.

Less grim and also, somehow, less compelling is Oliver Balch's *India Rising*. While Boo constructs an intricate first-hand narrative from exhaustive notes and recordings, Balch plumps for lively first-person impressions, punchy sentences and questionable generalisations. He writes with email urgency; his verb, when there is one, is in the present tense and he dismisses out of hand the idea of 'providing a comprehensive macro-narrative'. This is in keeping with his sampling intent to 'take the temperature ... [of] the New India': 'The New India is taking flight and I resolve to scramble on board. As a point of embarkation I head for Bengaluru [Bangalore]. I have an appointment with Captain Gopinath, the man who gave the nation wings.'

The self-made Gopinath, 'India's Mr Ryanair', is the first of Balch's many witnesses. Although not invariably rich, they all aspire to be. They speak good English, work long hours and ape Western ways. In leisure moments they hang out in shopping malls, toy with mobile phones and dream of America. They neither doubt that India's time has come nor worry about mounting deficits and slowing growth rates. Indeed, news of these setbacks may not have reached them.

Balch's travels, despite their frantic immediacy, look to be a trifle dated. West Bengal has not been 'run by Communists' since 2011; the Barista chain of coffee shops was gulped down by a rival in 2007; and Kingfisher, the airline to which Captain Gopinath reluctantly sold out, is itself now in big trouble. The 'shining India' that so dazzles Oliver Balch is already losing its sheen. Political paralysis and global recession threaten to derail the smooth transition into an economic superpower that he so brightly celebrates.

A safer and more low-key approach is adopted by Samanth Subramanian in his *Following Fish*. Like *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, this is a debut. First published by Penguin India in 2010, it recalls Alan Davidson's early classics (*Fish and Fish Dishes of Laos*, *A Kipper with My Tea*) and thoroughly deserves the wider recognition now promised by Atlantic Books. Subramanian makes no great claims for it. It is simply a fish-centred travelogue or, that

which he believes all travel writing should be: 'plain, old fashioned journalism, disabuser of notions, destroyer of preconceptions, discoverer of the relative shifting nature of truth'. Loosely structured around nine excursions to fishy destinations from Bengal to Gujarat, it marries anecdote with whimsy and abundant good humour. The fishing fraternity makes engaging company and there must be something about fish connoisseurship – the catching, filleting, cooking and consumption – that fosters a marvellous way with words.

Here, for instance, is the improbable sounding Captain J Berchmans Motha, ramrod septuagenarian, regular churchgoer and the twenty-second (in direct descent) *thalaiwan*, or headman, of Tuticorin, a fishing port in the extreme south of Tamil Nadu. Subramanian, accompanied by his go-between Fernando, had earlier been sent packing by Captain Motha, having disturbed him during his siesta. They resolved to try again.

When we did return, Fernando was careful to call ahead, and we were consequently met by a Motha with neater hair and a lukewarm smile. The smile, gleaned as it has to be through the foliage of his moustache, is not the expression he is most comfortable with. By default, Motha looks deeply disappointed with the human race, much as a father would with a wastrel son; his eyes, behind spectacles, engage minimally with others, and his conversation is grudgingly given, some mental pair of scales weighing each sentence to judge whether it should be squandered on this undeserving world. But he was never unpleasant, and he was more generous with his time than I could have hoped.

Time, plus tide, constitutes the fisherfolks' medium. Give or take side-trips into toddy tapping in Kerala and a cure for asthma in Hyderabad (the patients must swallow live fingerlings that have been laced with asafoetida), Subramanian combs the beaches and the fish markets for engaging encounters, then enriches them with his own musings. Fishing, in this *bonne bouche* of a book, is revealed as the most elemental of all activities, one 'composed of water and air and light and space, all arranged in precarious balance around a central idea of a man in a boat, waiting for a bite.'

To order these books, see the *Literary Review* [bookshop](#) on page 41

JOANNA KAVENNA

Moon Country

Names for the Sea: Strangers in Iceland

By Sarah Moss

(Granta Books 358pp £14.99)

In the nineteenth century travellers flocked to Iceland, enticed by sagas and later hyperboles, in search of a 'wild weird clime' (Edgar Allan Poe) and a place 'infernal to be looked upon' (Anthony Trollope). Richard Burton and William Morris also went there, admiring the dusty mountains, blackened lava fields and spectral glaciers. In 1936, W H Auden and Louis MacNeice followed on, retreating from 'over-emphasis', dire events in Europe, and their sense that, 'in England ... one cannot see the ground/For the feet of the crowd, and the lost is never found'. They co-authored a witty, irreverent travelogue, *Letters from Iceland*. In 1996, Simon Armitage and Glyn Maxwell followed on from Auden and MacNeice in *Moon Country* – their title a reference to one of MacNeice's lines, 'the songs of jazz have told us of a moon country'.

In her latest book, a memoir, Sarah Moss describes a year she spent in Reykjavik. At first, this seems to be one more follow-on: she takes her title from Auden, 'each poet has a name for the sea', and echoes his disdain for the sagas, William Morris, and history fetishism in general. 'I don't want to see the bath of the great historian,' she writes. 'I don't want to know that the great historian had a bath.' Paradoxically, she is searching for 'an unmediated Iceland, even though I know there's no such thing.'

This quest for the unmediated recurs in Moss's work. Her first novel, *Cold Earth*, strands a group of archaeologists on the coast of Greenland; her second, *Night Waking*, is a comic existential thriller set on a remote Hebridean island. In *Names for the Sea*, Moss takes a job at the University of Iceland and brings along her husband and two small children. It is 2009, and Iceland is mired in the Kreppa, the financial crisis. Despite this, everyone tells Moss that she has arrived in a Nordic utopia, a place of immaculate gender parity

and hardly any crime.

Moss sets her family up in a flat, unpacks the various oddments of parenthood, and buys some overpriced frozen vegetables. The crazy volcanic vistas lie beyond, scenery that could have been designed by Dalí – green lakes, mountains shaped like lions or perfect cones, striped bergs floating on silver waves. Yet all winter Moss is trapped in her flat, because the snow 'doesn't exactly fall ... it's coming horizontally' and her children get blown over if she takes them outside. When the weather improves she goes with her family to see the northern lights, sketching out hurried impressions: 'bright green, flickering across half the sky ... Just look at the damn things, I think, buy a postcard later.' Some of her wildest adventures are imaginary: 'If we didn't have children ... we could go up there, crunching over the lava to the empty heart of Eldfell, the fire mountain, and we could peer down into the crater and turn to see the sea crawling against the new coastline.'

This is all funny, honest, and a useful corrective to the tradition of the lone traveller, the landscape poet striding across empty plains. It is like taking the Caspar David Friedrich painting of *The Wanderer* (usually found on the covers of books by Nietzsche) and adding a toddler straining to hurl himself into the misty depths below and another child who is bored and wants to go home. It also confronts the quandary a travel writer faces once she or he has gained a child or two: that while the cliché of the solitary traveller remains, travel can never quite be the same again. Moss simply ignores the cliché, and keeps dragging her family down ice-bound streets, along Route 1 (the ring road that circles Iceland) and even, occasionally, into the unkempt, car-wrecking interior. She relishes the seasonal changes of the land: 'the greens and blues have turned to shades of grey'; 'the clouds part and for the first time in months there is sunlight

