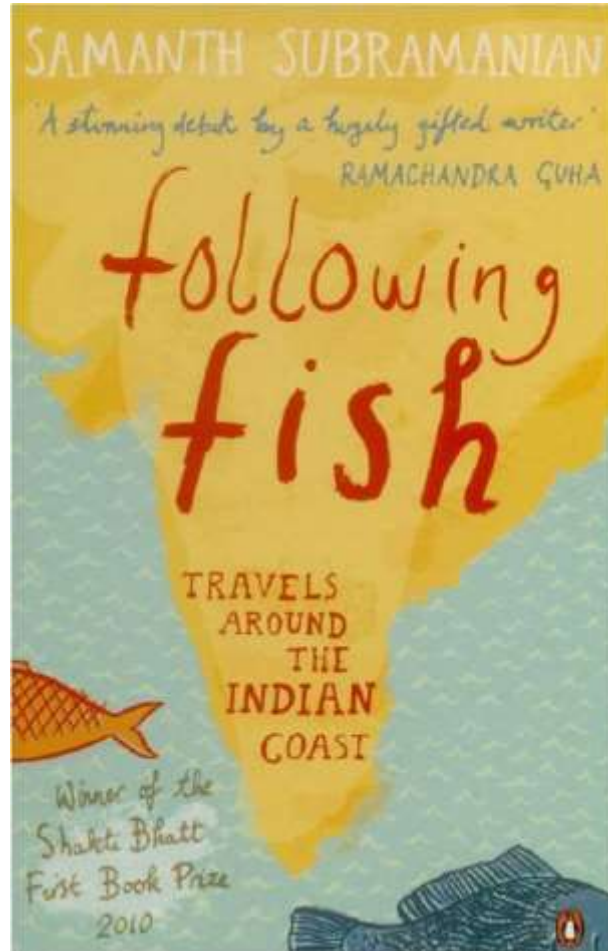


**Travel Literature Transgresses Cultures and Boundaries:  
Reading Samanth Subramanian's Nonfiction *Following Fish***

**Dr. Gurpreet Kaur, Ph.D., M. Phil., M.A., B.Ed.**

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Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.in/Following-Fish-Samanth-Subramanian/dp/0143064479>

**Abstract**

Travel literature intends to put to record usually the personal experiences of an author touring a place for the pleasure of travel or intentionally for the purpose of research transgressing the cultural, social, racial, ethnic, religious and gender based boundaries that exist among humanity. Travel writing is another genre that has, as its focus, accounts of real or imaginary places. The genre encompasses a number of styles that may range from the documentary to the evocative, from literary to journalistic, and from the humorous to the serious. It is a form whose

contours are shaped by places and their histories. Critical reflection on travel literature, however, is a relatively new phenomenon. Moreover in this context, India remains a land of deserts, mountains and plains in most imaginations. Only a few of the stories about India explore its vast rivers actually mention its coasts. This paper aims at exploring an Indian journalist turned writer, Samanth Subramanian's nonfiction, *Following Fish: Travels Around The Indian Coast* (2010). In this attempt, he observes the cosmopolitanism and diverse influences absorbed by India's coastal cities, the withdrawing of traditional fishermen from their craft, the corresponding growth of fishing as pure and voluminous commerce, and the degradation of waters and beaches from over-fishing.

**Keywords:** Samanth Subramanian, *Following Fish: Travels Around The Indian Coast*, travel, literature, histories, India, nonfiction.

### **Travelogues**

Travelogues have been popular in the history of world literature. Travel literature typically records the experiences of an author touring a place for the pleasure of travel. An individual work is sometimes called a travelogue or itinerary. Travel literature may be cross-cultural or transnational in focus, or may involve travel to different regions within the same country. And of course accounts of spaceflight may also be considered travel literature. Literary travelogues generally exhibit a coherent narrative or aesthetic beyond the logging of dates and events. Travel literature has many sub divisions in which can be included Travelogues, Fictional Travelogues, Travel writing, Travel Journals and Guide books. "A travel writer should have an unnatural cleverness in representing unusual incidents in a humorous manner. They should be literary writers than being mere travelers," observes a writer referring to the context of travel writing in India (Ummarkutty 28).

### **Travel Fiction throughout History**

Many fictional works of travel literature are based on factual journeys – Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and presumably, Homer's *Odyssey* (c. 8th century BCE) – while other works, though based on imaginary and even highly fantastic or satirical journeys – Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Voltaire's *Candide* or Samuel Johnson's *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* – nevertheless contain factual elements. Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) and *The Dharma Bums* (1958) are fictionalized accounts of his travels across the United States during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Other recent literary classics include Taslima Nasreen's *The French lover* which takes us through the life and culture of Paris and Calcutta; Amitam Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, which explores the flora and fauna of Sundarbans, the vast, intermittently submerged archipelago, largely covered by mangrove forests, that forms the delta of the Ganges as it debouches into the Bay of Bengal.

### **Travel Writing**

Travel writing is another genre that has, as its focus, accounts of real or imaginary places. The genre encompasses a number of styles that may range from the documentary to the evocative, from literary to journalistic, and from the humorous to the serious. Travel writing is often

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associated with tourism, and includes works such as guide books and reviews, with the intention to educate the reader about the place, provide helpful advice for those visiting the place, and inspire readers to travel to a destination.

### **India as a Global Travel Spot**

In this context, India remains a land of deserts, mountains and plains in most imaginations. Only a few of the stories about India explore its vast rivers and actually mention its coasts. Samanth Subramanian, an Indian correspondent for *The National*, a journalist as well as an author, is known for his two books thoroughly written on the basis of his exhaustive research, *Following Fish: Travels Around the Indian Coast* (2010) and *This Divided Island: Stories from the Sri Lankan War* (2015), which was shortlisted for the Samuel Johnson Non Fiction Prize and won the Crossword Non Fiction Prize.

### **Focus of This Paper *Following Fish* - Samanth Subramanian's Work**

This paper aims at exploring Samanth's *Following Fish*, by following this narrative. This nonfiction has also been awarded with Shakti Bhatt First Book Prize and nominated for Andre Simon Book Award.

Samanth Subramanian was haunted by the experience of a grey-as-death steamed fish he had at a dinner when he was quite young and staying in Indonesia with his family. Much later in life, Samanth returns to fish again. Although born in a family of strict vegetarians, Samanth decides to explore the idea of fish as food, not only through the country's diet but also its culture, livelihood, sport, history, society and even religion.

Being a journalist, Samanth has written for a wide range of publications. His writing gravitates towards long form narrative which is crisp and clear. This book involves right from how the process of catching fish goes on to the making and to the cultures that influence this category of "sea food". During his travels he has not only tried eating in the best of restaurants but even gone to the shacks to taste the Hilsa, not only woken up at ungodly hours in early mornings to reach the fish market, but has swallowed the murrel live that is debated to cure asthma. He has gone through the streets where the Koli people live in search of a Mumbai that was very different before it became the city we see today.

### **Samanth Visiting Coastal States in India**

In over nine essays, Samanth visits coastal states across India and tells extraordinary stories about people's relationship with fish. Written in a witty manner, this book is the best nonfiction narrative exploring the less visited area of India in the context of travel. In the 'Introduction', Samanth states what actually the book is. For him it is:

not a how-to-travel book but a travelogue- a record of my journeys, my experiences and observations, my conversations with the people I met, and my investigations into subjects that I happened to find incredibly fascinating... plain, old-fashioned journalism, disabuser of notions, destroyer of preconceptions, discoverer of the relative, shifting nature of truth. (xiii)

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## Hunting Hilsa and Mastering Its Bones

In the first chapter 'On hunting the hilsa and mastering its bones', he starts by describing the city that loves its Hilsa – Kolkata. Here, the fish is more than food and poets call it the 'the darling of waters'. He lands in the Nandaram market in Burrabazer, Kolkata. He is informed that winter is the best time to visit Kolkata, because of the moderate weather. The reader is acquainted with the special kind of vicious skeleton of hilsa which tickles when sliding through the lines of throat and unbelievably, a true Bengali has enough skills of deboning this fish, sorting the meat out and storing the bones on one side in the stomach to be extricated later. There are various ways in which hilsa is cut into pieces in a systematic manner and then cooked letting not any part of it to be wasted, like fried hilsa, curry with mustard cutlets of hilsa roe, soup of hilsa head called *jhol* or mashed up chutney known as *ambol ilish*, using a special mixture called *panch phoran*. Then taking meat of hilsa off its flesh is a tricky maneuver performed skillfully by an expert like Vasanthi, a cook in Bengal Club in Kolkata. The craze of hilsa is so much in Bengal that one young man states, 'Without eating hilsa, my mood for the day isn't right at all' (15).

Further he, through expert fishermen, tells us the difference between Padma hilsa (Bangladeshi) and Ganga hilsa. Padma fish is fatter and oilier, and Indian fish is silvery in appearance. Another myth is that on Monday very few people buy fish and the reason is unknown, although Samanth believes that it has no religious inclination. There is *Shorshe ilish* cooked in mustard sauce in a very unique way, a specialization of the place. The hilsa enhanced mustard oil is used for flavouring food or mixing to rice. The writer moves on to describe the Hawrah fish market in detail. The deterioration of hilsa is a matter of concern due to silting and pollution of Ganga river. He discusses the issue of overfishing and the result was that he was being provided hilsa even in January which was otherwise an off season. Equally thought provoking was the condition of increasingly muddied and polluted Ganga and densely polluted and choked river Hooghly.

## Swallowing a Live Fish

In chapter two 'On swallowing a live fish', the writer throws light on the famous miraculously curative 'fish treatment' of Hyderabad known as 'faith healing'. It involves 'the willful ingestion of a live murrel fingerling that had been stuffed to its gills with an unknown medicine' (21). The history of this treatment by its proprietors, Bathini Goud family, dates back to 1845 and is used basically for the treatment of something as elementary as asthma. It is believed to be a cult organization, not scientific and hygienic, maintaining no patient records and no follow-up visits. He also writes about the rising opposition to Goud fish treatment by a couple of NGOs like *Jana Vignana* NGO and the Hyderabad chapter of the American based center for Inquiry. Both these NGOs promote reason and science over superstition.

Bathini Harinath Goud, a practitioner of this treatment from the Goud family lays bare all the details about this treatment to Samanth, its history, people's faith on it, agitations against it, Government's support from time to time, religious ceremonies related to it (*timesofindia*):

- Gulping down fish stuffed with yellow herbal paste 'will help breathing'
- 156-year-old treatment from Hindu saint contains a secret formula of herbs

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- Family claims having the treatment three years running will cure asthma

### **Ear Lobe That Changed History**

In the third chapter ‘On the ear lobe that changed history’ author explores Manapadu, situated on the southern coast of Tamil Nadu, where he visited a church of Holy Cross, where St. Francis Xavier offered mass in 1542. There he tastes the sweet water of the miracle well despite its connection with the sea. He also met Valentin Ilango, a high school Tamil teacher and a passionate historian of Manapadu. He throws light on the mass baptism of mid 1530s, the Ear Lobe incident, about the heart of Parava Catholicism, the Church of Our Lady of the Snows, also called Periya Kovil, or the Big Church. The fishermen of the Tuticorin are known by their caste –Purava and are these days called Bharathas, the religious folks. The Ear lobe incident involved the loss of a fisherman’s ear lobe in the 16th century which led to the Parava folk of Tamil Nadu converting to Christianity.

Father Jerosin Kattar, a parish priest of Our Lady of the Snows, a Parava himself, tells about the syncretism or fusion of different beliefs at various levels, sometimes language, at other times in practice or in thought, between Catholicism and Hindu customs and caste traditions. The custom of the *Pon Ther* or the Golden carriage is prevalent in Tuticorin. The idol of the Our Lady of the Snows is installed in a *Ther* and hauled around town with great pomp and floral celebration (49). This is another example of syncretism.

About the fauna of Tuticorin, Samanth writes about a special kind of XXL sized flies nearly of thumb size typical of the place (46). With changes in customs, traditions and even religion, the cuisine of Tuticorin remained unchanged mysteriously, Jacob Aruni, a food consultant and researcher in Chennai states, ‘In Goa, for instance, the use of cinnamon and garlic and wine in food caught on from the Portuguese. But in the coastal area around Tuticorin, they still use salt and tamarind and coconut more dominantly- the ingredients they were using even before the Portuguese arrived’ (56).

### **Odyssey Through Toddy Shops**

In chapter four ‘On an Odyssey through Toddy shops’ author takes the readers through the roadside petty and shabby toddy shops selling poor quality illicit liquor which sometimes cause blindness or even death in Trivandrum, Kerela. This liquor-arack mixed toddy is called ‘anna mayaki’ and its distribution is controlled by the liquor mafia in Kerala. Another liquor author talks about is *mundhiri kallu*, a pale pink concoction, reminiscent of Pepto-Bismol, with layers of raisins at the bottom of toddy. Mahesh Thampy, an MBA running real estate business in Trivandrum, gives an insight into this business of illicit liquor. Food in toddy shops is terribly spicy so that the customer demands more toddy to soothe their flaming tongue. Samanth tastes mussels quick roasted with coconut, curry leaves and coriander; kappa meen curry. Further, we are told by Mariadasan, that fishermen these days instead of using compass used GPS system in their boats. He also shared his experiences of Tsunami, its pitiless impact on fishing villages and harbours.

In Kerala, the best toddy is found in Alappuzha district, drawing tourists to its backwaters. Alleppy is the mother lode of toddy shop. Journeying on the Backwaters Bus from Alleppy to

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Kottayam on a four hour tour, Samanth and his friend were able to look at a variety of houseboats with raised sun deck, extensive hardwood furniture, baroque cabinets, satellite dishes and plasma TV sets. He observes the culture in Kerala to be conservative, being 'still a male bastion'. Women can't have even dosa from a shop in open on the road. They still don't have much of a public presence in India.

### **Once-Lost-Love**

Samanth starts chapter 5, 'On searching for a once-lost love', with the two great qualities related to eating: the ability to eat with a catholic, voluminous appetite, and the ability to eat out alone' (80). He shares his belief of an ability to dine out alone, which normally people when unable to do skip meals. Samanth throws light on petty issues of dining out and the agendas usually taken up while doing so (81). In this chapter he reaches Mangalore, a place which lies on a curve of land that descends from the Western Ghats to the sea and deeply enamoured of its waters- the backwaters of the Netravati and Gurupura rivers.

The famous dishes of this place are a little less spicy as compared to those available in Kerala's toddy shops, this being 'silky gravy, smooth and deep orange and full of flavour' (83) and superior one, called Mangalore curry. Samanth found curry and dosa for just Rs. 10 each and so he had a doubt about the quality of food to be low. Very keenly, he describes his experience of this fish curry: p.83. He also came to know that Mangaloreans used tomatoes in chicken and mutton dishes but rarely when they curried fish. Later with the guidance of a correspondent of *The Hindu*, Jaideep Shenoy, Samanth was guided to *Narayan's* (a tiny restaurant) and for introducing him to Vasudev Baloor. He could eat dishes like tamarind fish fillets of seer and ladyfish or whole sardines and mackerel, Narayan's special masala added to all dishes, especially fried fish. This restaurant was owned by Shyam Sundar and about sixty years old. Later he meets Vasudev Baloor, who is a bureaucrat with titles of President and Secretary of many organizations usually of fishermen. He 'is a short, balding man with a wise face, intelligent eyes that shine even through the thickest of spectacles, and skin that is coloured and creased like walnut. One of his fingers is permanently out of joint, broken during a student protest in Mysore' (92). Through him, Samanth is informed that Mangaloreans' own fishing community had withdrawn from the profession and mostly the students at the College of Fisheries are from Karnataka. He also told that the best Mangalore fish curry is not made in restaurants but in homes and for this fish curry they make a masala every 2-3 days collectively.

### **Fastest Fish**

Samanth starts chapter six 'On pursuing the fastest fish in the ocean' with an incident of fishing in Angria Bank, Goa by Danny Moses, a best-remembered-fishermen, which showed that fishing was not an easy task for everyone and it needs an expertise; because sometimes, 'the sailfish's bill is like a razor- you put your hand out, and you might get it sliced off. That was the dilemma' (98) and he tells that generations one after another indulge in the profession of fishing, particularly in Goa. This sailfish is the fastest fish in the ocean and weighs around hundred kilograms and stretches over three-and-half metres. Surprisingly, it changes into many colours and sometimes turns transparent also. This prismatic trick is also called 'the *mor maach*, or the peacock fish'. Sailfish are predator fish and hunt like packs of wolves.

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Through a common acquaintance, he met Peter Baptista, a fervent angler from Mumbai and Danny Moses. With Baptista, Samanth goes sail-fishing to a spot somewhere between Mumbai and Goa, he called it Xanadu (a rich mine for sailfish), a fictitious name, as he was not allowed to disclose its name. Here Samanth emphasizes the quality of patience required for fishing, as there is no place for 'impatience'. In this sport participants are screened on the basis of single quality of temperament.

Further, he tells that due to environmental degradation and conservation laws, the sport is showing extinction. Baptista also states that even at sea, overfishing is becoming a problem. Massive trawlers scrape the bottom of seabed to pluck every possible fish into their holds, wrecking the ocean's ecology and scooping worthless fry before the small fish can mature into adults.

Samanth also adds some knowledge gained from a memoir *The Sailfish and the Sacred Mountain* by Will Johnson describing the sailfish as 'a Neptunian being unequalled in majesty and evasiveness, a watery version of the Himalayan snow leopard' (106). Samanth tells more about sailfish and how it is different from dolphin. The fully upright propulsion by sailfish is an attempt to show its all menace and outrage, whereas dolphin does the same because of its inherent cuteness (106). Incredibly, due to the prestige inherent in catching a sailfish, The Sailfish Cup, held in Miami offers \$100,000 to a team that catches and submits a video recording of each catch.

### **Grieving**

In chapter seven 'On grieving for bygone beaches and fish' Samanth enters Goa's grandeur. Goa's economy is of idleness. It works on the principle: to idle is to linger, and to linger is to buy more stuff, eat more stuff and do more stuff on jet-skis (111) and fishing is in their blood. Samanth also reaches Panaji and tries to fish. For Moses, 'it's a social thing, but it's also a chance for us to spend more time alone with nature-that's why we do it' (113). But unfortunately unlike ten years ago, Goa has become a fish starved state now, with most fish coming from Maharashtra and Karnataka. Moses is afraid that in near future if the greed for following or overfishing continued, 'my son will not see a single salmon in the river. And it's all just a classic case of greed' (114). He shared his dilemmas.

Many issues have been portrayed like changing social, moral values and ethics, more and more deterioration of the same. Later Samanth met Claude Alvares, a fierce looking environmentalist, who is concerned about the damage that the tourism industry has wrought upon the environment of Goa, especially its beaches and the fishing trade. He told Samanth that the government of Goa gives license to about 300 shacks and 3000 deck beds on beaches with an increase every year in the season of tourism.

Moving further, the writer met Sitakant Kashinath Parab, the chairman of the Mandovi Fishermen Marketing Co-op Societies, who added to the problems Goa was facing. He lamented that fifty percent of the coastal fishermen had moved into tourism. But the highway system had improved, through which were trucked fishes into Goa from Tamil Nadu, Orissa and Gujarat.

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Further, education had improved, which consequently misdirected toddy tappers to take up tourist business and other sophisticated and white-collared jobs.

Regarding riverboat casinos, Alvares told that there was only one in 2001 named *Caravela*, but now there are five which host about three-to-five hundred guests and their untreated waste is released into the river. And shockingly, Goan government received about Rs one crore from each casino riverboat as license fee. Even the Fishery department had given over their jetty as well as the ground floor office to the owners of the *Caravela*. In the words of Alvares, ‘They have either sold their souls or rented it out’ (120).

### **Eat as a City Once Ate!**

In chapter 8, ‘On seeking to eat as a city once ate’, Samanth reaches Mumbai to meet Yashwant Chimbaikar, a fish vendor and apart from that a fund of information about all sorts of commerce in Mumbai. He gives an insight into the Sassoon Docks, the business going on inside, which also included bidding over the prices of the fishes. Yeshe shows him a number of fishes which appealed to Samanth as some ‘truly odd-shaped monsters’. He even told about the astonishing realities about the fish business, like some ‘tuna’ fish sold in Mumbai as ‘made in Japan’, tinned and canned in Mumbai itself. When Samanth reaches Mumbai, the political atmosphere was up with Maharashtra Navnirman Sena’s campaign to guard Marathi identity, of its violence against north Indian immigrants. Samanth then visits the Mumbadevi temple in the heart of Zaveri Bazaar and is surprised to see that it is visited not only by all Mumbaikars but Punjabi, Gujarati, Malyalam people also.

Followed by that, he visited one of Mumbai’s best remaining khanawals ‘Anantashram’ in Gurgaon and Sushegad Gomantak in Mahim. He met Patil, a 90 year old local leader of 9000-odd Kolis living in Danda Khar, who loved cooking. Patil told about some special Koli dishes like *ukkad* (a dish of very fresh pomfret boiled with salt and turmeric) and *nisot* (is the Koli challenge to chicken soup, a hearty brown broth perked up by a ground mixture of tamarind, small onions, chillies, coriander and garlic, in which a succulent mackerel or Bombay Duck has been boiled vigorously). He told Samanth that fishermen drank a lot, especially their country liquor because it helps to cope with extreme weather.

### **Fishing Boat**

In the last chapter, ‘On the crafting of a fishing boat’ author narrates his visit through the boat crafting yards in Gujarat. Mangrol has boat building row with high compound walls behind which this craft goes on. There are bigger boat building rows in the town of Veraval, a leading producer of fish in Gujarat. Samanth beautifully describes a scene at a boat crafting row.

Gujarat is the state with the longest coastline and even being the top producer of fish, very few Gujaratis eat meat, and so most of it is trucked off to other parts of India. It is a thriving industry in the catching of fish as well as building of boats. Mostly boats are wooden, and rarely fiberglass is used because latter is considered tackier and inferior.



Surprisingly, the entire boat in some rows is built with hands and doesn't make use of power tools, only engine being the sign of modernity in the whole boat. He met a boat builder Murjibhai Korla who told certain facts about the profession. When he started 25 years ago they made a boat in 6 to 7 months and sold it for Rs 20,000 piece but now it is completed in two and half months and sold for Rs 25 lakhs each. He also told that a new boat sits high on the water and settles lower and lower with the passage of time as the wood starts drinking water. Normally a boat has a span of 12-13 years with a 'tearing out the insides and replacing it with all fresh wood' after 6-7 years. Samanth ends up the chapter by visiting and meeting two master boat builders, Mohammad Razzaq and Arjan Bhai, who give him an even better insight into the craft of boat building.

## To Conclude

The stories in the book are warm and the narrative style gives you the pleasure of reading fiction while enjoying the authenticity of his observations and the truth of his characters. The language used and the way through which Samanth describes the recipe of *Shorshe ilish*, fish *podu* (a spiced fried dried fish powder, looking similar to powdery jaggery) and *bangda* fish curry brings water in the mouth of the reader.

There is a visible presence of the writer as a first-person narrator does in his piece of writing. But this doesn't let the reader know why Samanth is travelling. There is a lot of enthusiasm seen along with intellectual curiosity. Language used is as delightful and crisp as the curry that 'scalded my mouth, seared my tonsils, and sent parades of flavour marching up and down my tongue'. He has described fish dishes differently: fried fish as 'chewy and fibrous, like a better class of cardboard', a fish curry is 'watery and bland', a piece of mackerel 'dull and uncooperative'. Samanth opines that the best food he ate during this journey was at people's home and not in any restaurant. He met a number of people, mostly men who were quite eager to share stories about places, shops, and temples.

This book is not only a boon and a must read for fish lovers, it is also must for those who want to understand and appreciate coastal history and culture of India, which often is ignored. The basic theme of *Following Fish* is 'fish' itself. The recurring themes in this book are Samanth's concerns for the changes modernization has brought to the business of fishing, deteriorating environment due to overfishing and exploitation of beaches by the tourism industry, the withdrawing of traditional fishermen from their craft, the corresponding growth of fishing as pure and voluminous commerce, and the degradation of waters bodies.

So, this book makes us look at the other side of the picture usually either not seen or not shown to the society. But definitely, the reality is shocking and the results are surely going to be alarmingly destructive. So unless we read such literature we are unable to know these untold facts about how human activities are bothering the nature and deteriorating the environment we live in.

This book suffers on the rare occasions when Samanth engages with such prosaic matters as in the last chapter on making of a fishing boat, letting the narrative to veer towards bland reportage. Although he has excluded other essential aspects of the study of fish i.e. ignoring the freshwater fauna and not adding much about the vast cultural history of fish, yet the attempt is

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quite successful. Perhaps taking a deeper dive into these aspects may have made it a richer study of the subject, but may have at the same time lost its ease of narration and its elegance and become less appealing to the readers. While reading this narrative, some readers would have definitely planned for a similar trip or some would have felt nostalgic, remembering the days spent on river boats and beaches of Goa. Ultimately, this nonfiction tempts one to eat and to travel.

Thus the travel literature involves a description of the whole new world that exists apart from theirs by the people who have travelled. *Following Fish* is an excellent guide, full of keen observation regarding the rapidly changing culture, commerce and life in the coastal regions in India, bringing together very skillfully the past and the present.

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