



Untitled, (35) from the series *The Village on the Highway*, 2021

GAURI GILL THE VILLAGE ON THE HIGHWAY

Gauri Gill is an Indian artist whose use of photography goes far beyond the practice of a passerby taking pictures. Her series are often created over long periods of time, through relationships being nurtured, through her care and embedded engagement and collaboration with the communities she portrays. Gauri Gill's camera is intuitive but not intrusive; Gill's series are complex and revealing using an approach that has been called "active listening". In this series, The Village on the Highway made from January to December 2021, Gill documented the makeshift dwellings of farmers occupying major roads leading into New Delhi while they protested new laws that threatened their livelihoods. Gill meticulously and sensitively recorded the temporary homes, made using repurposed farming equipment, to highlight their ingenious construction. She also made studies of other objects of daily life, like cooking pots and water pumps. Eventually, their protests succeeded, and the laws were overturned.

From January to December of 2021, I documented the makeshift dwellings of farmers occupying the national highway leading into New Delhi at Singhu border. They were protesting new laws that threatened their fragile livelihoods. Barred from entering the capital by police forces, they remained on the road for over a year, braving extreme weather conditions—including an unseasonably cold winter, scorching summer, and heavy monsoon—as well as waves of the Covid-19 virus.

Initially, I visited simply in order to extend support. There were activists and photographers living on the site, unlike me, and recording various aspects of the protests to share on social media. Much of mainstream media was ignoring the historic struggle, or covering it through purely urban biases. But slowly, I began to notice the completely homegrown architecture of resistance by the farmers, which ingeniously repurposed tractors, trailers, trolleys, trucks and other farming equipment, continually adapting them to allow for the vagaries of changing seasons and extreme elements. Well used vehicles were magically transformed into bedrooms, storerooms and living rooms. While elderly farmers were forced to bathe in the open in five degree centigrade temperatures, washing machines linked to tubes and buckets appeared to enable communal washing. In the summer the farmers added khus coolers to their new homes; in the monsoon, mosquito nets. Doors were tacked on to tarpaulin, bamboo extensions created to allow for libraries, medical camps or small shops, and large, round the clock kitchens manifested as if out of thin air. In this uplifting struggle, langar or community food offerings were the beating heart. I witnessed the road itself dug up into patches of earth to plant cauliflower.

The speaking structures that I encountered struck me as worth recording with my analogue camera, both to mark the undying persistence of the courageous farmers, and the unique temporality of what may well be the world's longest protest. The story is really about David vs Goliath, as peasants brought their very bodies, tools and fight for survival right to the capital city—or the palace gates. People with their backs to the wall showed us all not only how to endure, but to prevail, with utmost creativity. — Gauri Gill, 2023



Untitled, (5) from the series *The Village on the Highway*, 2021



Untitled, (10) from the series *The Village on the Highway*, 2021



Untitled, (20) from the series *The Village on the Highway*, 2021



Untitled, (23) from the series *The Village on the Highway*, 2021



Untitled, (27) from the series *The Village on the Highway*, 2021



Untitled, (22) from the series *The Village on the Highway*, 2021



Untitled, (16) from the series *The Village on the Highway*, 2021



Untitled, (37) from the series *The Village on the Highway*, 2021



Untitled, (28) from the series *The Village on the Highway*, 2021



Untitled, (1) from the series *The Village on the Highway*, 2021



Untitled, (3) from the series *The Village on the Highway*, 2021