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Gauri Gill's Award-Winning Photo Series Captures The Art Of Survival In Rural Rajasthan



Gauri Gill and a frame from her series, 'Notes from the Desert'. Gauri Gill

Vaaswat Sarkar

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If you are a contemporary Indian photographer or a photography enthusiast, Gauri Gill needs no introduction. The [illustrious](#) publication, The New York Times has hailed her as "one of India's most respected photographers", while the homegrown news outlet, renowned for its independent journalism, The Wire, calls Gill "one of the most thoughtful photographers active in India today." Born in Chandigarh, India, Gauri Gill has been trained in the art of photography from some of the premier institutions – Delhi College of Arts, Parsons School of Design and Stanford University.

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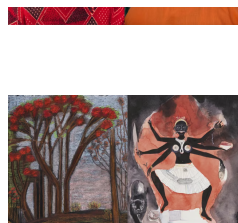


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In the year 2011, she was awarded the Grange Prize, Canada's most prestigious contemporary photography award. The esteemed jury, in their discerning evaluation, observed that the artist's works possess a remarkable ability to delve into the realm of ordinary heroism, deftly navigating the intricacies of challenging environments. Imbibing a documentary spirit that resonates deeply, the artist forges intimate connections with her subjects, capturing their essence with profound [authenticity](#). Through her lens, she unveils a human concern, shedding light on the pressing issues of survival that permeate their existence. This take on Gill's artistry by the Canadian jury rings thoroughly true in light of her work, *Notes from the Desert* (1999 -ongoing). Even though photographs from this series have been previously showcased in several individual exhibitions and projects the work has recently resurfaced in the spotlight with renewed vigor, and rightly so.

On the evening of 28th September, 2023 Gauri Gill was announced as the the winner of the tenth cycle of the Prix Pictet, a global award for photography and [sustainability](#). She was selected as the winner by an independent jury from a shortlist of twelve other talented photographers, which included the likes of Vasantha Yoganathan and Hoda Afshar, who all submitted entries responding to the theme 'Human'. Along with the honor that accompanies such a prestigious award, Gauri Gill also received a sum of 100,000 Swiss Francs. It is always a welcome sight to see good art receiving the patronage it deserves.

Within this captivating series, the artist embarked on an exploration of village schools in Rajasthan, commencing in April 1999. She soon realized that the school itself is a captivating microcosm, encapsulating a multifaceted rural reality. Through her lens, she unraveled the [intricate](#) tapestry of life in the Thar Desert; capturing the essence of a complex reality previously unknown to her urban upbringing. Over the

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course of two decades, by visiting the same places and people, she bore witness to the entire spectrum of life in the desert – from droughts to monsoons, dust storms to floods, epidemics to celebrations. Guided by her belief in working with marginalized communities, she employed an approach she termed "active listening"; amplifying their voices and shedding light on their stories. Through her evocative imagery, she invites us to delve into a world where resilience and the human spirit shine amidst the challenges of existence.



the prize of 100,000 Swiss Francs. Her winning series 'Notes from the Desert' looks at whole spectrum of life: drought years and the year of a great monsoon - when Barmer became Kashmir.

Her concept notes states, "In April 1999, I set out to photograph village schools in Rajasthan. Having grown up mainly in cities, I soon realised that school was simply a microcosm of a complex reality I knew nothing about. Since then, in the Thar desert of western Rajasthan, visiting the same people and places over decades, I have witnessed the whole spectrum of life: drought years and the year of a

great monsoon — when Barmer became Kashmir; dust storms that can give you a fever and a flood bad enough to cause the rebuilding of homes. I have followed the farming cycle, migration, men travelling to work in Gujarat and Maharashtra, Food for Work programmes, rural employment and other government schemes, nomadic journeys, epidemics, cerebral malaria, tuberculosis, overwhelmed hospitals and understaffed schools, death from snakebite, the death of a camel in a year remembered as the year of the death of the camel, births, marriages, child marriages, moneylenders, dharnas, national and panchayat elections, festivals, feuds passed down over generations, celebrations, prayers...and through it all, my valiant friends, by whom I was led."

Image Details:

1. 'Waterwells'. 1999–ongoing.
2. 'Jannat, Barmer'. 1999–ongoing.
3. 'Izmat, Barmer'. 1999–ongoing.
4. 'Mir Hasan with His Grandfather Haji Saraj ud Din, Oldest Member of the Community, in His Last Days, Barmer'.1999–ongoing.
5. 'Sumri, Daughter of Ismail the Shepherd, Barmer'.1999–ongoing.
6. 'Government Hospital, Barmer' (3). 1999–ongoing.
7. 'New Homes after the Flood, Lunkaransar'. 1999–ongoing.
8. 'Jogiyon ka Dera, Lunkaransar'. 1999–ongoing.
9. 'Urma and Nimli, Lunkaransar'. 1999–ongoing.
10. 'Hanuman Nath with His Daughter and Hem Nath, on Holi Day, Lunkaransar'. 1999–ongoing.

All images are from the series 'Notes from the Desert'.

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On my many visits to rural Rajasthan, I have witnessed a complex reality I knew nothing about as a city dweller. To live poor and landless in the desert amounts to an inescapable reliance on oneself, on each other, and on nature. These fragments of shared experience now inhabit a large photographic archive called Notes from the Desert, encompassing different narratives and varied forms of image making.

- *Gauri Gill, on her series 'Notes from the Desert', as it appeared on the publication The Eye of Photography*



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Indian Photographer

Gauri Gill

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