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# 'These photographs have felt meditative, offering glimpses of clarity in a comforting darkness'

Photographer Gauri Gill on revisiting her series 'Nizamuddin at Night' with a new montage and photographing her Delhi neighbourhood during the lockdown

Written by [Benita Fernando](#) | Mumbai |

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Nizamuddin at Night, 2005–ongoing, Image courtesy Gauri Gill.

There are two ways to view a photograph, in silence or with poetry. Delhi-based photographer Gauri Gill chooses to do the latter in a new montage, where scenes from her series *Nizamuddin at Night* are juxtaposed with the beat of 'An Evening Walk, while a friend is in prison' by poet Akhil Katyal. The night scenes of Gill's Nizamuddin neighbourhood echo the sombre yet quietly triumphant note of Katyal's poem, dedicated to Pinjra Tod activist Natasha Narwal.

Gill, a notable figure among contemporary Indian photographers, posted this montage on her newly setup Instagram account as a way of revisiting *Nizamuddin at Night*, which she began more than a decade ago. However, the award-winning photographer, whose works were shown at the 2019 Venice Biennale, is also continuing the series by shooting for it since the pandemic hit India. Gill, 50, speaks about the nocturnal Nizamuddin and what it means to walk and shoot during lockdowns and a pandemic.

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Edited excerpts:

**You have been shooting *Nizamuddin at Night* since 2005. How did it start?**



Untitled, from Nizamuddin at Night. Copyright Gauri Gill 2020.

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Well, here's something I wrote about it in *Civil Lines* in 2010: I started to photograph my neighbourhood in the year 2005. Returning home late at night, I would notice things that I didn't in the day. Lit up by streetlights, house lights and moonlight, sometimes diffused by the rain and fog, Nizamuddin became another place. One of the first pictures I took was of a white van. Its precise location on the road, its mysterious alignment with the shadows imprinted on it, transformed it from an ordinary van into another creature altogether. It was as if I had passed through a door into another world. Sometimes, I imagine a conversation between the two halves of Nizamuddin: the West side which houses Baba Auliya's shrine; a piece of old Delhi in New Delhi, alive with *qawwali* singing, pilgrims, beggars, tourists, migrants, butcher shops, filth and prayer — and the genteel East side, with Humayun's tomb; grand, isolated and austere. The Saint and the Emperor.

In retrospect, I think I was doing the East a slight disservice here; indeed, it is often eclipsed by the vitality of the West. The East has some very romantic old homes, initially built by refugees, full of humility and elegance. Many are now being razed to the ground and converted to nondescript builder flats, so it also reflects the city at large. There is Arab ki Sarai, the most beautiful gate in India perhaps, from

which the last Mughal emperor, the poet Bahadur Shah Zafar, was brought out when he was captured by the British. It has had a tradition of barsatis, or inexpensive terrace flats, and of artists living here, from VS Gaitonde to Mrinalini Mukherjee. It has the front views of houses which are all dressed up, and the back lanes, or 'service lanes', which flip your perspective. And for me, it has a great deal of personal history and reminiscence, which might be the most important thing anyway.

I did the night walks for maybe five or six years, and some of the pictures were shown alongside Sunil Gupta's work in a show at India International Centre called 'Gill and Gupta'. But over the years I got busy with travel and life, other things took over.



Untitled, from Nizamuddin at Night. Copyright Gauri Gill 2020.

**What were your motivations to revisit the series this time? Did you start after the pandemic set in?**

Yes, after the lockdown I began to walk around the neighbourhood again, late in the evening, only once a week or so, as a very special treat. I would head out at dusk, a time full of possibility for me. Lots of old memories began to come back. The first



evening I was out for hours, full of excitement. I didn't intend to make more pictures but ended up doing so, this time with my phone, and in colour. The earlier pictures were all black and white, made with medium format film on a large rangefinder camera which I would handhold without a tripod.

Coincidentally, around this time, I joined Instagram. For years, photographer friends had urged me to join, but somehow I never had the time and also feared getting addicted to social media, putting pictures out on the fly without the necessary mental processing time. But at the start of the lockdown, when the quiet descended, I decided to give it a try. I thought it might provide a certain discipline, and help me better see so-called ordinary things around me. Photography often does that.



Gauri Gill, whose works were shown at the 2019 Venice Biennale, is continuing the *Nizamuddin at Night* series by shooting for it since the pandemic hit India.

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**These night-time walks with your camera, without a flash or a tripod, sound almost meditative, like an exercise in solitude. Do they mean more as an escape from the confines of the home during this pandemic?**

Yes, this series has always felt like that, meditative, offering glimpses of clarity in a comforting darkness. At this particular time, it offers a kind of solace too. The weird thing is that in the pandemic the neighbourhood has started to feel all day the way it used to at night only. So I sometimes head out earlier.



Untitled, from *Nizamuddin at Night*. Copyright Gauri Gill 2020.

**The sleeping watchman, the late-night traveller, workers at closing hours — tell us more about the nocturnal characters who are a part of *Nizamuddin at Night*.**

The pandemic has been astonishing in its sweep and on-going relentlessness, especially the prolonged lockdown, and the accompanying silence—and silencing. Since *Nizamuddin* has been a hotspot, it's been quite strictly enforced. Apart from scattered people near the few shops that are open, walkers exercising carefully during certain hours, or someone walking a pet and so on, there have been few people outside. The small shamiana covering the eclectic gathering place in the

West, a protest site for people to come and share, to speak from the heart, has been dismantled. The watchmen do remain, as do the colony guards. They have the most difficult job as they are also exposed to the elements, be it heat or cold. The trains have only recently resumed, and not at the same frequency as before. Usually, I can hear the train announcements all night from my bedroom, along with the early morning *azaan*, and this winter the occasional cries of *azadi*, but suddenly the trains went silent, along with the protests.



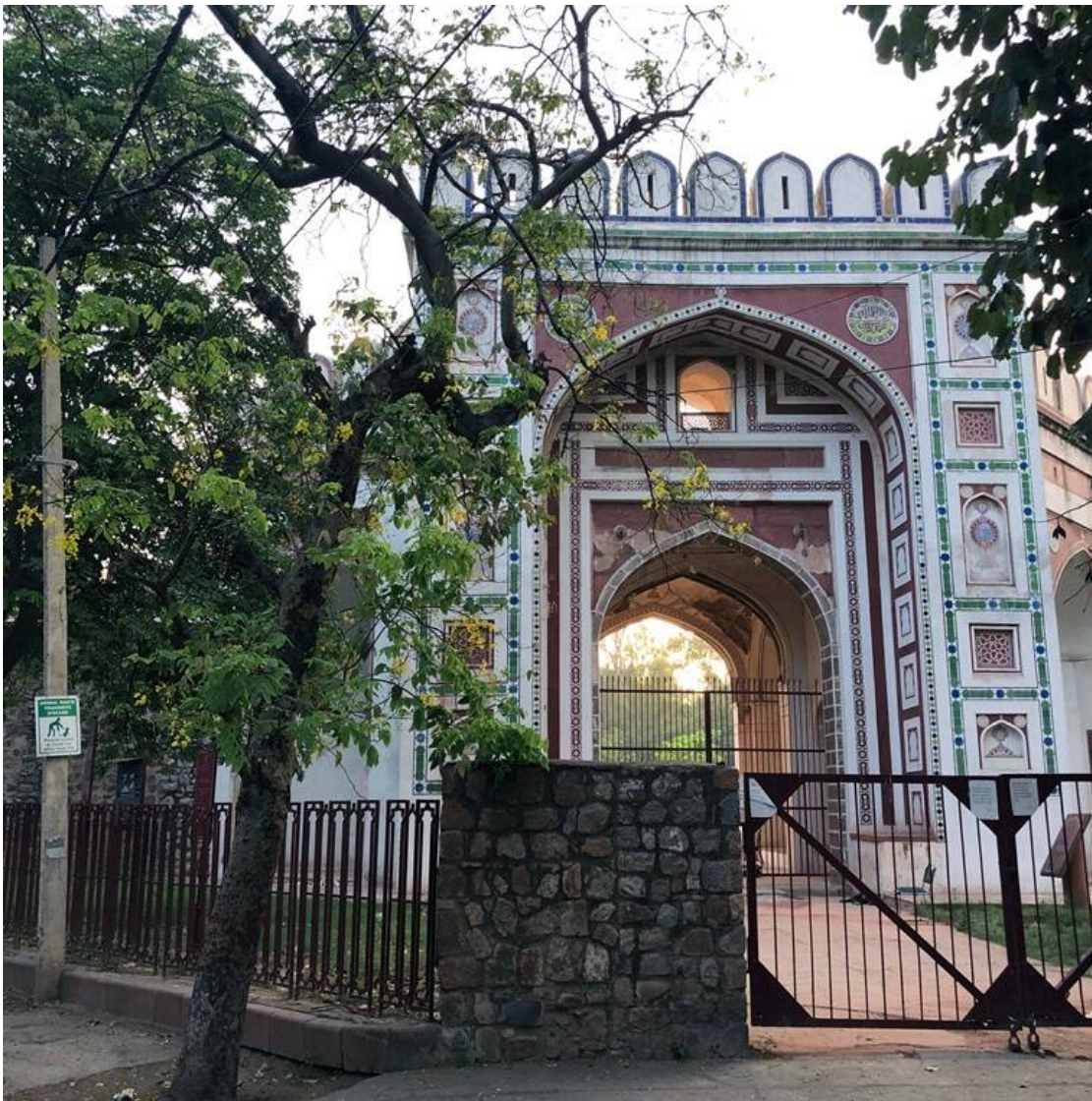
Untitled, from Nizamuddin at Night. Copyright Gauri Gill 2020.

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**The series, like several of your others, has been shot in black-and-white, emphasising the mysterious, secretive nature of the night. You have chosen to continue it in colour. Tell us more about this decision.**

It's completely different. The form does dictate the content, as well as vice versa. I might take a picture of a laburnum tree in colour, which would not work in the same way in black and white. Black and white is often about the emotion and abstracting or distilling things, just like the night, whereas colour invariably becomes about the material world. But then, colour also has different temperatures and palettes and can evoke memory in a different way.





Untitled, from Nizamuddin at Night. Copyright Gauri Gill 2020.

**Of late, many artists have been encouraged to find different modes of showing their works. Do you think that's the case with your montage?**

It all came together quite spontaneously. Ranjana Steinruecke of Gallery Mirchandani and Steinruecke in Mumbai asked me to send them some work for Instagram and to say something about it. I wondered what I could say. It all felt trite, as it's hard to talk about one's photographs. Then I thought of this poem by Akhil Katyal that I had recently read, that had moved me, and spoke so directly to this particular physical landscape, from Subz Burj to Bangla Sahib, and also the precious ordinariness of it all, how swiftly it can be taken away, as it has been for his friend.

**I am curious about how dogs pervade this series as if they were the presiding deities of the night-time. Were you especially drawn to them?**

Nizamuddin is known for its omnipresent dogs, the so-called strays. There are good Samaritans who feed them regularly, and on summer nights they sleep luxuriantly on expensive cars. A friend visiting from Kolkata once gallantly proposed walking me home from where he was staying around the corner, but instead, I had to offer



him some protection when he got quite nervous as we were loudly approached by the true guardians of our streets — all of whom are also apt to dissolve into disarming sweetness fairly quickly.



Untitled, from Nizamuddin at Night. Copyright Gauri Gill 2020.

**Wandering through the streets at night means a challenge in terms of safety and mobility for women photographers. What are your experiences like, now with lesser people on the streets and more policing?**

This is absolutely true. On the one hand, I don't think about it too much, or I would not be able to do the things I want to do. And to be honest, sometimes I have scared people, suddenly emerging in an alleyway with my camera. The camera in itself is talismanic and offers a kind of protection; when you're observing something, you're not a part of the dream. But, you know, Akhil's poem is dedicated to his friend Natasha Narwal, a student activist who is one of the founding members of Pinjra Tod, and is now a prisoner of conscience for expressing dissent against CAA earlier this year. It makes one reflect upon freedom, and solidarities, how from the women of [Shaheen Bagh](#) to the ladies of Nizamuddin, or vice-versa, women too wish to

wander, think, and speak, to not have our voices drowned out, or be co-opted, to be allowed to occupy the space we inhabit.



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