

→ THIS LONG CENTURY

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This little clip contains images excerpted from an ongoing series of photographs about my neighborhood in New Delhi. *Nizamuddin at Night* is juxtaposed against Akhil Katyal's recent poem, *An evening walk*, written for a friend who is in prison.

Beginning in the year 2005, I would sometimes wander around at night, taking pictures using black and white film with a large manual rangefinder camera, which I would handhold without a tripod. I did this for five or six years. Then other things came in the way. Here's something I wrote in the journal *Civil Lines* in 2010: '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 *dargah*; 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.'

On reflection, I did the East a slight disservice; indeed, it is often eclipsed by the vitality of the West. The East has some very romantic old homes, initially built by refugees, expressing 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, perhaps the most beautiful gate in India, 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 inhabiting them, 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.

After the lockdown began in Delhi in late March this year, I began to head out for evening walks, in the late evening dusk. My eyes were refreshed from not having stepped out in some time, and I began to make more pictures, this time in color, using only my phone. The neighborhood has changed, and so have I.

Akhil Katyal's poem is dedicated to his friend Natasha Narwal, a student activist who is one of the founding members of the women's collective Pinjra Tod, and is currently a prisoner of conscience for expressing dissent against the exclusionary CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) earlier this year. Delhi had a series of peoples' protests that went on for most of this past winter. They were followed in February by the Delhi riots, enacted primarily as punishment for the protests. Nizamuddin had a small but active protest site that I visited a few times, along the edge of the West side. This became an eclectic gathering place for people to come and share their views, express solidarity, speak from the heart. One night when I was walking back from the *dargah*, where I had gone with a friend, we were waylaid by a very gentle and beautiful silent candle lit protest, walking its way through the streets. Suddenly, with Covid-19, all that is over. I saw recently that the small *shamiana* of the protest site has been dismantled. The long days of the pandemic are a tunnel of silence, and silencing. Yet, even in the darkness, hope persists, and a stubborn belief in 'the inevitability of your freedom'.

Gauri Gill was born in 1970, in Chandigarh, India. She earned a BFA (Applied Art) from the College of Art, New Delhi; BFA (Photography) from Parsons School of Design/The New School, New York; and MFA (Art) from Stanford University, California. She has exhibited within India and internationally, including the 58th Venice Biennale; Museum Tinguely, Basel; MoMA PS1, New York; Documenta 14, Athens and Kassel; 2016 Kochi Biennale; 7th Moscow Biennale; Wiener Library, London; and Whitechapel Gallery, London. Her work is in the collections of prominent institutions worldwide, including the Museum of Modern Art, New

York; Tate Museum, London; the Smithsonian Institution, Washington and Fotomuseum, Winterthur. In 2011 she was awarded the Grange Prize, Canada's foremost award for photography.

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