

Architecture of resistance

Gauri Gill's 'The Village on the Highway' is a tribute to the ingenious homes that came up at Delhi's doorstep during farmers' protest

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Gauri Gill, Untitled, (5) from the series 'The Village on the Highway', 2021. Copyright Gauri Gill

Something unusual happened in Punjab's villages during the winter of 2020. The discontent that had been simmering among farmers turned into fierce anger, and they marched to the national capital to demand the repeal of the farm laws, which threatened to hand control of farming to corporations, and thereby destroy their livelihoods. Tractors and trailers full of farmers made their way from fields to highways, until their march was halted just at the gates of Delhi. But this wasn't to be the end; it was to mark the beginning of an epic battle. So, the tractors were parked, and tarpaulin tents swiftly erected on them. A new village had sprung up on the highway.

Over the next one year, this village kept alive the dream of reclaiming the lost democracy, it kept alive Punjab's long tradition of resistance. It didn't matter if they were sleeping on iron trailers in

subzero temperatures, they didn't give up even as over 700 of them fell. The battle gave new songs, new poetry, new hope that everything is not lost yet. It brought arrogant power to its knees.



Gauri Gill, Untitled, (8) from the series 'The Village on the Highway', 2021. Copyright Gauri Gill

The Village on the Highway, also the title of Gauri Gill's new body of work, captured the imagination of the current holder of the prestigious Prix Pictet prize (2023) as well as the Grange Prize (2011). She visited protest sites across the highways, but began to return to Singhu border, the epicentre, initially not as a photographer but as someone who has a longstanding concern for rural issues, which she has followed through her work for 25 years. As she admired the extraordinariness of this newly manifested home, she began to document the epoch unfolding around her. 'The Village on the Highway,' is now being shown at Vadehra Art Gallery in New Delhi, a very city they were barred from entering with barricades and iron nails, a city they said was theirs too.

Gill defies the obvious by intentionally excluding the protesters from her frames. Instead, she focuses on the tractors, trolleys, trucks which became homes to these farmers for over a year — silent witnesses to their resilience and ingenuity. These makeshift homes adapted to the harsh realities of protest, accommodating coolers and ACs in the summer, mosquito nets during the monsoons, and tightly packed plastic sheets against the bitter cold. Through the changing seasons, Gill was there.



Gauri Gill, Untitled, (63) from the series 'The Village on the Highway', 2021. Copyright Gauri Gill

Using tarpaulin sheets and bamboo frames as a backdrop, Gill brings the raw beauty of the protest site into the New Delhi gallery. Even as the tiny expanse of Vadehra fails to fully convey the scale of the farmers' revolutionary act, Gill's photographs piece together the extraordinary saga that unfolded on the national highway. And the gallery itself begins to stand in for the inside of one such truck or trailer.

Her large analogue camera captures it all: community kitchens that fed thousands of protesters, as well as the police who opposed them, and members of the impoverished local population. Brooms, ladles, pots and pans, and empty milk packets — everyday essentials that sustained life over the year. Steel glasses, carefully turned upside down to dry, ready for the next round of high-throated sloganeering. Blankets drying on clotheslines. Manjis, mirrors, combs, and bar soap tucked in a plastic bag. Radishes growing on raised beds. Discarded doors, once abandoned, now repurposed. Slogans reminding us: "If you ate today, thank a farmer." Posters of Bhagat Singh and Che Guevara adorning bamboo walls as protesters takes rest before a table fan. Asia meets Latin America, Punjab meets Bolivia — every act of resistance finds resonance here.



Gauri Gill, Untitled, (44) from the series 'The Village on the Highway', 2021. Copyright Gauri Gill

The vibrant tarpaulin sheets infuse the images with colour — yellow, evoking the ‘fasal’ back home, the wheat fields turning golden under the winter sun; blue, symbolising the wisdom passed down through generations of farmers; green, representing nature’s bounty; and red, of resistance, of course!

‘MY WORK IS LED BY MICRO MOMENTS’

Chandigarh-born Gauri Gill traces her roots to Tarn Taran district of Punjab. ‘The Village on the Highway’ marks a continuation of her practice, which has continually focused on ‘how people in precarity find ways to float, rather than drown’. Among her notable works are her archival notebooks on the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom, *The Americans*, about Indian immigrants in the USA, and the ongoing series ‘Notes from the Desert’ on marginalised communities in Western Rajasthan, for which she won the Prix Pictet in 2023.

Excerpts from a longer interview:

No one could predict how long would the agitation go on for. When exactly did you decide to document it?

I am led from the heart and issues of justice. I would return because I found the site so compelling and ultimately energising. So often we artists and intellectuals get depressed because we spend our time reading the news or on twitter. Here, one actually felt buoyed from witnessing the farmers determined optimism and flow of generosity, which included feeding everyone, including the police in their temporary communal kitchens; the medical camps they opened to serve all who needed assistance; libraries to share knowledge, etc. It was good to be reminded of how feet on the ground can move things in a way that social media and online battles cannot. The micro moments form larger moments.



Gauri Gill, Untitled, (9) from the series 'The Village on the Highway', 2021. Copyright Gauri Gill

Your photographs capture what you call 'the village' in various moods. Contemplative, defiant, easy, unsettling... How many visits did it take to create this vast body of work? And what can you recall about it?

There were several visits. What stays with me is the sheer tenacity of farmers, especially when things looked hopeless. I remember a long summer going into monsoon when numbers had dwindled on the site because farmers had to return home to tend to the land. Representatives from each family stayed on the site. The standoff had gone on so long, it seemed nothing might

ever change. Farmers were dying. I felt down even as a visitor. But I remember doughty elders saying to me, 'One day the tide will turn'. There is a phrase and guiding philosophy in Sikhism called Chardi Kala, which implies choosing optimism even when you can see the difficulties ahead. I saw that spirit. Only when the laws were overthrown and there was finally some jubilation on the site, did farmers speak of how hard it had been. In that moment at the end as farmers dismantled what they had made, I also saw them weep as they said goodbye to each other, because they had lived through something unimaginable and formed new and indissoluble bonds with strangers from across their own state, and even the country.



Gauri Gill, Untitled, (35) from the series 'The Village on the Highway', 2021. Copyright Gauri Gill

This protest was an emotional moment for Punjabis, the anger, the determination, the compassion, the passion, was writ large on their faces. But you decided against capturing the faces. Why?

As you know, I am Punjabi myself and very aware of the importance and urgency of the protest. In fact, the first people I serendipitously ran into when I first visited were the farmers from my own ancestral village in Tarn Taran, Alladinpur, with whom I also ate my first langar meal at the site.

Initially, I saw no reason to document the protests at all because the farmers themselves were doing such a good job, as were the many activists living on the site. As I continued to return, I found that no one was documenting the amazing structures that had manifested at the site and enabled the farmers to survive a whole year on a highway. This formed a completely handmade and homegrown architecture of resistance, in which farmers ingeniously repurposed tractors, trailers, trolleys, trucks and other farming equipment, continually adapting them to allow for the vagaries of changing seasons and extreme elements.

The farmers had travelled long distances from their villages to New Delhi to make arguments for their very survival. They arrived with very few economic resources and with great uncertainty as to what lay ahead. Forced to sit on the highway when they were barred from the Capital, they began to transform the vehicles that they had arrived on — or the equipment that they used daily and knew intimately — into uniquely habitable homes. Doors appeared through tarpaulin, walls arose from bamboo and thermocol, and string and tape held together wood. Well used vehicles suddenly became bedrooms, storerooms and living rooms. Communal spaces such as libraries, medical camps, small shops and round the clock kitchens manifested as if out of thin air. I began to witness the road itself dug up into patches of earth to plant vegetables such as cauliflower and radishes.



Gauri Gill, Untitled, (20) from the series 'The Village on the Highway', 2021. Copyright Gauri Gill

This sitting down on the highway lasted a whole year, so over time, the farmers had to adapt the structures to allow for not only the changing seasons but also unforeseen calamities such as the Covid pandemic. In the winter, when 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 homes; in the monsoon, mosquito nets shrouded the structures.

I don't believe that only the faces of the farmers tell their story. What they made, the materiality of the protest was intrinsic to them, and the unique spirit of their endeavour. Rural people are being written out across the world, and there is shrinking space for them to be heard. Urban folk complained about personal discomfort and detours in their travel on the highways. But the truth is that the mental divide between urban and rural populations is now so vast that most city people do not seem to remember where our food comes from. The farmers struggle powerfully visibilised those whom we undeniably rely upon, yet refuse to acknowledge, let alone heed. And the spaces and structures cannot be separated from the struggle — they enabled it, speak of it, and now even form memorials to it. The architecture of protest was created by people to serve a unique exigency. The structures spoke to me of that.



Gauri Gill, Untitled, (22) from the series 'The Village on the Highway', 2021. Copyright Gauri Gill

How difficult was it to achieve this emptiness because the place was bustling with activity?

A lot of waiting was involved, and it is in fact the bedrock of photography because waiting also leads to a kind of heightened attention. But then, there was a lot of talking and eating which filled our time too! I learned from every moment.

How does this series relate to your larger body of work? Like your previous projects, 'Notes from the Desert', do you plan to have an ongoing relationship with Punjab's dispossessed?

I live in Delhi but have spent considerable amounts of time over the last 25 years learning from rural friends, Adivasi artists, Jogi friends from the so-called denotified tribes, and other imperiled groups. I am interested in the novel ways used by people with their backs against the wall to survive, even create joy, despite an economy of resources. To me, there is an utmost nobility in that unique imagination. In this series, troubled rural workers brought their very bodies, tools and fight for survival right to the centre of power and managed to occupy space with great creativity and resourcefulness.

My work happens in an organic way and is led by micro moments, and by my friends, so let us see what the future holds.



Gauri Gill, Untitled, (12) from the series 'The Village on the Highway', 2021. Copyright Gauri Gill