



A YEAR OF RESISTANCE

Gauri Gill's photographs document the ingenuity and beauty of the Indian farmers' Delhi blockades.

By Snigdha Poonam



CAULIFLOWER PLANTS STAND IN ORDERLY ROWS ACROSS A patch of freshly tilled soil. Not yet in bloom, the garden is bordered by colourful tarpaulins, as if to shield the buds from wandering cattle. On one end, a low concrete boundary has been built, a subtle assertion of ownership. A water container rests serenely on a stone platform. Beyond the polyester divider, a bamboo hut peeks into view, its slanting roof also padded with tarpaulin. Perhaps it's the home of the person who owns the vegetable patch.

Looking at this photograph, one might imagine it was taken deep in India's hinterlands, where bamboo huts remain a familiar sight and growing vegetables is a way of life. But this hut and the garden were located not in a village but on a major road leading to Delhi.

Photographer Gauri Gill's *The Village on the Highway* is a visual homage to an extraordinary feat of imagination, one that sprung from a year-long stand-off between the Indian state and the people who till the land. Its roots



lie in three controversial laws passed in 2020 to reform the agricultural sector, which employs about half of the population, most of them earning woefully little. Prime Minister Narendra Modi claimed ownership of the reforms, asserting they granted farmers autonomy. Freed from socialist-era price regulations and local middlemen's diktats, farmers were now ostensibly free to sell their crops to the highest bidder, whether state-owned companies or global supply chains.



The intended beneficiaries did not see it that way. Already strained by rising costs, recurrent droughts and mounting debts, many farmers feared they would be thrust into an unequal marketplace, putting their livelihoods at the mercy of powerful corporations.

Initially, groups of farmers staged protests in their regions. Two months later, frustrated by the government's refusal to listen, some of them marched en masse towards Delhi. That November, hundreds of thousands of farmers, many



of them Sikh, set off on foot and in farming vehicles – tractors, tempos, truck trailers – from Punjab and Haryana, north India’s agrarian heartlands.

But the convoy could not enter the capital. At the Singhu border, police and paramilitary personnel stood behind tall metal barricades armed with batons, water cannons and tear gas. The farmers refused to back off. Instead they decided to lay siege to the border, blocking the highway.

Setting up a temporary base required enormous creativity and resourcefulness, efforts that caught Gill’s attention when she visited the Singhu border. “They began to repurpose the very vehicles that they had arrived on, or the farming equipment that they used daily and knew intimately, into uniquely habitable homes,” she tells me over email. Uncertain how long they would stay, the farmers created spaces where they could sleep, cook and bathe. Where an empty road had stood, there were suddenly 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.

As a photographer, Gill was drawn to this “handmade and homegrown architecture of resistance”, as she calls it, which was built on the farmers’ ability to evoke beauty using the barest of objects and materials. “Doors appeared through tarpaulin, walls arose from bamboo and thermocol, and string and tape held together wood,” she recalls.

Each makeshift structure carried a spark of individuality, a touch of quirkiness. Some featured plain jute curtains, others synthetic ones adorned with bold floral patterns. Doors ranged from plain cloth nailed to the backs of trucks to solid bamboo constructions complete with windows, frames and latches.

As with much of her previous work, Gill’s focus was on highlighting “the beauty and generosity in places of profound precarity and acute injustice”. The absence of people in these photographs – a deliberate choice to protect their identities – does not diminish their centrality.



Each domestic object, a pot on a stove or a bucket of bathing water, conveys their presence.

The farmers stayed for four seasons. In summer, khus (vetiver)-infused air coolers were installed. In colder months, thick blankets padded the walls. In the monsoons, mosquito nets shrouded the sleeping areas.

Some of these items arrived with friends and relatives from villages hundreds of miles away, along with fresh food supplies grown in the farms to sustain the *langars*, or communal kitchens, a cornerstone of the Sikh way of life. The *langars* fed not only the protesters and their allies but also the police officers posted at the border. Yet, despite their efforts to persevere, hundreds of protesters died, succumbing to harsh weather conditions, age-related complications, dengue fever, accidents and illnesses.

In November 2021, the government passed a motion to repeal the laws. With their mission accomplished, the farmers dismantled their temporary homes, bid farewell to friends and comrades, and began their journeys home.

The Indian farmers’ protest of 2020–21 is remembered as one of the longest non-violent protests in contemporary history. It is also a rare instance of ordinary citizens triumphing over an unyielding state. Yet it was marked by countless moments when it seemed that the lights were about to go out.

“The stand-off had gone on so long, it seemed nothing might ever change,” Gill recalls. “Farmers were dying. I felt down, even as a visitor.” Yet their spirits did not waver. “I remember doughty elders saying to me, ‘One day the tide will turn.’”

Gill reflects on the Sikh phrase *Chardi Kala*, which means choosing optimism even when you can see the difficulties that lie ahead, indeed because of those difficulties. She could feel the farmers drawing strength from it. “I saw that spirit,” she says. **TI**

“The Village on the Highway” is at Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi, from February 4 to March 4