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## The human lens

Gauri Gill uses photography to create an archive of life in rural Rajasthan to challenge conventional narratives

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'Notes From The Desert.' (Photos: Thana Boonlert)

What is Gauri Gill's photographic archive titled? →

How does Gill's work address rural India's challenges? →

What role did the 'Jannat' series play in her exhibition?



An encounter with a girl beaten by a teacher moved Gauri Gill to write a story for a political weekly. However, her idea was set aside for lacking an angle that would engage urban readers and Gill decided to take a month-long sabbatical from work.

In April 1999, she ventured to photograph village schools in India's Rajasthan region. Having grown up in the city, she realised village schools were a microcosm of a complex reality that she knew nothing about.

"My grandfathers both left their villages in Punjab to join the army and slowly our ties with the rural were severed. Over the past two decades, my visits to western Rajasthan have encompassed various parts of life and changes that have occurred over time," she said in a talk at the Bangkok Arts and Culture Centre (BACC) earlier this month.

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Jannat.



'Prix Pictet Human' at the BACC.

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Her experiences cover a wide range, from natural disasters and politics to life events, constituting a photographic archive titled "Notes From The Desert". Hailing from India, Gill is the winner of the 10th cycle of the Prix Pictet, a global award for photography and sustainability. It was founded in 2008 by the Pictet Group to draw public attention to environmental issues.

Her photos are on view for the first time in Thailand through the Pictet Group, the Goethe-Institut Thailand and BACC. "Prix Pictet Human" is showcasing the work of 12 photographers shortlisted for the Prix Pictet until Nov 23. It explores a wide variety of issues from conflict and economic collapse to traces of human habitation and industrial development, violence and migration.

In Barmer, Rajasthan, Gill met a group of women in dark ajrak shawls surrounding the corpse of a little girl. While looking for a village school, she was approached by Izmat, who told her to share their suffering. And they started to exchange letters. The "Jannat" series recounts the life of three family members -- Jannat, her younger sister Hooraa and her mother Izmat -- abandoned by a father, yet united by love.

"Jannat died of illness in 2007 at the age of 23, while Hooraa completed a college degree in computers, practically unheard of in her peer group of local young Muslim women. When Izmat was struggling to gain access to her own land from her ex-husband, the judge would not believe that she had once been the poorest person in her village. These photographs were used as evidence," she said.



New Homes After The Flood, left, and Jogyon Ka Dera.



Urma And Nimli, left, and Hanuman Nath With His Daughter And Hem Nath.

Next, "Ruined Rainbow" is an accidental creation. Gill brought cameras to kids in the village when they expressed an interest in photography. Someone made the mistake of opening the back of the camera and exposed the film to light. In 2010, when she edited contact sheets for the exhibition, she found these rolls and felt moved to see familiar faces and places in these photos.

"I thought about photography, its inherent subjectivity and how there are as many possible narratives as there are narrators. As with life, the medium of technology introduces its own presence through chance and accidents. I played with the prints and when I looked at them again, the exposed images had formed an unexpected rainbow. A "Ruined Rainbow", if you will," she said.

In 2003, Urmul Setu Sansthan, a non-profit organisation that promotes community development, organised a Balika Mela (fair for girls) in Lunkaransar, Rajasthan.

Gill was invited to set up a photo stall where 13 girls who came in went on to join her workshop and, two years later, photographed the fair.

One of them, Manju Saran, ran a photo studio for five years before her marriage, a rarity in a patriarchal society. She also wrote the second essay in Balika Mela.

The "Birth Series" documents the midwifery of Kasumbi Dai. In 2005, Gill met Dai at a birthing workshop. She got invited to photograph her work and assist with delivering her grandchild in the remote village of Ghafan. After losing her husband at a young age, she became a midwife, who delivered all the children in the surrounding area. Gill regards her as the mother of mothers.



Gauri Gill, centre.

Izmat also took Gill to visit her father's grave and those of other family members. Created from materials found in nature, it inspired her to photograph graveyards. "Traces" memorialises marked and unmarked graves, which belong to those with relatively few economic resources and from both Muslim and Hindu communities. Each site is adorned with available materials to pay homage and cultivate memory. In "The Mark On The Wall", the same title as a Virginia Woolf short story, Gill documents drawings by local artists, children and teachers in government schools in Rajasthan. Many of them offer a glimpse of the collective mind of the local community.

Last but not least, "Acts Of Appearance" is a reinterpretation of local customs. In Dahanu, she learned of Bohada, a tribal mask festival, where performers wear masks to represent gods, demons and ancillary figures. In 2015, Gill commissioned Subhas and Bhagvan Dharma Kadu, sons of the legendary artist Dharma Ram Kadu, along with their families and volunteers to create a new set of masks, which represent beings in contemporary reality.

"I imagined using freedom afforded by the masks as a way to create distance from and reflect upon the self; as a possible means to explore one's life and circumstances in the lived present rather than the distant past of historical myth or memory. We are all heterogeneous beings, constituted of as many different selves as moments in time, inhabiting varying contexts as others read us in their own subjective ways, often different from how we imagine ourselves to be. The question also arises, to whom does my face belong -- me, or the world that views me?" she said.

Gill has learnt to "listen deeply" to see clearly. Despite its democratising bent, the camera wields disproportionate power in terms of who gets to tell the story. Her small attempt is to try and cede control of representation.

"Photography cannot only help us to broaden monolithic representations, but also to expand the closed and self-referential circles of power and visibility, determining who is included and who is excluded. Where and toward whom we direct our attention is an act of love and belief," she said.

As her work reflects injustice in the world, Gill admired how people find ways to survive in fragile or precarious circumstances.

"These small acts of resistance and beauty by individuals or communities are all we have in the end and wherein lies hope," she added.

**"Prix Pictet Human" is running at the Main Exhibition Gallery, 9th floor, Bangkok Art and Culture Centre, until Nov 23.**

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