

## Life is Elsewhere

Gauri Gill's photographs of Indians in America should have been mounted more imaginatively, says David De Souza.

GAURI GILL'S SHOW OF PHOTOGRAPHS, ORGANIZED BY MATTHIEU Foss at Chatterjee & Lal Gallery, Mumbai, from the 11th to the 24th of April, was titled, *The Americans*. Jeet Thayil's poem, *The Future Infinitives*, accompanying the show, carried an expression that would have made a more appropriate title - "Almost American" was an evocative description of people who seemed lost in transition. The show had earlier been mounted at Bose Pacia, Kolkata (from February 16th to March 8th) and Nature Morte, New Delhi (from March 15th to 29th).

As you walked into the gallery in Mumbai, you were visually assaulted by a host of images - more than seemed fair or necessary. The walls were papered with photographs that were not too unfamiliar - like the ones most of us have of family and friends back in the USA. You would have had to crawl on the floor and get a ladder to see all the images - this was where the show shot itself in the foot. Someone was overheard saying it was a curatorial disaster.

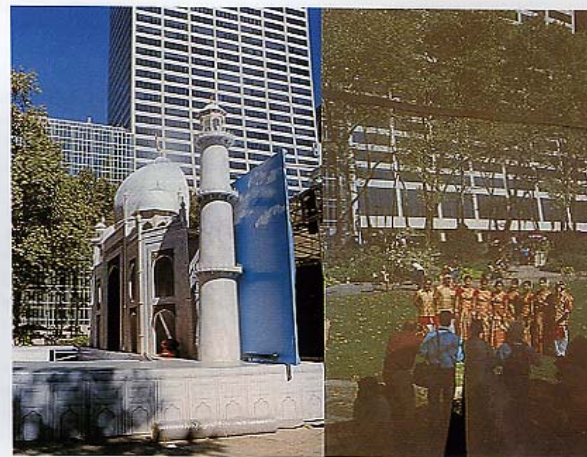
Many of the images were diptychs, and within the images, sometimes, there were other dualities - this didn't quite work in all the frames. Some of the images had been cleverly juxtaposed so that you didn't quite know where one ended and the other began. Sort of reminiscent of the 'single take' music videos of the '90s. The images were mainly of Indian Sikhs in the USA - the exhibition, however, was hardly representative of the Punjabi community living abroad. It looked rather like a small, extended family album. The Buick in the driveway, the maples, the elms, the motels, the mobile homes or the Santa Clauses were often the only indicators that the images were actually shot in America. They could as well have been shot in Ludhiana, Noida or Gurgaon.

The images were of a documentary nature. They were sometimes quite funny - in one image, for example, there was a cut-out of the Taj dwarfed by tall buildings placed next to a foggy frame of an Indian folk-dance troupe being photographed after a performance. The show had its share of predictable *Monsoon Wedding* and *Bend it like Beckham* visuals as well. The most striking photograph however was of a young, upwardly mobile, Indian couple getting into their separate automobiles, the lack of communication between them jarringly obvious. The other images that made you look twice were the ones with images within them - either on TV or in photo-frames on walls. Images of matrimonial conferences, arangetrams and dandiya functions gave you a fair idea of the lives South Asians in America lead. The photograph capturing the mini cut-outs of victims of domestic violence was quite telling, when seen with other, more celebratory frames.

At one point of time, the West seemed to be in 'search' of India. There were photographers who assiduously tried to capture exotica - of both the high-society and the street-level varieties. Many Indians now seem to want to capture the West. Whether they commit the same mistakes as the Euro-American photographers is what remains to be seen.



Gauri Gill. Alok and Sumati, Silicon Valley, California. Photograph, 2001.



Gauri Gill. Incredible India Performance, Bryant Park, New York City. Photograph, 2007.