

STANFORD

M A G A Z I N E

PHOTOGRAPHY

Neighborhood Watch

Documenting Indian communities from Rajasthan to Yuba City.

by **Linda Weber**



REACHING OUT: Gill (below) records the plight of rural girls.

Courtesy Gauri Gill

IN EARLY 1999, photographer Gauri Gill was vacationing in western Rajasthan, a state in northwestern India, when she saw a male teacher beat a young girl at a village school near her guesthouse. She was about to intervene when she realized challenging the man might make things worse for the girl. Afterward, unable to shake her feelings of powerlessness and anger, Gill resolved to learn as much as she could about the day-to-day life of Rajasthan's children, especially preadolescent girls. Schooling is often considered a luxury for them, and arranged child marriages and female infanticide persist in rural areas.



To help foster change, Gill, MFA '02, initially considered becoming a teacher herself. But she concluded she could have more impact if she stuck with photography, documenting the lives of girls in rural villages. So she took a leave from her job at *New Delhi Outlook* newsmagazine and began traveling from school to school.

"I realized that literacy is only part of the problem; the story is bigger than that," Gill says. The plight of her subjects "is affected by the politics of the individual community, caste, class, its underlying economics, the geography of the area and water," she says. "For instance, girls can't go to school at certain times of the year because families start harvesting and girls have to look after their siblings and graze the livestock; while as far as possible, the boys' education isn't disturbed."

Gill threw herself headlong into the project, getting to know the girls in several communities and slowly forging friendships with their parents. Many girls are married before age 12, though they stay with their families until puberty. Gill was drawn to

their spunkiness. "They're at an age where they still feel that anything is possible and are completely open to the world. But they're given the responsibilities of women, even though there's a crazy kid inside still trying to break through," she says. "It's really poignant: there's attitude and defiance, but conformity, too."

Gill, who received undergraduate fine arts degrees from the Delhi College of Art and the Parsons School of Design in New York, had done long-term photo series before. In her native India, she portrayed child laborers in Mirzapur and Badhoi, as well as victims of the Bhopal gas tragedy 10 years after the accident. In New York, she photographed a Gujarati news vendor and Sikh taxi drivers. But it was her experience in Rajasthan that led her to graduate studies. The Stanford MFA program allowed her to design a curriculum that combined her ongoing projects with expanding interests. "I wanted to study anthropology and history and psychology. I consider my work broadly documentary, so I wanted to understand how people create documents in other disciplines," she says.

Shortly after arriving at the Farm, Gill set out to satisfy her curiosity about the Bay Area's Indian community and continue a project she'd begun in New York on the Indian diaspora. She scoured local Indian publications for upcoming social events and started showing up with her camera at gatherings like the Mr. and Miss San Francisco pageant in Fremont and "bhangra" rap parties in San Francisco. She photographed Indian transplants, from Stanford students to farmers in Yuba City, Calif.

What fascinates Gill about her compatriots living here, she says, is whether and how they choose to assimilate and what influences shape the kids who are born here. Her curiosity comes partly from her own experience living in New York and California and from that of relatives and friends who have settled abroad. She identifies several subcultures, including older Indians who have recreated a life they once led in India that doesn't exist there anymore, and younger, recent transplants drawn by the technology industry, who deliberately set out to Americanize. Those keen to assimilate often choose to identify and socialize with second-generation Indian-Americans, and try to emulate them.



GROUNDLED: A mother and daughter, linked to the land.

Courtesy Gauri Gill

"Sometimes second-generation immigrants become guides for first-generation immigrants," says Gill. "But these [first-generation] yuppie types are often not really engaging in this culture, only imitating a perceived way of being, mostly derived from advertising and consumer culture." Those observations prompt Gill to ask the perennial questions about assimilation: "How does one adapt and yet retain one's soul? Does one just surrender completely? Where is the resistance?"

The hybridized culture of second-generation young people also intrigues her. "You see the Chicano and hip-hop influences in the young guys," she says, "but also influences from Bollywood [India's film and music industry] and religion, like the gold Khanda lockets that many boys wear." Gill calls the blend "dynamic, rich and vital" and says it reflects the American-born Indians' search for identity as well as their confusion.

"There's an attempt to fit in, but to assert their difference, too. There's both pride and embarrassment," she says. "The kids speak both English and their parents' language fluently and are in some ways more conservative than many of their counterparts in Indian cities." To Gill, their view of India is distorted, constructed from their parents' nostalgic notions, Bollywood films and even visits to India, "where relatives fawn over the returned NRI [nonresident Indian]."

The photographer's perceptions come through in her work, observes Stanford photography professor Joel Leivick, who compares the Rajasthan series with her pictures of Bay Area transplants. "The people in Rajasthan are surrounded by their own history; they are linked in an ancient way to the ground they walk on," says Leivick. But the Indians in the Bay Area don't seem to have that "timeless connection to the place," he says. "When I see Gauri's photographs of the young girls, there is an earthiness that I don't get from the Bay Area pictures." The contrast, Leivick says, comes partly from Gill's "stylistic decisions—color versus black and white, flash versus natural light, the kind of textures that define the spaces; all of that contributes to the meaning."

Gill returned to Rajasthan twice while at Stanford, and at the suggestion of a fellow student she entered that series in the International Fund for Documentary Photography competition. The fund offers grants to photographers who address social, political, economic, environmental or ethical issues. Named co-winner for the Asia-Pacific region in 2002, she won \$3,500, and 20 of her prints were exhibited alongside those of the seven other winners at Fifty Crows Gallery in San Francisco.

Back in India now, Gill says she plans to continue the Rajasthan project and conduct a photography workshop for disadvantaged women, who may be able to earn their livelihood with a camera. She's also looking for ways to show her work to a larger audience in the communities she's photographed. "So far, it's mainly people I know who've seen them."

Gill admits that her own vagabonding could be construed as a form of rootlessness but says her work, rather than her domicile, gives her life definition. She acknowledges the self-revealing aspect of photographing others. "I don't think you can ever get away from yourself. In the process of photographing the world, I learn things about myself. And for anyone looking, I'm always in the work."

Linda Weber is a writer and editor in San Francisco.