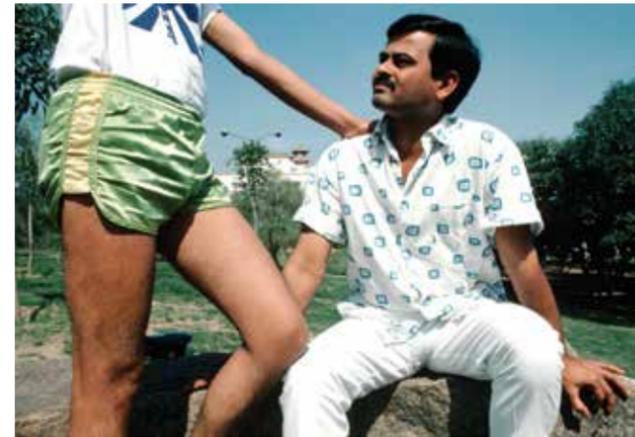




The Wedding from Exiles (1986).



Nehru Park from Exiles (1986).

could even pinpoint India on the map, or grasp what being Indian meant. So I didn't exactly fit in."

Interestingly enough, he was far more comfortable with his sexuality, being conscious of it at that age. The year was 1969, a time when the issue of gay rights was gaining momentum in the West, especially after the Stonewall riots in New York. "I found it was easier to be openly gay in school, than be Indian."

It wasn't as easy closer home. A year later, when he revealed his sexuality to



The Party from Exiles (1986).

his parents, his mother was hysterical and his dad, an ex-army man, considered his son's disclosure 'childish'. "He hoped I would eventually 'grow out of it', and even suggested therapy, to help change the mindset that I 'had developed'." Was it too early to tell them, I wondered, trying to imagine what it must have been in the early seventies to have a conversation of this sort. "Maybe I rushed into the matter," he says, "but it felt like giving away a part of the burden that I had carried for so long. I expected my parents to carry it for me." ▶

Jama Masjid from Exiles (1986).

Images Courtesy: Sunil Gupta/Vedehra Art Gallery, New Delhi; Sepia Eye, New York and Stephen Buljger, Gallery, Toronto



Sunil Gupta

Sunil Gupta talks to Conchita Fernandes of the several battles he has had to wage dealing with his identity, sexuality and ultimately, his illness.

Art plays an important role in conversation, and over the years, in India, cinema, photography, painting and literature have pondered over several issues, from those of ethnicity and religion, to class discrimination and social harmony. However, art is only a reflection of society, and much like real life, stories of the marginalised, of issues that one doesn't talk about. In his growing up years, photographer and activist Sunil Gupta always wondered about the lack of representation of Indian gay men, in the collective art history of the world. The country's refusal to recognise and address their rights, bothered him.

"One of my motives behind making art is to push the boundaries, not just the aesthetic ones, but the political ones as well."

A member of the gay community himself, Sunil has spent over four decades, fighting for the rights of homosexuals. Relentlessly working on projects that are a direct outcome of the social and political scenario around him, his work has been pivotal in pushing the envelope, bit by bit.

Embracing the Gay Identity

Having spent the first 15 years of his life in New Delhi, Sunil and his family shifted to Montreal in 1969. Moving into a white neighbourhood, he speaks of what felt like an identity crisis at that time. "I arrived, looking very Indian, wearing clothes that were too colourful." But, "You have to understand that at the time, not many





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“I love putting up images and looking at them, while also basking in its aura hour after hour.”

Using the Camera for Dialogue

With time, as his parents grew more accepting of his choices, Sunil started using his camera, something that had fascinated him even back in Delhi. “I was making pictures for my university’s gay newsletter. The camera, I found, was a great way for me to connect with people.” It was also a way for him to get out of the monotony of business school. “I was studying accountancy, and

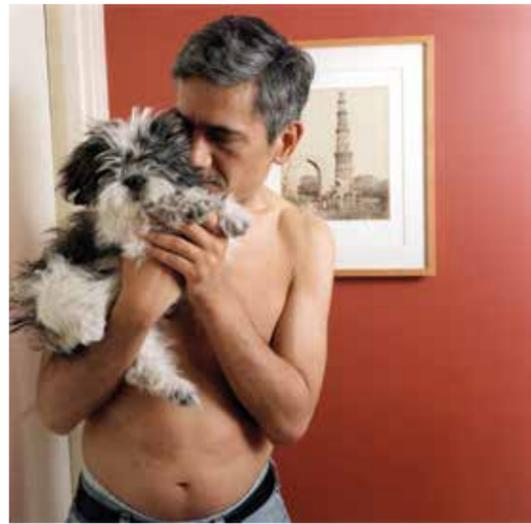
there was nothing queer about that,” he said. He moved to New York for an MBA, dropped out of the course, and eventually, took up a formal education in photography, initially in New York, and later in London.

Interestingly enough, his early inspirations were Walker Evans and Eugene Smith, as he gravitated towards their style of social documentary. The visuality of Sunil’s own work is far removed from the classical,

black and white aesthetic of these masters, but in a way, his journey has been about social documentary as well. While they looked at the outside world with an empathetic eye, Sunil chose to look inwards, perhaps in a tradition more akin to someone like Nan Goldin. Not only by documenting his own community, but also by placing himself in front of the lens, revealing his own vulnerability for everyone to see,

understand and hopefully question. The last bit has always been important to his cause, because he believes that change cannot come without dialogue. “People ask me why I constantly talk about homosexuality. I wonder if straight people realise that they too, are always talking about their sexuality. What is a husband talking about when he describes his wife? And so, what’s the problem if I do it?”

⌚ Clockwise—Leh, Mexico City, Helsinki, Goa, Miami, Candolim—Goa from *Love and Light* (2004–2009).



📍 *Blood-Fort, Babe-Fist and Shroud-Pleasuredrome from From Here to Eternity (1999).*

His Work in New York

New York had a definite influence on his work. Enthralled by the intensity that possessed its occupants, especially members of the gay community, Sunil shot

Christopher Street (1976), a series of portraits of homosexuals, who were coming out in the public eye. The simplicity of the photos belies their relevance that stands even today, for their portrayal of a time when aspirations



“People have been taught to imitate and explore work that is out there, which is great as a starting point. But it cannot also be the end point. What is the purpose in studying the works of other photographers when in the end, you miss the point in your own project?”

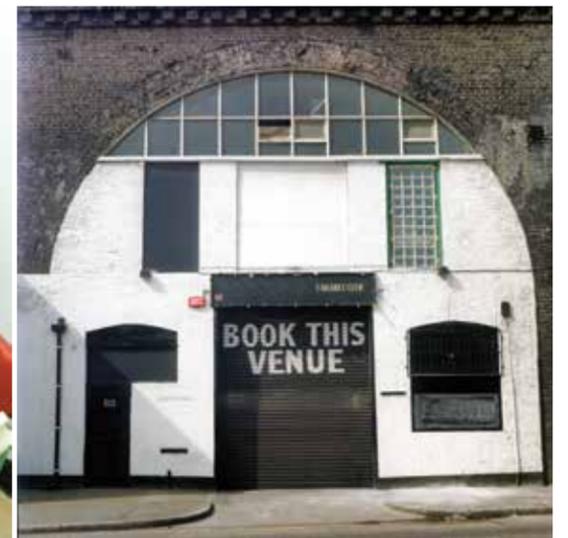
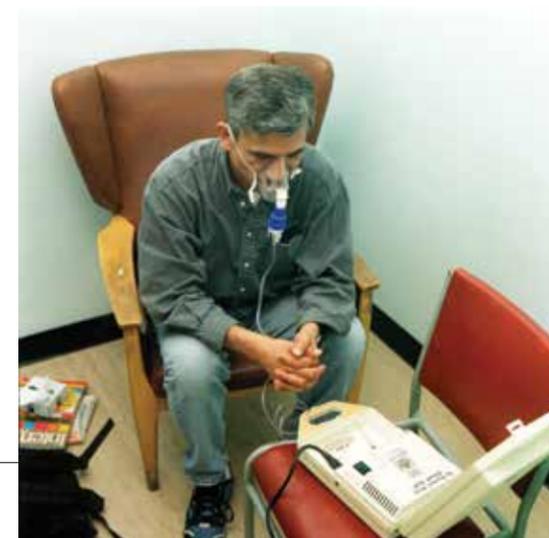
were fresh and hopes were high, for a wider acceptance in society.

First Work Dealing with Activism

A crucial moment in his journey towards activism was when he was awarded a commission to photograph homosexuality in Delhi. As he set to look at his community back home, he was hopeful that the beginnings of acceptance he had witnessed in the West, would also have taken place in India.

Nothing had changed, it seemed, and it was still as dangerous to accept one's sexuality in public. His subsequent work, *Exiles* (1986), became a response to the absence of gay men in public spaces. Anonymous, staged photos shot in popular public locations, were interspersed with conversations, to portray the duality that most gay men lived. They would often be gay, but lead heterosexual lives, even being married to women. The work is powerful, despite, and also because of its anonymous ▶

📍 *Christmas-Substation from Here to Eternity (1999).*



📍 *Pentamidine-Attitude from Here to Eternity (1999).*

nature—a powerful reminder of the unwillingness of the legal system to repeal the draconian Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code.

Looking at Himself

Sunil's life, both visual and otherwise, took a turn in 1995, when he realised that he was HIV positive. "I thought I was going to die."

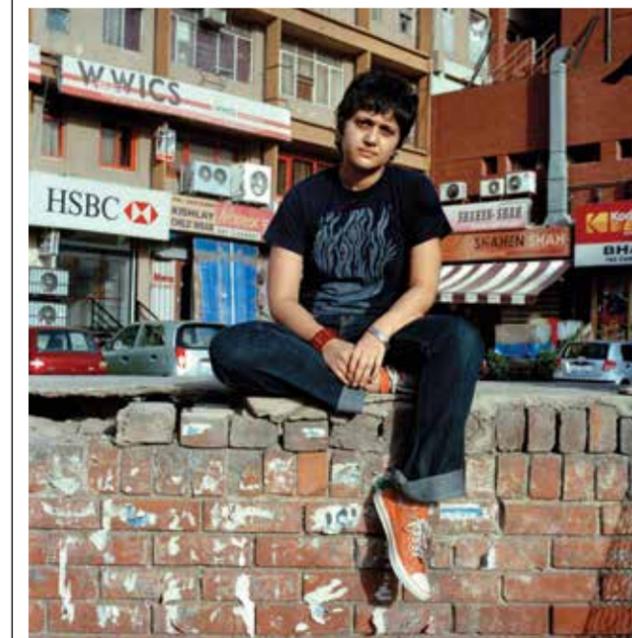
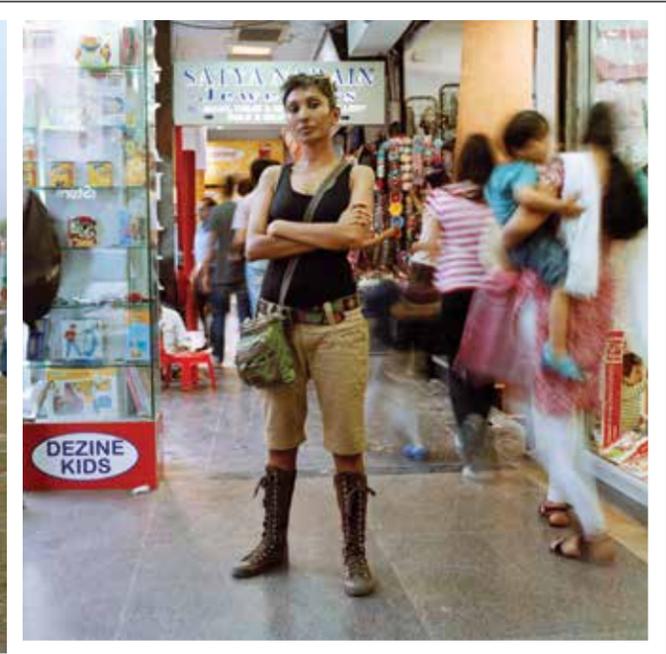
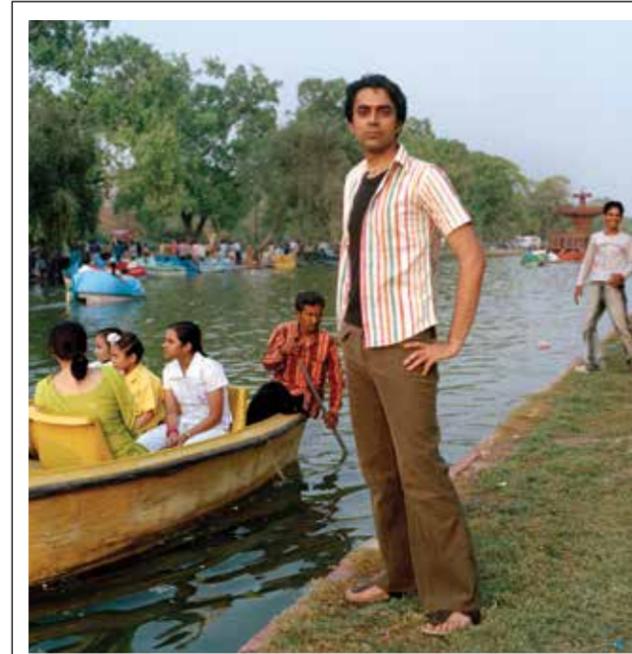
But with the new drugs that were being produced, he was told that I would live.

This period led to the making of *From Here to Eternity* (1999), a series comprising of six diptychs of self portraits, along with facades of gay clubs shot during the day. A closer look reveals deeper meaning within these simple pairings. For instance, the fact that the clubs appear so inconspicuous and

Shubham from *Mr Malhotra's Party* (2007-ongoing).



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"Alice Munro's short stories have been great sources of inspiration. The fact that something small could lead to something big was an idea that I derived from her work."

'commonplace' during the day, and that they transform dramatically at night, tells us about the circumstances under which these places function. The self portraits, on the other hand, were remarkably intimate, some with him being naked in front of the camera for the first time, others, depicting him undergoing his treatment."

That said, one of the significant aspects of this work was not in its making, but in its showing. The pictures were exhibited in Delhi in 2004, and Sunil describes the moment as a second coming out, of sorts. The response was positive, but he found the audience to be sympathetic to his illness,

which he thought wouldn't have been the case if his work dealt with his sexuality.

Marching On Valiantly

By making deeply personal, yet provocative work, Sunil Gupta has carefully treaded the treacherous waters of what is acceptable and not. He fights with fearlessness, his camera being his strongest weapon in his activism for gay rights and AIDS awareness. Most importantly, he is an important photographer because of his contribution to the Indian gay narrative, something, that all future generations can look at, examine and compare with their personal stories. .

Clockwise—Bikram, Aarti, Kaushiki and Priya from *Mr Malhotra's Party* (2007-ongoing).