

University for the Creative Arts  
Research Project Portfolios

# Dissent and Desire

By Sunil Gupta



# Project Details

Name of Researcher:	Professor Sunil Gupta
Co-researcher:	Charan Singh
Name of Output:	Dissent and Desire
UCARO link/s:	<a href="https://research.uca.ac.uk/5562/">https://research.uca.ac.uk/5562/</a>
Output Type:	T – Other; multi-component output comprising artist’s book and exhibitions
Year and mode of dissemination:	<p>BOOK</p> <p>2016 – <i>Delhi: Communities of Belonging</i>. New York: The New Press.</p> <p>EXHIBITIONS</p> <p>2017 – <i>Communities of Belonging</i>, Sepia Eye, New York</p> <p>2017 – <i>Communities of Belonging</i>, Diffusion, Cardiff Photo Festival, Wales, UK</p> <p>2018 – <i>Dissent and Desire</i>, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, with accompanying catalogue</p> <p>2018 – <i>Kochi-Muziris Biennale</i>, Kochi, Kerala, India</p> <p>2020 – Brixton Tate Library, London</p>
Key Words:	India, Delhi, homosexuality, lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, hijra
Funding:	Gupta and Singh were commissioned to make the research and pictures for the book by the Arcus Foundation and Emerson, Wajdowicz Studios, New York, US - \$25,000

# Synopsis

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*Dissent and Desire* is a research output created by Professor Sunil Gupta in collaboration with Charan Singh. It comprises a series of photographs.

The output depicts the lives of seventeen queer women, men and trans people in India's capital city, Delhi. The researchers chose this location as they argue that the capital city is a magnet for internal migration and therefore represents a good sample of the nation. Moreover, as a major city it includes all classes of society which Gupta and Singh sought to depict.

The primary research was carried out during a particularly difficult period after India had decriminalised its colonial anti-sodomy laws and then overturned that decision, abandoning thousands of individuals who had taken the difficult step to 'come out'. Gupta and Singh devised the research together equally.

They then divided the shooting between themselves based on their own levels of class comfort with the subjects. They also interviewed the subjects on video, at times separately and at other times together.

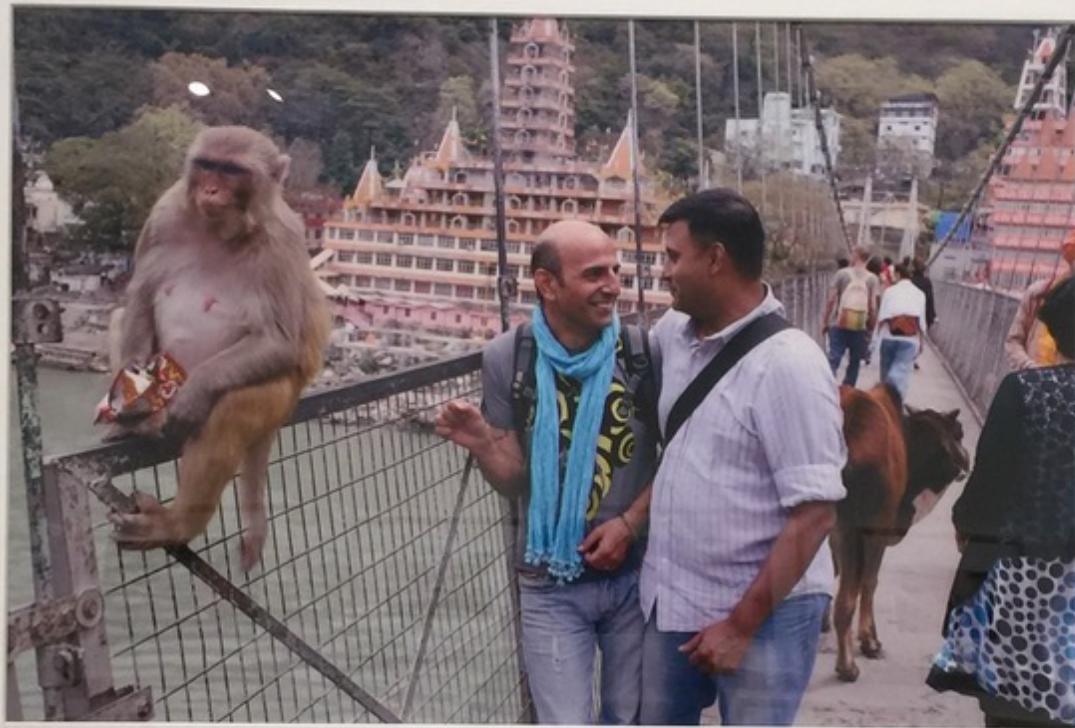
The research was first disseminated as a photo book published by the New Press. It was then disseminated through four international exhibitions, one of which was devoted entirely to Gupta and Singh's work in *Dissent and Desire*.

This portfolio outlines the project's underpinning research context, aims and methods and presents a PDF of the *Dissent and Desire* book. It also includes images of the exhibitions in addition to information on funding and visitor numbers. For additional context, a conversation between Gupta and Flora Dunster, published in 'Third Text', is also provided.

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*Sepia Eye, New York, 2017*





*Sepia Eye, New York, 2017*

# Context

*Dissent and Desire* comes out of a documentary photography tradition that has a long and sometimes troubling history of power imbalances and objectification of ‘othered’ subjects. This tradition has been much critiqued for its lack of ethics. The most influential early articulation of this critique was in *Photography/Politics One* (Spence and Dennett, 1979) and *Photography/Politics Two* (Spence et al, 1987), and since this intervention many photography researchers have sought to work within communities with which they are or have become familiar. Since Gupta and Singh are both queer men of Indian origin, and more specifically from Delhi, their research was able to challenge one of the fundamental criticisms of documentary practice, that it presents its subjects as ‘other’.

As homosexuality has been illegal and socially marginalised in India, Gupta and Singh were well aware of how the brief history of its representation had breached several ethical codes. In the colonial period researchers from the West had come to India to discover and represent the codes they found within on their own outsider terms, the ones that they had brought with them. More recently, however, queer theory

(also emanating from the West), has found a more established ground within Indian academia. Here too, issues of access remain as these academic discussions take place within and for a new English-speaking elite in higher education. So, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) has asked, ‘who speaks for the subaltern?’

To address these issues, Gupta and Singh were able to use a large set of personally-known social networks encompassing people who belonged to the elite as well as those who lived on the periphery, in Delhi’s slums. Their subjects were already familiar to them and not exotic.

## REFERENCES

- Spence, J. and T. Dennett (1979) *Photography/Politics One*. London: Photography Workshop
- Holland, P., J. Spence and S. Watney (1987) *Photography/Politics Two*. London: Routledge.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988) ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. London: Macmillan.

# Research Questions and Aims

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Research questions:

What is it like to be an LGBT person in India in 2015?

How can photography communicate lived experiences to people across the globe?

Does documentary photography still have validity as a practice?

How can a subaltern person have a voice in the world?

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Research aims:

To make a photobook about the situation of LGBT people in India

To reach a wide cross section of subjects across class and gender

To enable the subjects to have a voice as much as possible

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*Model used to plan installation  
at Contemporary Art Museum,  
Houston, 2018*



Suri Gupta  
Charan Singh

# Dissent and Desire

*Dissent and Desire* presents a curated series of crisp and evocative photographs by Suri Gupta and Charan Singh. The body of work constitutes an unprecedented mosaic of contemporary LGBTQ+ life in Delhi, India. Through twenty singular stories, we are invited into the daily routines, work, and homes of subjects from diverse backgrounds—including urban professionals and activists. By focusing on quiet and quotidian moments, Gupta and Singh allow us to see how the ordinary can indeed be daring.

Concentrating on Delhi, the complex city from which both artists hail, Gupta and Singh chronicle narratives of queer individuals who are surviving under and protesting against stigma and criminalized behavior. The intimate images reflect the photographers' celebrated capacity for capturing lives rarely seen. Gupta and Singh have created tender portraits of the men in which this act of subjects navigates life, work, and love in a country where antiquity has dating back to the British Empire were only recently struck down in 2009 and then reversed after the Indian Supreme Court reversed the ruling in 2018 in a sweeping vote of heterophobia. The Indian context is also notable for its ancient relationship to ideas of gender fluidity. Indeed, the Indian Supreme Court legally recognizes third gender, including eunuchs, transmen, transwomen, and transgender. Despite the progressive societal movement, prejudice led to class and language is a factor that continues to divide queer communities.

This body of work celebrates the complexity of queer lives in India, covering multiple points of view found in Delhi's LGBTQ+ communities. The multiplicity of representation problematizes one classification of those depicted, instead allowing a focus on the textures of their daily lives. The body of work is notable for the autonomy and respect it offers its photographic subjects. As first person narratives accompany the photographs, the stories of those represented are told in their voice using their words.

Both artists and creative partners, Gupta and Singh have notable individual art practices. This body of work represents their first formal collaboration. Charan Singh is SMU's India in residency at the Royal College of Art, London. Suri Gupta is SMU's India in residency at the Royal College of Art, London. Suri Gupta is SMU's India in residency at the Royal College of Art, London. Suri Gupta is SMU's India in residency at the Royal College of Art, London. Suri Gupta is SMU's India in residency at the Royal College of Art, London.

The exhibition is co-curated by CAMH Director BK Aring and Patricia Reardon, Assistant Curator and Exhibitions Manager.

#DissentandDesire  
#atCAMH

# Research Methods and Process

To create *Dissent and Desire*, Gupta and Singh made several research trips to Delhi, where they approached their social networks to find volunteers as subjects for the project. They identified seventeen individuals who were asked to sign consent forms.

Gupta and Singh then photographed the subjects, working separately and dividing the shooting between themselves based on their own levels of class comfort or familiarity with the subjects. They also interviewed the subjects on video, working singly or together. They devised a set of questions that probed their subjects' lives and how they had responded to the various changes in the law.

The primary documentary material was collated in Gupta and Singh's studio in London. The images were sent to the design studio in New York for editing into a selection for the book. The video provided text material for the book; Gupta

and Singh wanted the text to be direct quotes, the voices of their subjects.

The exhibitions were selected from their primary database of images, so that some images were included in the exhibitions that were not published in the book. Quotes from the interviews were displayed on the walls, and the exhibition also included a video in which the audience could hear the subjects speaking about themselves. Gupta and Singh discovered in Houston that making a separate cinematic projection room gave the video a great deal more weight and it was viewed more as a result.

Gupta and Singh shared the material with their subjects as it evolved. They continue to share news and images about the exhibition on tour with their subjects, some of whom saw the work when it was exhibited in India.

# Research Insights and Contribution

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## Research insights:

Through this research, Gupta and Singh discovered that working in the documentary tradition was still possible as long as researchers recognised its limitations.

However, they also discovered that no matter how much the researchers wished to give the subaltern subject a voice, in their interview this voice could still be entangled if only because of the need for translation from Hindi to English.

Similarly, they found that standard academic ethics processes involving consent forms were a problem amongst subaltern subjects because of literacy barriers and also because in such fraught situations 'real' identities are often suppressed.

Moreover, Gupta and Singh made the conceptual discovery that in India it was not possible for subjects to self-identify as queer until they had found a community to which they could belong.



I had no need to look for clues on homosexuality partly because I had them studying Sanskrit and Urdu. For me, finding queer stuff was just part of my reading. There was no sense that I was hidden from history.

—Geeta

Yes, the 2009 judgment definitely made a difference. It was like a window of possibility had opened to a life without the constant anxiety of forced separation.

—Kath



I'm happy to be grey and gone. I don't  
mind that I've ended up alone. I'm single  
but not lonely.

— Salma

# Research Dissemination and Recognition

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## Dissemination:

### AUDIENCES

Contemporary Art Museum in Houston: the work was shown as a major 'solo' show of Singh and Gupta's work, coinciding with the bi-annual Fotofest photography festival, which attracts 350,000 plus visitors.

Kochi-Muziris Biennale: 500,000 visitors

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## Follow-on activities:

### TALKS

Gupta and Singh have both been invited to speak at various venues including Autograph-ABP, Royal College of Art and Queen Mary's University of London. Gupta has been invited to talk about the research at the following conferences:

Society for Photographic Education, National Conference, New Orleans, LA, US: March 12-15, 2015

College Arts Association, Annual Conference, New York, NY US: February 15-18, 2017

The research is discussed in the paper 'Do You Have Place? A Conversation with Sunil Gupta' by Flora Dunster in the journal *Third Text*, January 2021 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2020.1860391>) (appended to this portfolio).

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## Influence of research:

### PRESS

'The fight for LGBTQ rights in Delhi – in pictures', *The Guardian*, 25 Nov 2016

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2016/nov/25/fight-for-lgbtq-rights-delhi-india-in-pictures>

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# Research Dissemination and Recognition

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## Influence of research:

### PRESS (cont.)

Amy Ashenden, 'This gay Indian couple have made a photo book of Delhi's LGBT community after the recriminalisation of homosexuality', *The Evening Standard*, 8 December 2016  
<http://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/london-life/this-gay-indian-couple-have-made-a-photo-book-of-delhi-s-lgbt-community-after-the-recriminalisation-a3415916.html>

Chapal Mehra, 'Queer love in Delhi: A book of photographs explores desire and longing in the Capital', *Scroll.in*, 20 December 2016  
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Priscilla Frank, 'Photographs Capture The Intimate, Ordinary Moments Of Queer Life In India', *Huffpost*, 29 March 2017  
[http://m.huffpost.com/us/entry/us\\_58d97297e4b018c4606a2889](http://m.huffpost.com/us/entry/us_58d97297e4b018c4606a2889)

Sonia Mariam Thomas, 'This Beautiful Photo Series Takes A Glimpse At The Lives Of The LGBTQ Community In Delhi', *Buzzfeed*, 6 April 2017  
[https://www.buzzfeed.com/soniathomas/this-beautiful-photo-series-takes-a-glimpse-at-the-lives-of?utm\\_term=.woBQQa2Pp7#.hxGzzjry6R](https://www.buzzfeed.com/soniathomas/this-beautiful-photo-series-takes-a-glimpse-at-the-lives-of?utm_term=.woBQQa2Pp7#.hxGzzjry6R)

The anti-sodomy law was revisited and repealed in India, and Gupta and Singh believe their work was part of the groundswell of opinion for change.

A CITY BEARS MANY

STORIES, EVEN THE ONES

WE DONT WANT TO HEAR



*Kochi-Muziris Bienalle, Kochi, India,  
2018*



*Kochi-Muziris Bienalle, Kochi, India,  
2018*



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*FRONT COVER IMAGE*

*Lily*

*People would say that I am soliciting if I just walk on the street. The police are not supportive when we want to file a complaint. Instead they humiliate us and even force us to have sex. So how can we have the courage to fight?*

*BACK COVER IMAGE*

*Rituparna*

*My mother called up and said she saw something on the TV and “the whole colony is talking about it.” She asked if I was one of them and I said yes. She hung up then and didn’t call for a long time.*

