

# SUNIL GUP TA

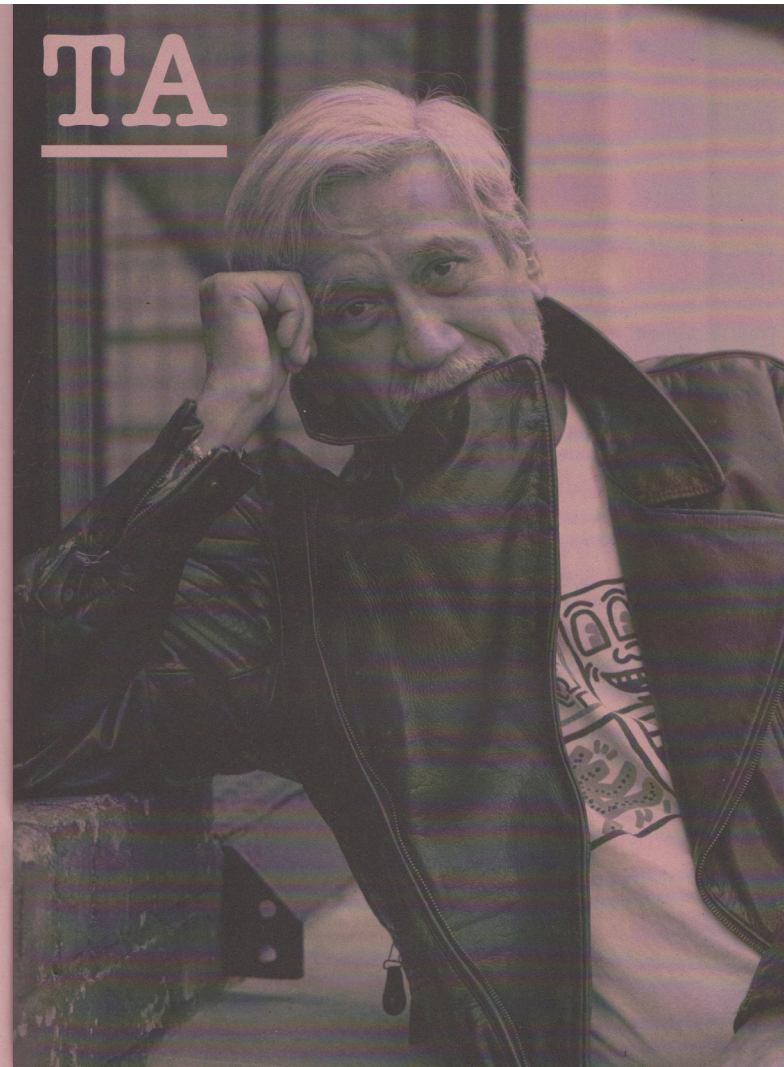
## gives

# A FUCK

LONDON — For over five decades, Sunil Gupta has been cruising with his camera, making iconic photographs that evade any single stylistic category; images that explore race, migration, AIDS and gay public life through his roots in activism. A touching and powerful sense of humanity and humility define Sunil's work — a result of his openness, frankness, and a curiosity afforded by his peripatetic lifestyle. The 68-year-old photographer and artist lives in London. Born in Delhi, he has lived in Montreal and New York, and finally settled in the UK, where he studied at the Royal College of Art via an original degree in Business. We spoke at his south London home and studio where he lives with his husbandji, Charan Singh, who is also an artist, researcher, and activist.

- Interview by Prem Sahib
- Photography by Kuba Ryniewicz

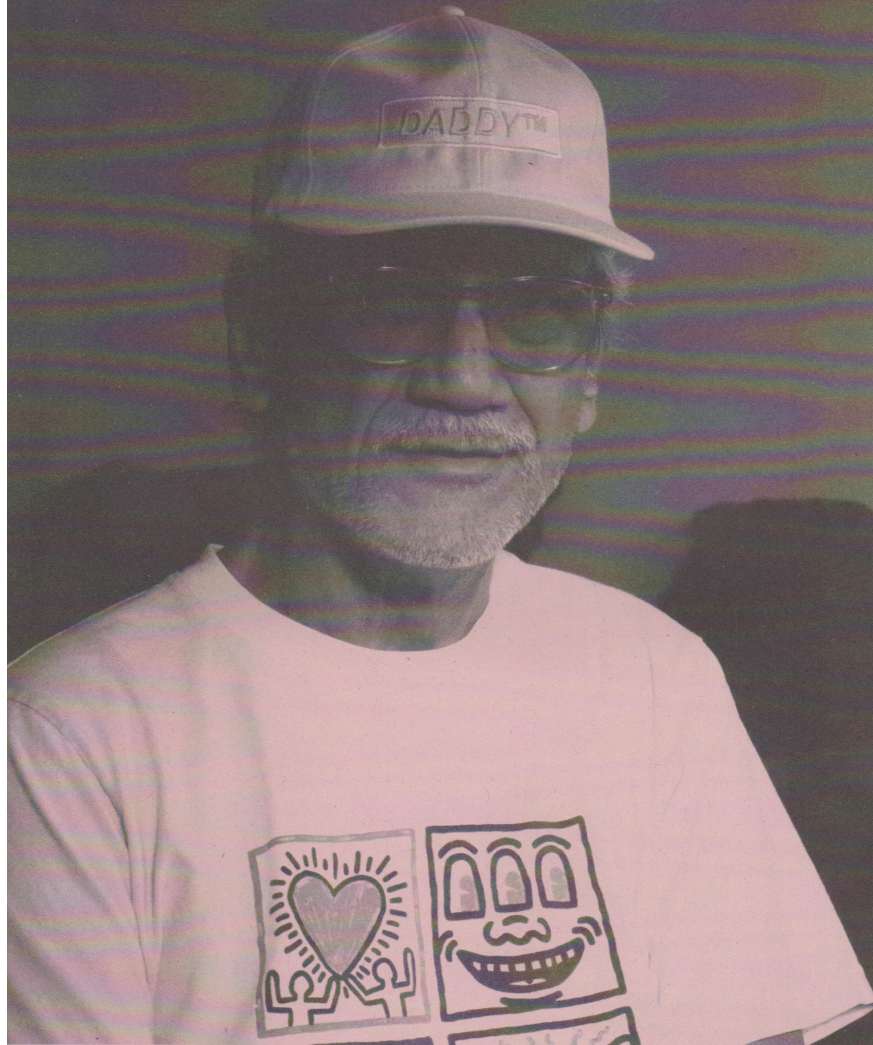
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SUNIL

Sunil keeps up an entertaining Instagram account, updating his leagues of followers every day.

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**Prem: In a past interview, I heard you describe yourself as “having a moment.” What do you mean?**

Sunil: Because of this “moment,” my work is getting a much wider reception, but back in the 80s, I only had a very limited, immediate, specialty audience. It was generally Black or Asian people. If I was in a gay group show, then there would be a lot more people coming – because a lot more gay white men attended. (laughs)

**How do you feel about all the attention?**

I’m nervous it’s gonna end any minute.

**Really?**

In the 90s, when I was doing a lot of curating work, I met an artist who was an early star with Saatchi. At 30, she was selling at incredibly high prices, but by 35, when I met her again, they’d just dropped her. It was like the stock market – it nosedived! I realized then just how fickle the commercial art world is.

**But it seems like you’ve managed to avoid the nosedive for most of your career?**

I avoided it. Because of my erratic lifestyle, Charan and I had a lot of debt. We spent all of our money getting degrees, which we’re still paying off. I’ll feel insecure until we’ve paid off this big debt. We’re just hanging on with this nightmare. You know, where we’re sitting now, it’s two grand a month. It’s a private rental.

**It’s amazing though, this space. This is both your studio and living space?**

Yeah. I do believe it was a gamble and it’s paid off. It made the “moment” happen. We were in a really tiny one-bed flat and all of this stuff was scattered in various storage spaces and at friends’ houses. I had very vague memories of where something might be. This apartment brought everything together. And then from the archives, which have become the source of a lot of “this moment,” starting with ‘Christopher Street’, which came out of these archives, which became a book. The book really took off and sold out and got nominated for things and sort of became really prominent.

**Your retrospective in London last summer took place at the Photographers’ Gallery, where, decades prior, you once had a show. What was the difference in reception?**

Oh vast. Decades prior, there was zero reception. It was the ‘Exiles’ work about gay men in Delhi and the gallery commissioned it

to be part of a show about body politics. There was no word said about it. Color pictures of gay men in Delhi didn’t strike a chord with anyone. It also had Jo Spence and...who’s that guy who does body parts? What’s his name? Black-and-white pictures of body parts. Hairy belly and toes...

**I don’t know. I should know!**

My memory is terrible.

**Were you ever tempted to pop into SweatBox, the sauna opposite the gallery, after a hard day’s install? (both laugh)**  
**Seriously though, I wanted to ask you about your relationship to spaces like sex clubs and saunas, because they appear in some of your works. Like your ‘Sun City’ series, which is set in a sauna in Paris, or your series ‘From Here to Eternity’ where you poignantly shot The Holst, Fist and Pleasuredrome in the daylight and from the outside.**

Well, I have a long history of being inside them. In fact, when I was in college, in Montreal, a downtown sauna opened. I worked in a gay bar, and after it closed, I’d work at the sauna because it was open 24 hours. My job was to change the towels and the KY. Basically, I saw a lot of knees – people walked around in white towels. I’d be sitting most of the time and I just saw this parade of knees. Basically, I decided that knees are the least attractive part of a body! (both laugh) And it put me off sex.

**Were you making work back then?**

I was trying to make work. Kind of all self-taught. I had an outlet because I belonged to the university’s gay society or whatever. We did the usual things: we had a telephone helpline, we had gay dances to raise money for the helpline, and we were trying to figure out ways to break into the city, so we made this tabloid-like paper called ‘The Gayzette’. It was a print paper, which was quite substantial, about 15-20 pages; a lot of text about gay liberation and “where we’re going” and “where we’ve come from” and blah blah blah. I took the pictures.

**You were involved in the publication while you had your job at the sauna?**

Yes, and one day the sauna became news!

**What happened?**

It had caught fire and people died inside.

**No way.**

It didn’t have properly signposted exits.

I think, to this day, some of the bodies have never been identified.

SAUNA

**That's so shocking.**

And then, of course, it all came out that these bars and saunas were owned by the mafia. This whole underworld thing went on, which you didn't really see obviously on the surface. The people I dealt with didn't strike me as being mobsters!

**That's really interesting! The images you took in London were quite different in tone, like your series 'From Here to Eternity'.**

I wanted the photos to have this ambiguity. But this time, it was about AIDS. It was 1999, I was positive, and I used to go to these places, like many people around me in south London. Gradually, things changed in a very unremarkable way. You remember in the 80s, there was a huge outcry about gay men and AIDS. Gays were all monsters, kidnapping our children and blah blah blah. We never had gay spaces in the first place, but ours started to multiply quietly. I used to go to a place called Substation South, which was underneath my bank in Brixton. At midnight, when everyone was properly pissed, people eventually started to have sex. It just became normalized. Its own kind of ritual developed. It became less about cruising one-on-one and more about getting involved in some kind of group activity. I didn't always get involved. Sometimes, I'd just be happy to have my beer next to five guys having sex. Some nights were more serious though, and you'd have to leave your clothes at the door and put all your stuff in those black plastic bags.

**Hmm, now that sounds familiar...**

You'd just wear boots and thick socks. You could stuff your cigarettes in them. Sometimes, on a summer night, I'd just walk home in my underwear when I couldn't be bothered to put my clothes back on.

**Going back to the London images, there's a sense of you being personally shut out.**

When HIV happened to me, I gradually withdrew, because the whole thing of disclosure happened. I met this guy who edited POS Magazine in New York and he would come over, and we went to The Hoist. We were both positive. There was a mezzanine on top of the club and someone was on their knees offering blowjobs, so we joined the queue. When we got to the guy, we disclosed we were HIV positive. When we told him, he wouldn't give us a blowjob.

**Really?**

We argued that he hadn't asked any of the other guys and they hadn't disclosed. He said, 'Well, but I can tell.' This led me to slowly withdraw. Which I guess was a common response to being positive in those days. I became a buddy to somebody else who had an even more extreme version of this withdrawal. He wouldn't leave his house. By the time I took the pictures, yeah, these places became ambivalent.

## **"My job was to change the towels and the KY"**

**What was it like being a South Asian person navigating these spaces? I'm guessing these London venues were predominately white, as they are now.**

It was too dark, mostly. At first, it never occurred to me. Because I had been going since I was in college. But they were pretty white then and they still are. That part was normal, but in the clubs then, it was also quite dimly lit. I remember having sex with all kinds of people I didn't really fancy or think about very much. One thing I didn't fancy was being fucked by people I couldn't see. I would stand with my back against a wall so no one would get me.

**Did you have a gay South Asian community at that time?**

There was this guy called Zaahid, who was very local, meaning he was from Southall, but he'd moved into a commune, like a squat in east London. I found a fellow soulmate – somebody who left his Indian family to be gay. Also, he was Black. We were both Black-identified then.

**Black was more of a political identity and coalition between POC at the time?**

There was this conversation about our Asian boys, you know, the ones who aren't gonna come to a Gay Black Group or to a bar. They needed something just for them. So, we found a space at London Friend on Caledonian Road. We organized a Sunday afternoon tea and samosas for the Asian boys. We worked out that 4-6pm on a

Sunday was the only time they could escape their families for a bit before dinner. They felt very stuck not being able to come out otherwise, and I thought, 'Where else would they go?' The gay scene was so very white and more than just implicitly racist.

**That's what I was trying to get at...**

Why would they leave a joint family system where they were being cared for, and step out into this world where nobody really wanted them in the first place? I remember doing activities like taking groups of them into West End gay bars, which was very interesting because we'd walk into a venue and people would take a step back. It was like Moses parting the sea. This gap would open up just because a large group of six or seven Asian guys suddenly walked in.

**It was obviously hostile back then. Do you think much has changed?**

I hope a lot has changed. The other thing I noticed when you went to the bar with this group, invariably they'd be other Asians you'd spot, single ones. I used to go up to them. I was very aggressive. Socially, I would just go up to people.

**Socially aggressive. I like that. That's a good thing, I think.**

I think I learned this in America. You just have to get what you want, why waste time? I used to walk up to those gays and say, you know, something silly like, 'Where are you from?' Trying to get them to join our group. I was met with a lot of resistance. Somebody there said, 'I'm from Cardiff and you can fuck off.' This happened to me a lot.

**So, they didn't like you drawing attention to them?**

I think they were trying to pass for something else. Latino or something and didn't want to be...

**By association, you were dragging them into...**

Into this unattractive category that nobody wanted to fuck.

**There's still a real dominance of the white, gay, male experience in art... Were these sorts of experiences feeding back into your work? Do you think art plays a role in desirability politics, for instance?**

I was very self-conscious at that time because gay media went through a change. We suddenly got color freebies that had centerfolds. I've yet to see a South Asian body as a centerfold. If there ever was one,

then I missed it. You'd see Black ones, maybe Chinese ones, but you never saw an Indian one, or I didn't. The big thing that happened in the 80s was Robert Mapplethorpe. In the US, there was this whole business with the censoring of his show and some of us felt compelled to support him, but personally, my cohort of overeducated, gay, art-making, photo theory-type people really didn't think our penises were a problem. The problem was racism, I had immigration problems, many, much bigger things. So, I really wasn't interested in penis pictures.

**The reaction was also to him objectifying Black bodies as a white male artist.**

Yeah. But we all bought the book... (both laugh) When I was younger, I didn't really do pictures of naked people. It really started when I was in Delhi, in my fifties. I got a reputation for inviting people over to take their clothes off for pictures. But I was really feeling the lack of it, you know?

**The lack of what?**

Bodies.

**South Asian people with their clothes off?**

Yeah. After AIDS, there was this terrible mafia of hairless gym bodies. You know, the porn became so boring. You'd go to dance clubs and there was like 2000 guys who all looked the same. Which I think was a reaction to AIDS, to project how healthy they were by showing off perfect bodies. I liked my Indian body and it began to appear in some of my pictures like the 'Pre-Raphaelites' series. They were slightly shapeless and they'd be very hairy sometimes. Not always. I picked a guy like that for my 'Sun City' photos, coming back to the sauna pictures. Not particularly good looking, short, slightly dumpy and very hairy, incredibly hairy. Often Indians say to me, 'He's so not sexy... Why did you pick this guy?' And I say, 'Because he signifies everything that's against the prevailing norm.'

**How is Western gay culture looked upon from India?**

Oh, I think it's seen as aspirational.

**What is the queer scene like in Delhi?**

It's huge – I think because of the homo-social nature of India, which hasn't changed. Men in India get a couple of hours between work and dinner when they're on their way home. A lot of casual sex can happen then. By the way, I haven't studied any of this; this is just from what I hear. The other thing is,

EXTREME

OVEREDUCATED

in India they didn't have "LGBT" – they missed that. They didn't have gay liberation, they didn't have gay bars, so they went straight to the phones.

**Straight to the phones?**

Straight to the phones. Laptops were too expensive. The phones took India by storm, and you can buy a Chinese-made phone for next to nothing. I saw a figure once, and it's staggering. You know, India is very populated and this was like 10 years ago, so it must be more now, but it was something like 850 million people in India have a phone.

**Wow.**

Can you imagine? 800 million people on Tinder and Grindr – hooking up like crazy!

**But where are they hooking up?**

Oh, behind a bush, or on a bus. There are no bars. There never were, so they don't miss them! I could get on a bus in Delhi and I would be pretty certain there'd be somebody standing next to me willing to have sex.

**So, sex in transit is really big?!**

Yeah. The other thing that's happened, because of the internet and streaming, blah blah blah, is that the time it takes for culture shifts to take place is like zero. The minute it's happening here, it's happened there too. So, with gay sex in India, of course, chem sex is there, just like here, but there, it's bigger. There are more people, and the chems are cheaper, and easier to get. My informant, who was say 35 to 40 years old, an active gay man on the Grindr scene now, when he goes on what he thinks is a sex date, four or five people are already there when he arrives. It's almost never 1-on-1 anymore. People are becoming lonely for human company. That's the only way they can connect – via the screen – because there are no bars. I just used to go to Substation and stand next to other gay people and feel like, 'Oh, I'm part of this community.'

**Yeah. Just going a little bit back to the cruising conversation we were having, is cruising still part of your methodology?**

Yes. I recently resurrected a set of pictures from the archives that are from one of my regular cruising walks. Actually, a route I used to take as a kid.

**Is this the 'Cruising the 60s' series that you showed at Art Basel HK last year?**

Yes. I grew up in Delhi, but I left in 1969 at the age of 15 and then went back in 1980 or '83... I found my old house, which was still

intact. The neighborhood was pretty intact too. I retraced my steps. We lived next to a huge Mughal Tomb – Humayun's Tomb actually – which is the same scale as the Taj Mahal. It had this huge garden and walls around it. These tombs were like fortresses really. Outside of the tomb, on the side that faced the river, was a kind of a no man's land. One never knows how to describe it in the West, but India is full of open ground, which is used a lot for cruising purposes. In 1980, as an adult with a camera...



Ding dong!

**You went back?**

I walked from the same front gates and retraced my path, which led to the outer corner of the tomb. The walls of the tomb are very thick and have passageways inside them. I mean, the whole thing is ideal for cruising and sex! (both laugh)

**Is a monument the strangest place you've ever had sex?**

It was fabulous... I've never had such a good place since.

**Literally, you had sex inside a national symbol?**

Yeah. In Mughal monuments, what you see at the public level are these elaborate marble graves, but directly below in the ground, there are these dark and dirty passages.

When I was growing up, this tomb was completely unprotected. The space is inhabited, obviously, by bats. I've come to associate the smell of bat shit with sex.

**What does bat shit smell like?**

Indescribable. I'll have to take you there...

**You've been involved in so much activism and activist movements. What conversations are you having with younger generations today?**

One of the main things is the naming. I say, 'I'm queer.' But I feel ambivalent about it. I find the categories very broad and altogether too friendly. I like being a criminalist.

**Is that gay identity these days? Criminal?**

Yeah, of course. Super promiscuous and anti-family. And suddenly now everyone is queer and having surrogate babies. Suddenly, it's mister and mister. The other thing is, I'm cisgendered. There are labels now that I didn't have before. I'm putting he/him in my emails. That's what I'm getting from the younger generations, which makes sense to them. Those are some of the conversations, but I haven't given up "gay" altogether.

**What have you been working on recently?**

I have a current project, new work – not from the archives. I'm doing something with The Imperial Health Trust, through Studio Voltaire. I've chosen to work with the HIV outpatient department at St Mary's, and then at Charing Cross hospital, in the department for gender reassignment. I'm collecting real-life stories. I'm planning to re-write them as fiction, or as a composite, taking events from different people's life stories. And then shooting a series of stills, like from a movie.

**What led you to working with the trans community on this project?**

I feel like trans is what gay used to be like, with all the hostility directed towards it.

**Do you think the gay community are doing enough for the trans community?**

Probably not. No. So many feminists in my age group are anti, which I find really hard. I'm not sure how this will be received because you know, I'm not trans, should I even be doing this? But I feel like I have to say something.

**Do you think you'll be staying in London then? Does this project have you grounded?**

Yes, I think so. We always thought we would get our degrees and leave, but going back to India is not an option. The political environment is so much worse than here.

I'm certainly wedded to my treatment. I really need to think long term, because I'm now much older and because COVID has made it even more complicated. You can't suddenly fly to a hospital easily in a foreign country. We are certainly based here. Ideally, we're trying to make some kind of operating base in India. The thing I like about India is teaching there. Charan and I both agree that we'd rather teach in India. I need to teach other Indians. Whenever I've taught in India, I've felt more committed to the larger purpose of it. When I teach here, I don't have any Indian students.

**Are there still not many Indian people in art education?**

No. Back in the 80s when I was doing a lot of stuff with the Arts Council, getting grants and stuff, they had this policy called 'The Glory of the Garden', the garden being England. Then I became very aware, and that's never left me, that everything you do here, every show you make, is for the glory of England. I'm not sure that we want to be constantly making stuff for England. The best thing about living in India was that I became Indian and made stuff in India for other Indians and taught classes with other Indians, who were very eager to learn. Having said all that, I've just become British! (both laugh) Let's have another cup of tea.



**Indira's Vision**

Why do you go on about changing the law.  
I don't want to be a martyr.  
I'm happy the way things are.



**Jangpura**

I am tired of being alone with no  
prospect of meeting anyone I like. I'm  
nauseated by the party and park scene.

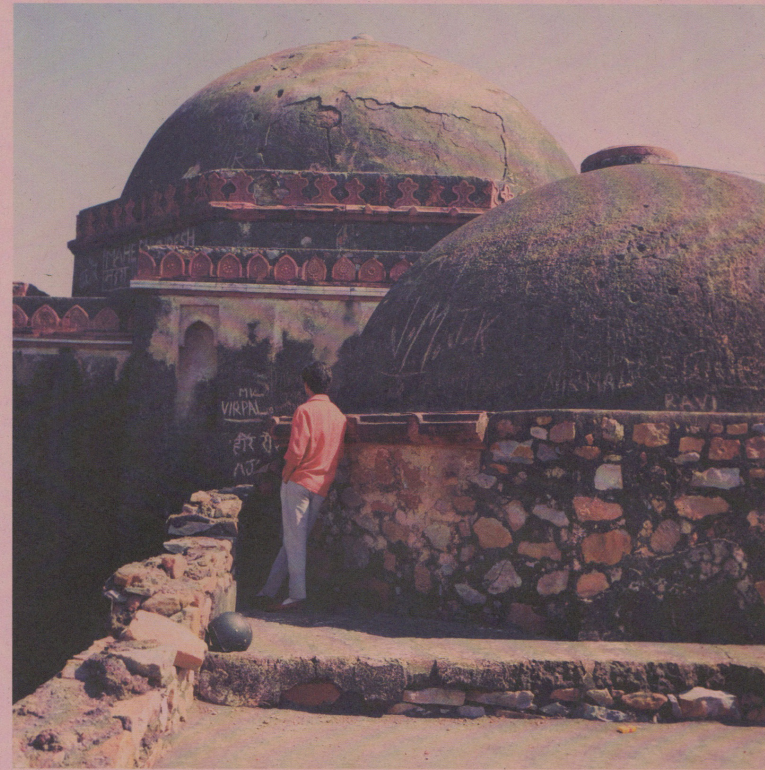
From the series 'Exiles', 1986/87.  
Images courtesy the artist and Hales Gallery, Stephen Bulger Gallery and Vadehra Art Gallery.  
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**India Gate**

Even if you have a lover you should get married  
and have children. Who would look after you in  
old age?



**Hauz Khas.**

It must be marvellous for you in the West  
with your bars, clubs, gay liberation  
and all that.