

GALLERY

SUNIL GUPTA

by SRINIDHI BALAKRISHNAN

Bikram stands tall, his hands placed loosely on his hips and eyes fixed directly on us. His expression is serious, but the colourful stripes of his jaunty shirt and the beaded necklace that adorns his neck betray a playfulness. "He's a young gay man and what he loves to do is to show himself off," says photographer Sunil Gupta.

The photograph is part of the series *Mr Malhotra's Party*, currently on display alongside Gupta's other major works at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge. Gupta began to assemble the series in the mid to late noughties upon his return to his birthplace, New Delhi. Having spent decades overseas, in the UK, US and Canada, he was struck by the country he had come back to. India bore the sheen of economic liberalisation, and its youth – particularly those who led queer, urban lives – were uniquely hopeful about what was to come. "I found a generation that doesn't want to be invisible, that wants to be out and proud and change the law and do everything now," says Gupta.

He met Bikram through a local queer activist group run by students from the famously radical Jawaharlal Nehru University, for whom he would organise photography workshops. The group was active in campaigning against Section 377 of the Indian penal code, which effectively criminalised homosexuality. (The law was repealed in 2009, reinstated in 2013 and struck down once again in 2018.)

Bikram himself was not a student, but a "city boy". "He was just a very snappy dresser and quite good-looking, so we liked him," Gupta says.

Bikram's confident stance makes for a stark contrast to Gupta's series *Exiles*, which visualised gay life in 1980s Delhi. In those photographs, anonymous men are depicted in front of historic monuments, their backs deliberately turned toward the camera. With Bikram and others, Gupta sought juxtaposition with his early work. "Here, we're in these vernacular locations," he says. "I wanted to make a point that queer people don't exist in some other place – they're in the fabric of society."

Gupta captures Bikram in a bustling public park, which is near the India Gate war memorial and the office where Bikram worked. It made for the perfect setting: Gupta revels in the apparent contradiction between Bikram and the "typical Indian family" to the left. **FT**

.....
"Sunil Gupta: Life with a Camera, 1970 – Now" is at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, until January 31. "I call you my love", published by Trolley Books, and "Christopher Street, 1976", published by Stanley/Barker, are out now

'BIKRAM' BY SUNIL GUPTA, 2009



