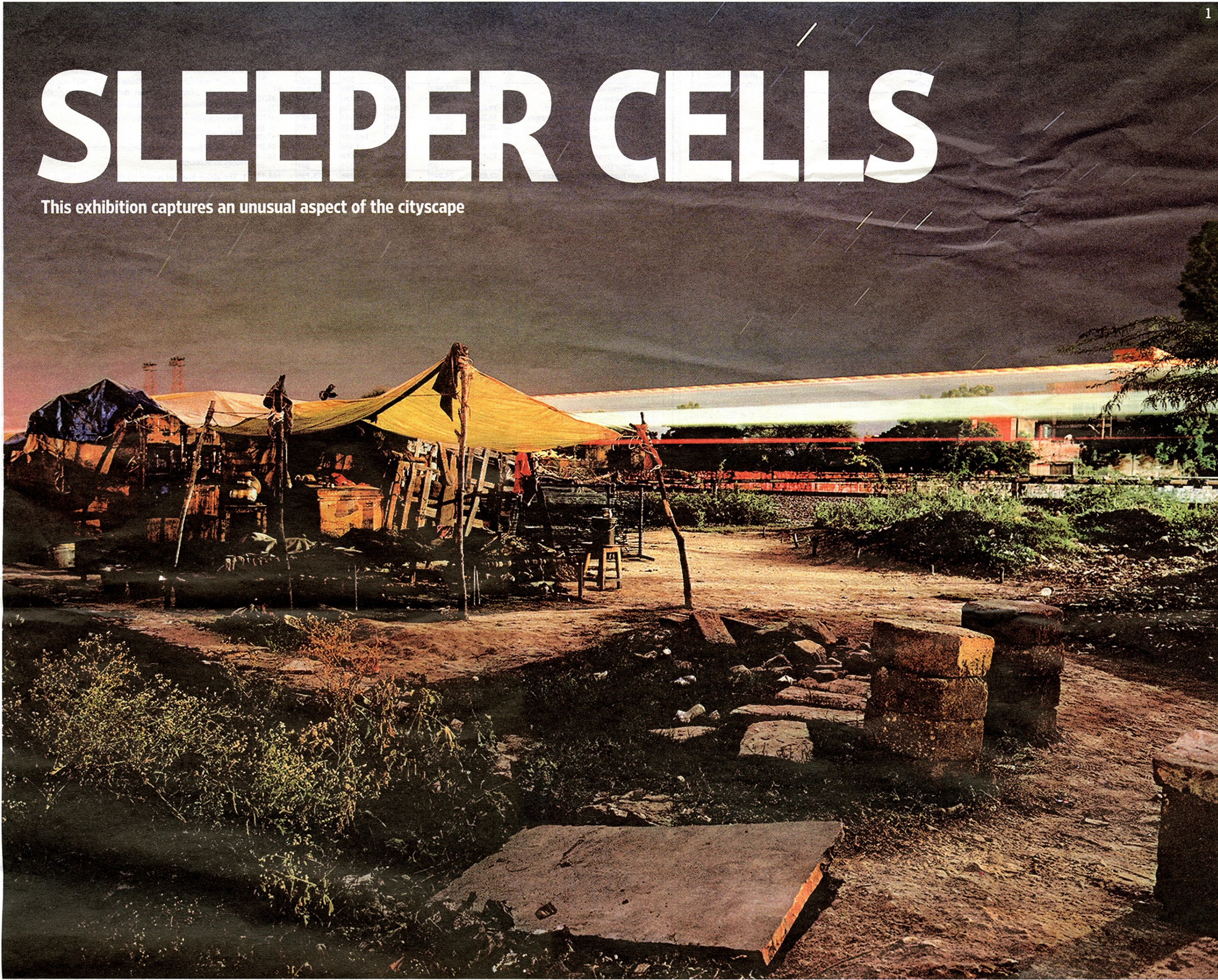


SLEEPER CELLS

This exhibition captures an unusual aspect of the cityscape



By POOJA CHATURVEDI
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Delhi-based photographer Dhruv Malhotra, 27, says he is a chronic insomniac and prefers to start his work at midnight. The "shroud of ambiguity that hangs with the darkness" fascinates him, he says.

Sleepers, his appropriately named photography documentation, reveals the night through pictures of people sleeping. The 41 images now on show in the Capital give an insight into the dynamics of the urban landscape and city life.

Malhotra, who undertook the project from 2007-10, paying for it himself, travelled through Delhi, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Goa, West Bengal, Haryana and Karnataka for the pictures.

"The darkness has always held a fascination for me," says Malhotra. "I wanted to make images of people sleeping out in the open, in the context of their environment and the built-up urban landscape"—rather than just close-ups.

Sleepers deals with the surreal-

ism of night life, undisturbed by the passage of time or strands of noise. In one frame, someone lies under a starry night; in another, a person asleep is unperturbed even by the sound of a passing train. "These pictures show the anonymity of these people and their public spaces; it highlights how these people are seen, and yet unseen," says Malhotra.

Sleepers grew out of Malhotra's earlier work, *Noida Soliloquy*, which focused on the streets and parks of Noida, near Delhi, and was exhibited in 2010. The *Noida Soliloquy* project was marked largely by the absence of people, while *Sleepers* is defined by their very presence.

"While wandering at night, I would always come upon people sleeping on the streets, in parks, in warehouses, on the pavements, below Metro constructions. It was interesting to document how people occupy open spaces," says Malhotra, who took up photography in 2006.

For him, people sleeping in the open spaces were a part of the public domain, so he did not think

there was anything wrong in photographing them, generally without their permission.

The project was fraught with its own challenges. He was stopped and questioned, and often ended up having arguments with policemen and passers-by who saw him with his big cameras shooting people asleep in the dead of night.

But Malhotra says he learnt how to deal with this. "Cops in different cities have different attitudes. The most difficult ones were in Mumbai, while the most helpful ones were in Goa."

Malhotra also carries a pepper spray for protection. "Once I was harassed by three drunk men while photographing, but as they tried to pull me into a car, I sprayed them. While they lay on the floor, I completed my 8-minute exposure shot and then ran," he recalls. For Malhotra, incidents like these are a part of urban culture and in some ways, define our cities at night.

Experimenting with light was another aspect that Malhotra enjoyed. To make the pictures appear somewhat surreal, he had long exposures—ranging from 8 minutes to 2

hours. "Many of the people in my images are guards, construction labourers or migrant workers who used to sleep pretty late and were mostly undisturbed by my presence. And because I didn't use any other secondary lights, I used to wander around them to find the ideal light for my photograph and of course, long exposures were the key," he says.

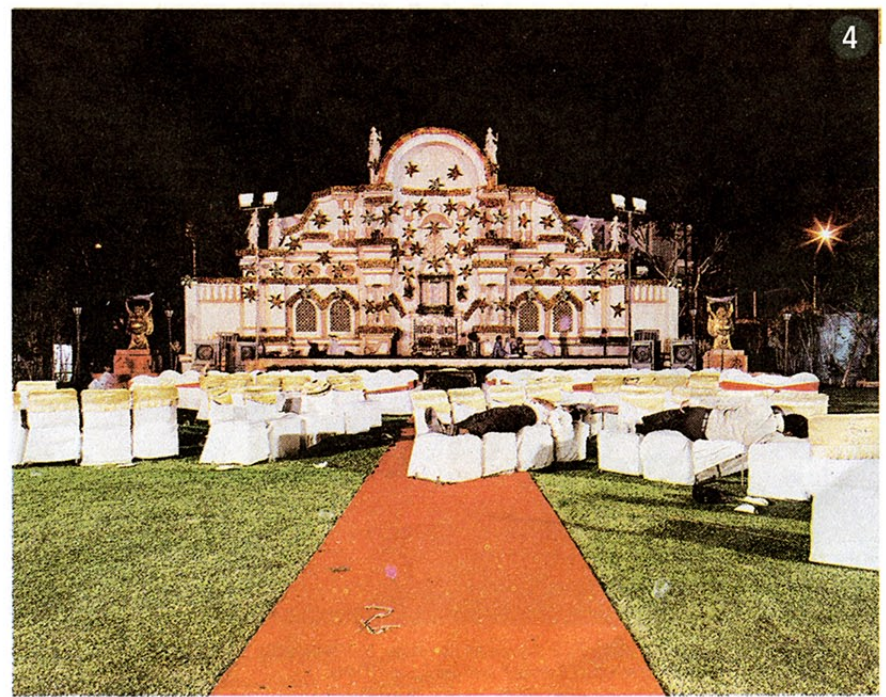
He was not very keen on captioning the images, since he felt it takes away from the essence of the photographs—the urban landscape.

Sleepers is on till 2 March, 11am-7pm (closed Sundays, Mondays and national holidays), at Photoink, MGF Hyundai Building, Ground floor, 1, Jhandewalan, Faiz Road, New Delhi (28755940/41/42).

Photographs by
Dhruv Malhotra

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Tender is the night:

1. The sound of a passing train does little to disturb those asleep in this photograph, which captures their surroundings as much as their fatigue.
2. The street light gives a fiery glow to the trees, but this man sleeps blissfully under a mosquito net.
3. A construction worker, wrapped up in a blanket, sleeps on his makeshift bed of two chairs.
4. Against the backdrop of this wedding venue, some workers settle in for the night, stretching out on chairs.
5. These rickshaws double up as beds at night.
6. In this shot, one man continues to sleep, while another has woken up and is staring at the camera.