

SLUMBER PARTY

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY DHRUV MALHOTRA / PHOTOINK

An insomniac photographer has made a career out of clicking people sleeping on India's pavements, parks and other public places

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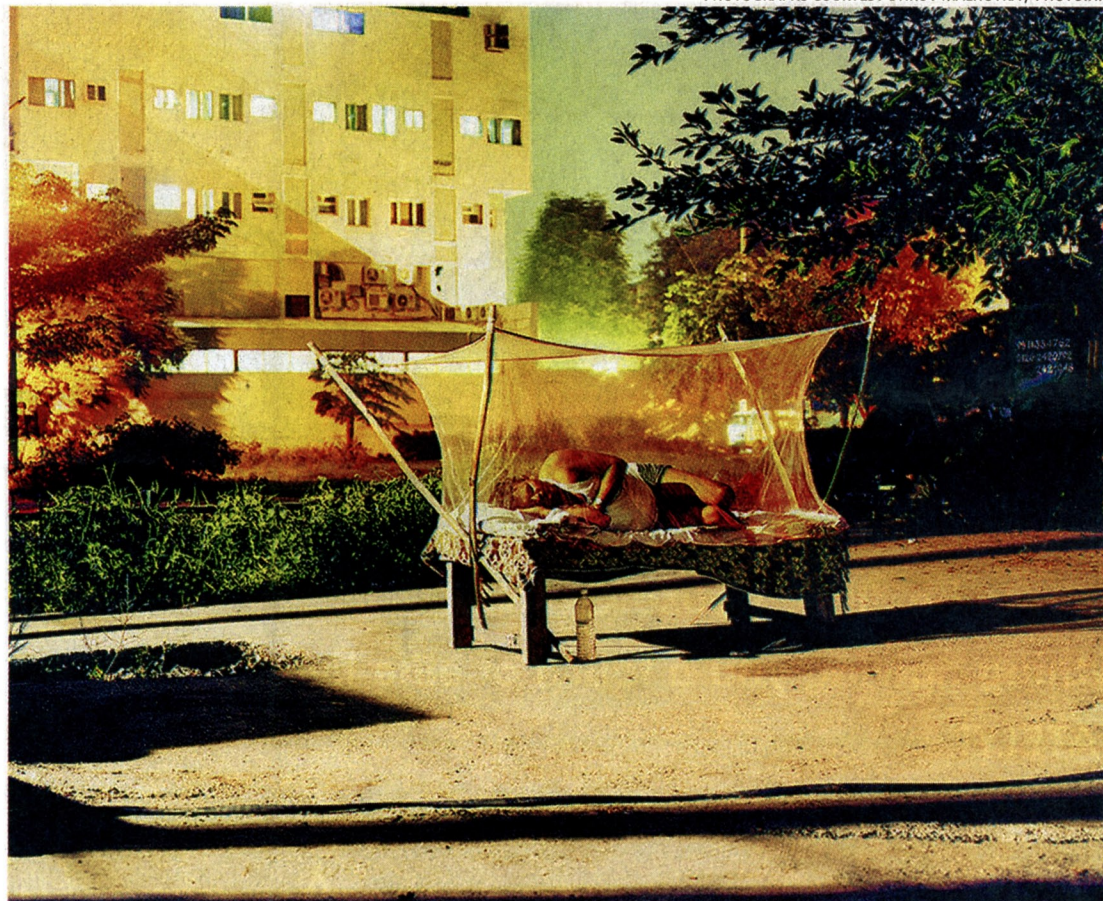
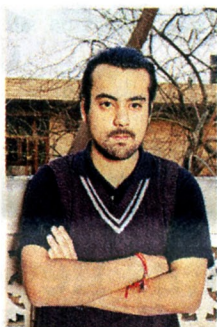
For an insight into how an insomniac looks at the world, see Dhruv Malhotra's photos. The 27-year-old is a self-confessed insomniac who sleeps not more than 3-4 hours on a normal day. There have been times when he has gone without sleep for days at a stretch — at the end of which, he says, he has come out as a wreck.

In *Sleepers*, his latest exhibition, he has gone around India documenting people in slumber. The photos have been taken in urban centres — Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Bangalore, Udupi and Jaipur. They show people sleeping on pavements, on the ground, beside a railway track, on taxis, under flyovers, on park benches. One photograph, for instance, shows a man sleeping on a table after some celebration. He is framed against the backdrop of a pandal entrance. Another shows a man sleeping in an open shack by the sea, his face covered with a shroud to shield him from the rising sun. All the photographs are marked by a day-like brightness that perhaps comes from the way an insomniac perceives the night.

Why does Malhotra photograph sleeping men? By photographing other people in slumber, is he trying to fulfill his own need for rest? No, he says, the idea grew naturally when he was working on a previous project, *Noida Soliloquy*, where he went around photographing the suburb at night.

Malhotra has always been a nocturnal animal. "Even as a child, I would go to sleep late and wake up early. When I grew up and went to college in Mumbai, it became possible to go out at night and explore the city," he says. Photography happened when he took a few pictures with a digital camera while driving around Mumbai with a friend at night. He realised that the photographs held promise, and the following year picked up a film SLR and set out on his journey as a lensman.

Even for photographs, it was never the day and always the night. "Daytime photography doesn't really excite me," he says. "I prefer the stillness, the mystery and the silence of the night. I can also follow a certain rigour and meticulousness



DARK ROOM: Malhotra shoots midnight onwards. He has often had run-ins with cops and encounters with local goons

of process. I have my own space. I don't get these things during the day."

A typical work-night begins at 11 or 12 midnight and lasts till 5 in the morning when people start getting up. He roams the city looking for subjects, and once he has found one, composes the photograph in his mind. He sets up his tripod and fixes the focus, leaving the aperture open for hours at a stretch. For *Sleepers*, the minimum exposure has been of eight minutes and the maximum, two hours.

Some of the subjects have woken up even as he has been photographing them. "They have never objected. They just seem amused that someone should be photographing them when they are asleep. In most cases, I usually succeed in talking them back to sleep. But it is not the sleepers who are the problem — it is the cops and the goons."

There have been several run-ins with cops, who have quizzed him about taking



pictures in the dark. In Kolkata, an encounter with local strongman at 2 am led to a visit to the police station but he was soon released. As for the goons, they can be fended off. "I carry a pepper spray when I roam about at night," he says. "I carry expensive equipment with me and can't afford to have them stolen." ■ *Sleepers* is on till March 2 at Delhi's PhotoInk Gallery