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IN THE NEWS

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**M**ENTION Mexican painter Frida Kahlo and what come to mind are her intense art and beauty. Few recall that she spent many years in bed-crippled by the multiple fractures in her back. Similarly, not many know that famous Bengali painter Binod Bihari Mukherjee—known for his legendary murals in Shantiniketan—created his entire body of work after he lost his sight in an eye operation as a child.

They were fortunate. They were seen as artists and not branded as 'disabled artists'. Nor did their works have to carry a similar prefix. But the participants of Blind With Camera project are not that fortunate. They have failed to shake off the 'blind photographer' tag. Same goes for Girish Mistry, who is hailed as "wheelchair-bound lens guru".

"One way to look at these artists would be as people who have conquered their disabilities. However, NGOs and the art community—both of which are nascent in India—have not accepted their work as a sub-genre," says Tina Chatterjee, director of Special Assignment for Concern India. "Perhaps," she reasons, "it's because disability is a double-edged sword. We are always conscious of avoiding the trap of being condescending."

Photographer Partho Bhowmick agrees. "The work of the visually impaired is distinct from the way others approach photography and should be treated as a sub-genre.

The on-going exhibition at Zenzi displaying their works has some surprising frames," says Bhowmick, who headed the Blind With Camera project. He was inspired by Paris-based visually-challenged photographer Evgan Bavarcar to take up the project.

The success story of Mistry, dean of Shari Academy of Photography and Digital Painting, is another instance of passion for art overcoming disability. Mistry was paralysed from the waist down in 1990. "I used to spend 15 to 18 hours a day working as a photographer. When I lost my mobility, my clients ignored me," he recalls. But for him, the only way to live life was by continuing his work. That resulted in the photography institute and later several exhibitions of his works. Today, Mistry doesn't see his disability as a hindrance and hates to be labelled.

Aspiring artist Sujit Chaurasia, born blind, composed photographs with the help of sound and the result was remarkable. Most of his fellow participants of Blind With Camera project followed the same method. Another participant Praveen Bhonsale, who lost his sight when in Class VI, says, "The camera is more than a toy for me. It helps me connect with the visual world." He wants to pursue photography as an art form.

To promote works of artists like Bhonsale and Chaurasia, Chatterjee feels, "A special market needs to be created for those with disabilities. That's possible only if we tap talents from across the country, not just metros."

## The art of living

Artists overcome disability but often fail to shed the tag

Girish Mistry  
at work

