

Evoque

Through the mind's eye

An exhibition by visually impaired photographers challenges both artistic and human limitations

SUMATI NAGRATH

SOME of the photographs are out of focus; in others, the compositions are rather weak. In one, the photographer's hand blocks the subjects. In fact, the entire exhibition looks just a bit amateurish. That is, until you realise that each of the 28 frames was clicked by a visually impaired person.

Recently on show at Delhi's India Habitat Centre, 'Beyond Sight' is an exhibition of photographs taken by people with varying degrees of visual impairment that range from partial to total blindness. While creating awareness about the world of the visually impaired, the exhibition also, subtly, pushes the boundaries of what we consider to be photography and questions its almost inextricable link with the sense of sight.

'Beyond Sight' is a result of 39-year-old Partho Bhowmik's single-minded dedication. "It all started when in 1994, I came across an article on the blind by accomplished Parisian photographer Evgan Bvcar," he says. Inspired by his

life and work, Bhowmik soon began an e-mail conversation with Bvcar which made him determined to conduct a photography workshop with visually impaired people. He initiated the process in end 2005 and after months of trying, in January 2006, he finally found his first student, 24-year old Mahesh Umr-rania, who lost his sight at an early age, with the help of Victoria Memorial School for the Blind, Mumbai.

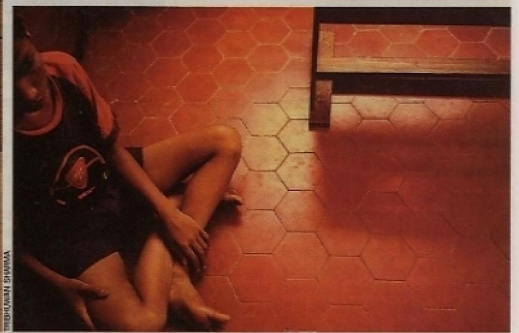
Over the next few months, eight others joined Bhowmik and Umr-rania in their weekend photography sessions. The intensive one-on-one sessions aimed at "triggering their visual thinking" says Bhowmik. "Acting as their guide and sighted partner made me view my world in greater detail and examine it much more closely." The year-long workshops culminated in the 'Beyond Sight' exhibition, which first showed in Mumbai in February.

Not bound by conventions of photography or, for that matter, art, the nine photographers have, depending on the degree of their visual impairment, used their memories and cognitive abilities

to click photographs that communicate their inner world to the rest of us. Those who lost their vision later on in life retain visual memories and try and reconcile them to the physical realities of the world they inhabit. Umr-rania's image of a tree's shadow and his self-portrait capture the world of mirrors and reflections that are now forever lost to him.

To those who retain partial vision, the world appears blurry. So when Raju Singh gets extremely close to his subjects to see them clearly, he "makes normal sighted people see the abstractness they wouldn't see otherwise." According to Bhowmik, in some ways, the toughest group to work with was those who were born without sight. "The attempt here was to create visual images using only non-visual senses." Rahul Shirsat captured the activity in his school library by "hunting for the sounds and then looking for the silence in all the noise."

While making us aware of our extreme dependence on one sense, that of sight alone, these photographs are funny, deeply introspective and a testament to the indomitable human spirit. ■



CLOCKWISE: A visitor admires the photographs on display at Delhi's India Habitat Centre; Blind from birth, Rahul Shirsat captures the 'noise' and 'silence' in the library of the Victoria Memorial School for the Blind; R. Dharmarajan Iyer, who lost his sight in his 30s, "followed the tapping sounds made by the hands" to create a "virtual handshake between the visible and the invisible world"