

Scenes Unseen

When visually impaired people pick up a camera, they do so to reinterpret a world lost to them

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FIND IT embarrassingly difficult to talk to Rahul Shirsat about his photography. "How do you see... I mean, see in your mind's eye... er, imagine... the picture you're about to take?" I babble incoherently. Shirsat, 28, is far more articulate: "Through sound. Sound is everywhere. Since sound is our eyesight, it helps us judge everything."

By way of explanation, he points to pictures of visually-impaired children playing by a window. "There was sound, light and silence. I used my heart to capture the silence and my mind for the noise," he says.

The conversation goes to the heart of the *Beyond Sight* exhibition, currently being held at the NCPA's Piramal Art Gallery. The exhibition - a culmination of the *Blind with Camera* project initiated by IT professional Partho Bhowmick - displays the photography of nine visually-impaired people, taken over the course of a year.

"The point is to show the world that pictures can be conceptualised through the mind alone," says 39-year-old Bhowmick. Yet, for us 'sighted' people - products of an inherently visual culture - this is an idea that is difficult to understand.

"But how?" is the instant question in my

head. "To teach blind people photography, one has to set aside 'regular' notions of photography. One makes use of other faculties - touch, sound, warmth and light. You can't get caught up with the aesthetics of a picture; it's works as long as it communicates effectively," he says, as if reading my mind.

So Bhowmick was forced to think out of the box - from asking the participants to physically pass their fingers through the aperture of the camera in order to understand how light makes a camera work, to explaining the concept of a focal point by making them form a rectangle on the ground and walk to the centre of it.

Bhowmick didn't come to his understanding of how the blind perceive the world effortlessly - he spent two years virtually interacting with blind photographers across the world. "After bumping into visually-impaired Parisian photographer Evgan Bavcar's work, I was fascinated. I started educating myself about blindness and the visual arts. Eventually, the Victoria Memorial School for the Blind in Mumbai, allowed me to conduct a workshop," he says.

The images, if one manages to move beyond our superficial understanding of 'art', say much about the world that the participants inhabit. A red and blue, albeit blurred, photograph of a flight of stairs is



BLIND VISIONARIES: Mahesh Umrrania's image was taken after he felt warmth and coolness on his skin as he walked under the tree's shadow.

more a statement on how the photographer understands patterns than a masterpiece of colour and composition. "If I say a pattern is a design that repeats itself, it makes little sense to someone who was born blind. The stairs allow Rahul to understand patterns in a tactile way," explains Bhowmick.

While the photographs may be low on design, they're often astoundingly rich in concept and content. Twenty-two-year-old Mahesh Umrrania's images of a harmonium are about his personal journey with music - the photographs were taken from a variety of distances to illustrate his growing closeness to the art form.

Moreover, given the mix of participants in the workshop - some were born blind, others lost sight later, and still others have low vision - the images differ vastly in meaning and interpretation. Some pictures are references to a past in which their vision was still intact: one of Umrrania's photographs - that of the shadow of a tree - was inspired by his sighted childhood. Others are abstract references to their disabilities: sixth-grade student Nikhil Mundhe's interprets his photograph of light filtering through the door of a room as a testimonial to his partial blindness, in which he sees light and darkness...but little else.

Internationally, visually impaired photographers have managed to eke out a living for themselves, but it's still too early to hope for the same in India. Bhowmick intends to extend the project to handycams, and to sell the artworks eventually. For the time being, though, the likes of Umrrania have found a way to reestablish contact with a lost world. "I've just taken a few pictures of the Air India building before coming here," he grins.

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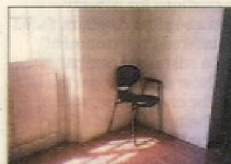
Beyond sight is at the NCPA's Piramal art gallery from February 17 to 25.



Rahul Shirsat took a picture of these stairs to understand patterns in a 'tactile' way. "By taking the first step of the staircase, I have captured the reunion of the 'tactile' pattern and the 'visual' pattern."



Inspired by the book *Celebrating Negatives*, R Dharmarajan's picture conveys his life philosophy of converting the negative into the positive.



"A contemporarily designed chair next to an old wooden door moved me to convey the co-existence of the old and the new in our lives," says Rahul Shirsat.



Kanchan Pamnani lost sight halfway through her life, and this image celebrates her philosophy of finding life "bigger" than it appears.

Twelve-year-old Sunil Bhavsar tried to position himself at the entrance to capture the most beautiful part of his school - The Victoria Memorial School for the Blind.

