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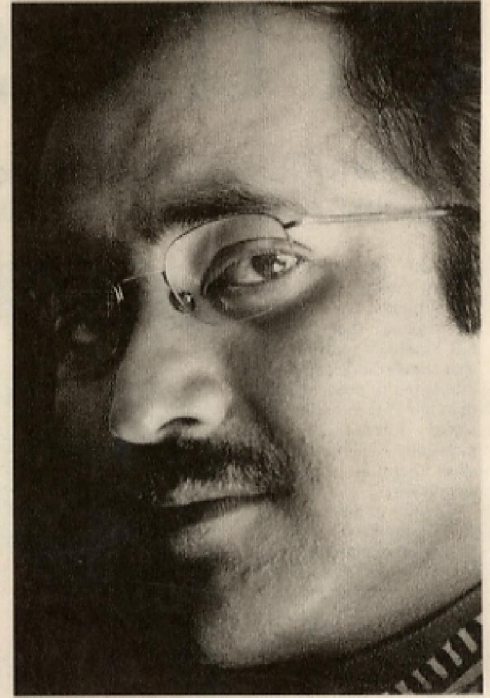
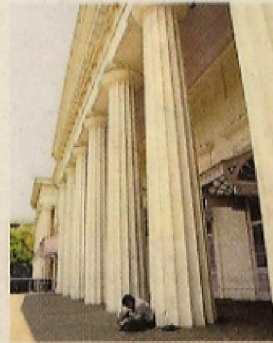
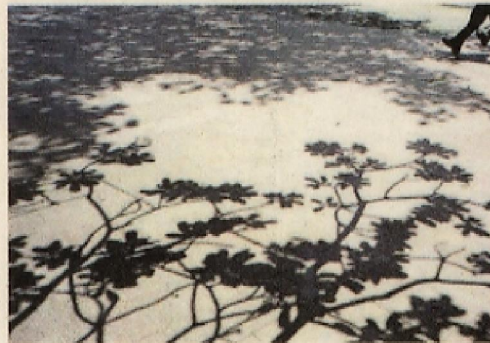
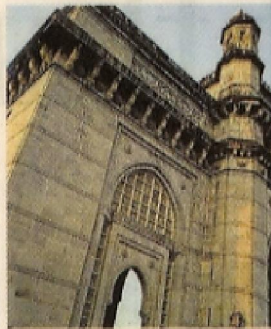
Outside the ordinary

ART Beyond Sight, an exhibition of photographs by the visually impaired, challenges conventional notions of art at a time when even the acceptance of such an idea is the biggest challenge

Photography is the art of 'drawing with light' but can people who inhabit a lightless world draw with light? "Beyond Sight", an exhibition of photographs by the visually impaired, is proof that they can indeed. "When a blind person touches a cup, he is also seeing it with his mind's eye," explains Partho Bhowmick, whose brainchild this is.

"Beyond Sight" displays photographs by participants of Blind with Camera (BwC), an ongoing workshop run by Bhowmick and Victoria Memorial School for the Blind in Mumbai. BwC trains the visually impaired in the art of photography using a complex mix of mental imagery and sensory perception.

At the workshop, participants conceive an image mentally and translate it into a photograph with the help of a sighted companion. "They are trained to spend time feeling a space, sensing the layout of objects, touching them or using their judgment," Bhow-



DIFFERENT STROKES Partho Bhowmick (extreme right) feels photographs by the visually impaired also require a different approach from the viewer who must actively participate in understanding the expression of their world

mick explains. "They listen to detailed descriptions, feel the warmth of the light, search for visual memories of sight (if not born blind) and connect all this with the external visual condition."

Bhowmick applies himself to understanding individual traits while working with them. "I do a lot of homework to understand each student's current condition of sight, memories of sighted life (if they were not born blind), and their daily routine. I ask them to describe their house, the layout of objects in it, and their most-loved space at home. I ask them to describe

the last new place they visited faces of parents or loved ones."

The photographs present a unique view into the "inner gallery" of the photographer and serve as a reminder that touch and sound are potent ways of understanding the world — and as effective as sight.

Photographs by the visually impaired also require a different approach from the viewer, who must actively participate in understanding the expression of their world, one that is experienced differently at some fundamental level. Tactile photographs, Braille

notes, visual aids, and a descriptive tour at the exhibition make the photographs accessible to the visually impaired as well.

Acceptance, however, remains the biggest challenge. "Very few of the students' parents visited the gallery to see their work," Bhowmick says, about the exhibition's run in Mumbai. "Just one statement like 'How can the blind take pictures?' from parents or loved ones can keep a student away from class. Some students experienced this but they returned after a gap."

"In India, our perception of

disability is very narrow," he continues. "We expect a disabled person to just live and attain 'some' economic independence. Their contribution to art and culture is never given serious thought."

Beyond Sight has gained attention, however. The exhibition has received invitations from IIT, Mumbai, Azim Premji Foundation and Tata Institute of Social Sciences. In time, Bhowmick wants to replicate the initiative in different places and include other visual art forms.

He is driven by the belief that art by the disabled has important things to contrib-

ute to society and to our ways of thinking, seeing and understanding. "It will be a long and bumpy journey before art by the disabled is considered at parallel with mainstream art," he says. "What we need is a national forum aimed at creating a culture where people with visual disabilities can learn, participate and enjoy the visual arts. This is what I want to do in the future."

Beyond Sight will be on at the Karnataka Chitrakala Parishad from June 9 to 17. Partho Bhowmick can be contacted at parthobhowmick@gmail.com.

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