

DECCAN HERALD



Wednesday, June 20, 2007

PANORAMA

DECCAN HERALD 11

'Photography helps blind share their feelings with others'

The room at Gallery 3 at the Chitrakala Parishad in Bangalore had echoes of a few voices. While they varied in frequencies, the common feature in all of them was the palpable disbelief which they found it hard to conceal while walking around viewing the photographs on display. The astonishment is not without a reason though, for the pictures were shot by the blind and visually impaired.

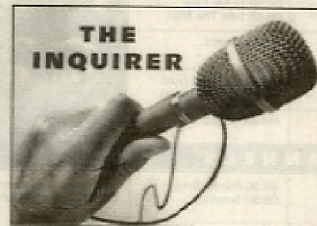
Partho Bhowmick, a Mumbai-based IT professional, who teaches photography to visually challenged persons had organised this exhibition. Bhowmick is an amateur photographer and took up teaching photography for the blind, after reading about a blind photographer in Paris. This was the first ever effort of the kind in India, though several visually challenged persons are successful in photography and other visual arts across the world. The chosen pictures on display were by nine visually challenged individuals currently training

under Bhowmick in Mumbai. Bhowmick spoke to L Subramani of *Deccan Herald* before the exhibition was inaugurated and insisted his was a serious effort to demonstrate the ability of the blind to use visual arts as a medium of expression. Excerpts:

The pictures on display were certainly impressive. But based on efforts of a few individuals, is it possible to conclude that the blind in general can succeed in visual arts?

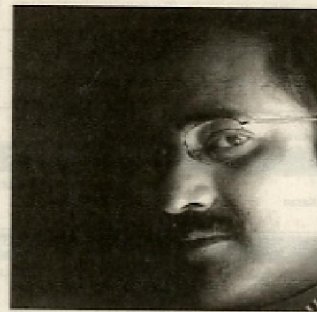
Why not? This is proof that the blind can observe their surroundings through their mental eye. They can do that even better when they start forming a visual picture using their tactile and hearing sense. Any expression, be it visual or any other, would appeal to everyone when it comes from a person's own experience. This is an exercise towards teaching the blind to convert their personal experience into a picture.

Presumably, teaching the blind, or, fine-tuning them to form a visual picture of their immediate envi-



ronment must have been a challenging task.

There is no standard method of doing that. Nor can it be uniform. Because blindness in these individuals differ in degree and happens at different points in time in their life. For instance, you can't expect a person, who is totally blind from birth to understand the visual effect of colours. On the contrary, you can't expect a low vision (partially sighted) person, who works his 20 per cent vision to get on with daily life to form a visual picture mentally; he would obviously make use of his residual vision to



Partho Bhowmick

perceive things around him.

What's the method you followed?

I sat with all the nine students individually, understood the nature of their condition — for instance, if their blindness is by birth or later — and asked them to describe places familiar to them and the ones they had recently visited. This would give me a fair idea of their ability to visually

perceive things based on their touch and hearing senses. I used to draw what's called an "ability statement" on their readiness to communicate with the visual world and design strategies around it.

Was there a ready acceptance for the idea? How did the visually challenged take the idea that they can be photographers?

Of course, taking a photograph isn't something that occurs to the blind naturally. So, when I first spoke to the members of NAB (National Association for the Blind, Mumbai); I found no one was interested. After a sustained effort, one student was ready to learn. This number rose to nine in the last one year. Once they participate in the exercise and understand it works, they are obviously thrilled and they think of yet another option to share their feelings with the mainstream world.

Though it is quite motivating to realise the blind can take photographs, isn't there a sneaking feeling that they still have the limita-

tion of not seeing and enjoying their own work? How do you see them reconciling to this?

I'd asked them this precise question, each time they return from a shooting session. Most of them told me that being part of such an exercise was a thrill in itself. As we sit together, analysing each of their pictures, they tell me that they are able to appreciate the pictures even better. Moreover, the pictures are their experiences which they wish to share with the mainstream world. So, it doesn't matter if they don't happen to understand the exact visual impact of it.

Do you think your efforts would inspire others to work with the blind?

My wish is that the exhibition should inspire artists to take similar initiatives in different cities. When the visually challenged individuals across the world can enjoy the experience of creating a visual art, I feel such an opportunity must also be provided to the visually challenged in India.