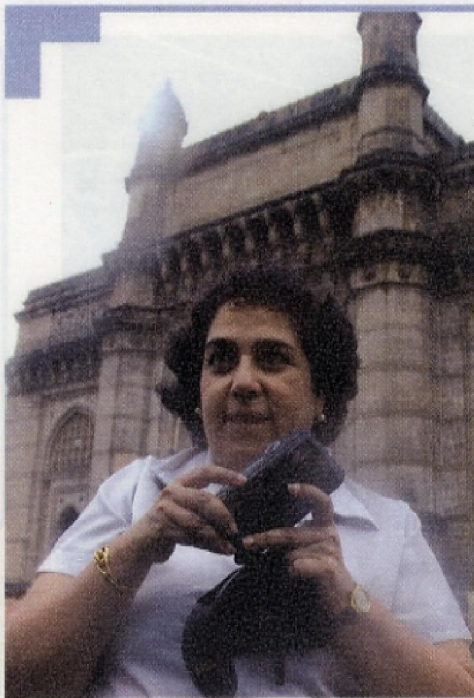


RIGHT: Kanchan Pamnani is a practicing lawyer

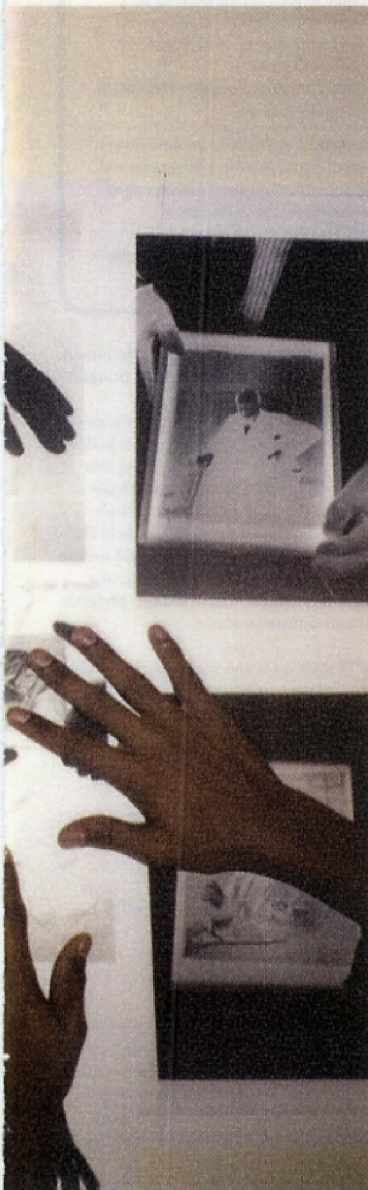
BELOW: Dharmarajan Iyer calls this image a virtual handshake between the blind and the sighted

BELOW RIGHT: Rahul Shirshat's image of a Mumbai subway



Photography lets me share with friends, the beauty of the faces and places that I encounter when I travel

KANCHAN PAMNANI



I broached the idea of conducting photography workshops to the National Association for the Blind. They were taken aback

the protocols and polite gestures in the world of the blind also came from those two years of study.

I broached the idea of conducting photography workshops for the blind to the National Association for the Blind (NAB). They were taken aback. Sure the blind do many exciting things, but photography!

It took me six months to get my first student. Mahesh Umrrania came to me and said, "I will be your guinea pig." Mahesh has a brilliant ear and is getting a bachelor's degree in music from the University of Mumbai. He lost his eyesight when he was 12.

When we first met, I tried to find out what he remembered of the visual world. I asked him the colour of the sky; the colour of a rose. Blue, he said. Red. I asked him to name an object that was vi-

olet. He thought a bit and said, "*baingan*" (brinjal). Despite 14 years of blindness, he was still strongly connected to the visual world. Sadly for Mahesh, he did not remember faces, not even his mother's.

WE WORKED OUT a rough schedule for the weekend workshops. Mahesh and, later, my other students learnt to handle the camera. We use SLRs, point-and-shoots and digital cameras.

Rahul Shirshat, my second student, has been blind since birth. Some stereotypes about the blind are true. Rahul's sense of touch and sound is very strong. Look at the picture that he took in the subway. He startled me by always knowing which train was approaching. He told me that he touched the indicator's light-bulbs;

and the warmth of the glowing bulbs worked like Braille dots.

Very often the blind in this country are either over-protected or under-protected, both potentially problematic situations. One of the advantages of working with this group is that they are very mobile and very confident. The first day I took them out, I could not concentrate on taking photos. I was too concerned about their safety. They laughed when I told them about my fears. "Name any location in Mumbai. Give us the address and we will get there," Mahesh, Rahul and Raju said.

Raju Singh, a computer instructor in a school for the blind, had taken pictures on his own earlier. His composition is excellent. He had been born with normal vision. He lost his eyesight gradually and now he has only about 20 percent vision