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INDIA BEATS



NUANCED EXPRESSION: A photo by Mahesh Umrrania (right) and Partho Bhowmick.

Through the mind's eye

Visually-impaired people at the Victoria Memorial School for the Blind give a different angle to photography.

GEETA PADMANABHAN

AS an exhibiting photographer, viewing life from a different angle is second nature to Partho Bhowmick of Mumbai. So it isn't surprising he should have seen an extraordinary opportunity in what most would have thought an indulgent gesture. He believed he could teach blind people photography.

"Accident," he says, describing how he stood frozen at the roadside shop when he chanced upon this story in an old photo magazine. A blind photographer in Paris, successful. Name: Evgan Bavcar. "I at once e-mailed him, looked at his compositions online." There's a touch of reverence in Partho's voice. "I was profoundly influenced by his work and philosophy." He began research on blindness and visual art, learned of visual artists around the world. He watched "Children of a Lesser God", "The Scent of a Woman" and "Sparsh" and read Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life*.

Predictable response

In 2005, Blind with Camera began to crystallise in his mind. A workshop to see the visual world through the "eyes" of blind people. Would they be interested in sharing his passion? He talked to associations for the blind. The response was predictable. "Endless questions, doubts," he says mildly. The impediment was not sightlessness, it was lack of acceptance. Six months later, he got a call from the Victoria Memorial School for the Blind.

"One of our blind students informed the management about Partho's dream workshop," said Radha Subrahmanian, Trustee and Hony. Secretary, VMSB. "We jumped at the idea. There's nothing blind people cannot do. Shouldn't they try out to know

if they can?" Go on, she told Partho, three months back. The school gave students and infrastructure, Kodak gave cameras, roll and D/P.

"Quite a challenge," admits Partho. It meant adaptive ways to communicate the process of creation. The idea was to prove that photographs could be shot by the mind as much as by the eye. "Their pictures are their point of view, reflection of their experience of reality and anchored with what they feel. I taught myself from zero...The results were surprising."

Understanding an art

At the workshop, visually impaired participants learn the basics using point-and-shoot 35 mm or SLR cameras. They use raised images, Braille notes, visual aids and audio descriptions of illustrations. Outdoors they add sound, warmth of light and help from friends. Those who had sight for a while rely on visual recollections of the "subject". Propelled by strong intuition, they place the camera in relation to the object, space and light and click. The final composition, the "thoughtfully different" picture, depends on their life experience, the extent of blindness, clarity of visual memories, ability to think and judge and their involvement with the subject.

Viewing objects through the mind's eye frees you from the "the falsehood of training, the restrictive rules of perfection and the influence of visual culture", they argue. Freed from expectations, it proves "seeing" is as much touching and hearing. It's photography in the purest, truest form — you "create" a picture.

The students are delighted. Rahul, blind since birth and a BPO aspirant says, "Without tips, I was asked to shoot visually-impaired kids playing in a room. I used sound to base my judgment, my heart to capture the silence and mind to seize the moment." Mahesh, who lost sight at nine: "Photography re-

connects me to the visual world." R. Dharmarajan, Economist, government officer: "I try to set an example by taking the negative and making it positive — both in life and work. My photography is a reflection of that attitude." Kanchan Pamnani, solicitor, who gave up photography when she lost sight: "My interest in photography was rekindled when hope was held out we could develop it into a hobby." Sunil's picture of VMSB's magnificent entrance is a much-published one. For Nikhil, a class VI student at VMSB, "the camera is more than a toy. It captures my imagination."

Gift of self-expression

The farsighted workshop is today poised to become a movement that celebrates self-expression. The photographers' vision will reach the public through exhibitions, books, films and websites. "It builds hope and self-esteem and empowers them financially," says Partho. Typically, he glimpses a larger picture. "A disabled person should not just live independently, but contribute to art and culture." He sees himself standing at the starting point of a long race towards this. I then had to ask. Is it sympathy that will pull audiences? "Curiosity," he admits. "Appreciation depends on viewer background and conditioning." He doubts if even art critics/ media reporters will be able to comment, as "they are not exposed to this concept. What they should appreciate is the effort that communicates a new understanding of visual art and helps correct prejudices towards disability. Finally what is created by them is important and not their disability." The exhibition will travel to other cities in June.

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