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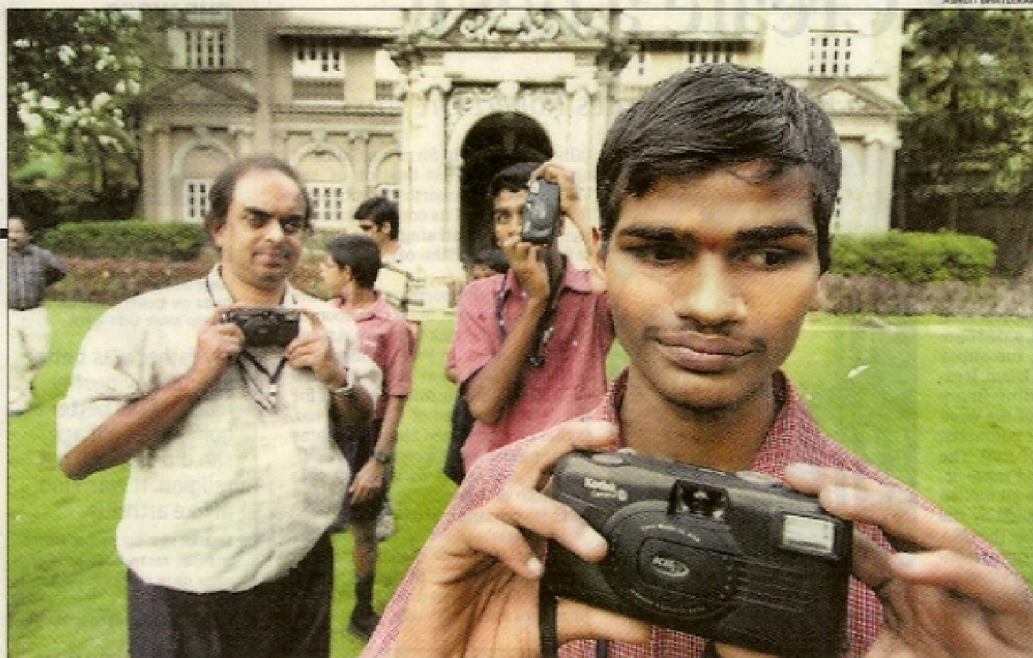
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ARSHIT BHATNAGAR

Developing in the dark rooms

A coming exhibition of pictures taken by the blind may intrigue many. Sharmila Ganesan on how the sightless take photographs

Bhowmick assists students by describing the scene in front of them. The instructions are simple. Touch the subject; take four steps behind, judge the height and click. "It's like a dance," he says. The rest is imagination.

Bhowmick has many international counterparts to guide him on email. In the US, a man named Mike Anders teaches photography to the visually impaired. Another man in Poland uses tactile clues to help the blind. A photojournalist in France encourages the blind to take photos on the street by harassing passers-by to capture their reactions. "Don't talk about things like the sunset that the blind can't relate to. Talk about things they can touch or hear," they all told Bhowmick.

It was easier for the late-blind like 48-year-old Dharmarajan Iyer to grasp lessons as their memories of structures and faces are still alive. The deputy director of Forward Markets Commission, a regulatory body under the ministry of consumer affairs, lost his vision at the age of 30. Before that, he had travelled around

the world and taken pictures which now lie in his album. "I had not dreamt of touching the camera after that. I would only pose," says Iyer.

For students like 22-year-old Rahul Shirsat who was born blind, each session was a revelation. He recalls the class where Bhowmick drew a number of parallel lines along his left hand with a pen. Then he was asked to go up and down the staircase a couple of times. "Do you find anything similar?" Bhowmick asked him.

"It's a series," Rahul replied and took an image that his teacher thought was brilliant — from the top of the staircase, with the tip of his shoes in the frame.

Sujeet Chaurasiya, a shy teenager says "I can only see white." But he really means black. "I take my best friend's help. I once took a photo from the window of the two trees right there," he says, pointing to the playground. His classmate Nikhil Mundhe once captured a teacher near the wash basin. "He was washing his face and was embarrassed," says Mundhe, smiling. For some reason, they all like to keep the

viewfinder near their eyes. In each of them, there is a desire to see or be seen. Recently, Mahesh even shot his own mirror image, when Bhowmick told him what a mirror was.

Often, they ask for feedback. "I like to know if I've cut off their head or something," says High court advocate Kanchan Pamnani, one of the students, laughing. Kanchan was once very finicky about the colours she wore, but after she began to lose her sight, it worried her more. She says that the visually impaired have the advantage of visualisation. "When I go to the High Court, I know every single shop or building that leads to it. That helps me to think ahead."

When Bhowmick began to teach photography to the blind, people sneefed. Many thought he was kidding. Only the Victoria Memorial School for the Blind saw purpose in the cause. They gave him four students and space to start lectures. Then five more joined. His students say that they feel they have begun to see more after taking to photography. Recently, when Raju Singh shot the Asiatic Library, he could not see its pillars. But when he held the 2-D image of the library close to his eye, the pillars became visible. "I even shot my friend's wedding last week," says Singh.

As shots of the Gateway's pigeons, the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus and students sleeping in a line are readied for the unique exhibition of blind photography, the students of Bhowmick know there will be many questions. Dharmarajan Iyer is sure some people will ask, "How did you do that?" when they actually mean "You can't do that." Iyer has his answer ready "I'll tell them I can also cook." ■

A DIFFERENT VIEW These visually impaired people are excited by the idea of taking pictures

Mahesh Umrrania has forgotten his mother's face. He was nine when he last saw her. Today, he is 22 and she is a blur, just like everyone else. Mahesh started losing his vision from the age of three and now only remembers the world as a set of colours. The faces are gone. But since February last year, he has found a new way to see. That was when he met Partho Bhowmick at a lecture in the National Association for the Blind (NAB), who introduced him to something called

the camera. At first, it was difficult to believe Bhowmick, a corporate executive with an interest in photography who said things like, "You don't need eyes to take pictures. They can be taken in the mind." But the man had evidence. "These are the photos taken by Evgen Bavcar, a blind photographer from Paris. There are many such artistes abroad. You can also do it," he had said. The invitation was tempting.

Umrrania doesn't try to describe faces anymore. To his friends now, he just hands

out their photographs. All taken by him. "It's my new medium," says Mahesh, who wears glares. Every Sunday since last February, he has been taking photography lessons from Bhowmick in the audio library of a school for the blind in Mumbai, along with eight other blind students. Among them are some who lost their vision at a later stage like him, some with very low vision, one who can only see outlines and two who haven't seen the world at all. They were born blind. During these classes,



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