

Blind with Camera: A Change of Perspective

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The idea of the blind and visually impaired dabbling in photography may sound a bit bizarre at first, but thanks to Partho Bhowmick and his Blind with Camera initiative, it's bound to change.

BY PRIYANKA TILVE

If someone one had told me a month ago about visually impaired people taking up photography, I wouldn't have believed it. But having met Partho Bhowmick, initiator of the Blind with Camera project and witnessed one of his blind student take pictures, my perception has changed. I met Partho at Antarchakshu - The Eye Within, an event organized by the students of Xavier's Resource Center for the Visually Challenged (XRCVC) in Mumbai. The event provides a glimpse into the world of the visually impaired. Also on exhibition at the event were pictures clicked by visually challenged students, who had learnt photography under the Blind with Camera project.

As they say, a picture is worth thousand words. These pictures especially had stories behind them and

presented a new perspective. From a professional photographer's point of view, they may not be all that well framed or composed, but they serve the intended purpose as they provide us with a fleeting glimpse into the world of a visually impaired person.



Partho with Mahesh Umrania, a late blind who enjoys photography and believes that photography helps him reconnect with the visual world.

The Journey

Who would have thought that a visually challenged person could take photographs? No one; not even Partho, who worked as an IT Manager with Pidilite Industries. This was until he came across a magazine feature about a French blind photographer. Partho, an avid photographer, was intrigued and established contact with him. He says, "I got inspired by his work and his philosophy on why a blind person should engage in visual art. He also connected me to a consortium, Art Beyond Sight, where blind artists could post their activities online. From 2004 to 2005, I did independent research work, interacting with blind artist across the world." Convinced, he decided to take it ahead in India, and his journey began in 2005. He shared his ideas with the

National Association of Blind (NAB), and conducted sessions with the visually challenged to see their reaction. From 10 students in 2006, today he has over 100.

The Process

Partho explains how he goes about teaching the visually impaired. "First you need to understand the nature of blindness they have. Somebody who is late blind always tries to recall their memories and tries to reconcile with the visual reality. All these guys, irrespective of the kind of blindness, have a process of generating images in their mind. They cannot escape visual reality, that's for sure. The image formation in their mind happens with the help of touch, sound, etc. So, for a late blind, there is reconciliation of this memory and the visual reality. They may take a picture of the shadow, because they know what a shadow is and can feel it due to the difference in temperature. On the other hand, born blind can always end up surprising you. This is because they have no reference points and their images are absolutely abstract. They rely on touch and sound. People with low vision, which includes people who can only see far away objects, and people with peripheral vision distortion, who can only see what's straight ahead of them make maximum use of their residual sight, and the photographs they take are very true to the ones taken by sighted people."

Partho teaches photography to the visually impaired with the help of a simple point-and-shoot digital camera. While he

WANT TO HELP PARTHO?

Partho is trying to find technology that can enable the blind to take photographs. On the top of his list is a talking camera, which will feature audio outputs for every function and possibly with an option of instantly printing a raised image. Samsung China has developed such a camera, but it hasn't been launched yet. The

second thing on his mind is software that can describe images in languages understood by the blind. Lastly, software to convert pictures into line diagrams, which can be printed as touch and raised pictures. If you think you have ideas that can help, you can get in touch with Partho Bhowmick on partho@blindwithcamera.org.

doesn't expect them to establish careers in photography, he hopes that they take away more than just photography tips, "These people have a process of creating images, but that stays with them because our society doesn't talk with them in a visual context. So it either stays or dies with them, but it doesn't come out. With photography, they can communicate those images. It's more of a strategic visual thinking. Now, they have a strategy of how they should think, then build up an image and then capture it." Students also learn to focus, be team players, and learn time management and other soft skills.

While many people may want to believe that the photographs taken by these people are by fluke, Partho explains to us the process they follow to take pictures. He says, "The moment they shake hands, they get a feel of the body structure of the person in proportion to themselves. If they are not very sure, then they will put their hand on the person's shoulder to get a feel of his height. After this, they will move three steps back and take a picture. Taking one to one photographs is easy, but when there is a group with people of different heights,

measure it by walking from one end of the space to the other while counting steps. If there are 15 steps, they will, let's say, walk to seven and then walk three steps back to click the picture. In case of audio, all they have to do is follow the voice and click. They have heightened senses, which they make use of here."

Partho doesn't just stop at teaching them photography, but has gone beyond and organizes exhibitions and workshops. "I sell these pictures and that's one source of income. We also conduct sensitization workshops in schools, colleges and corporate houses, which brings together sighted and non-sighted people. Here, a sighted person is blind folded and trained in photography by the non-sighted person. Half the revenue we earn goes to the blind trainer, which is good income for them." He conducts workshops all over the country and trains the local sighted photographers first so that they can take the work ahead.

The Vision

When he started out, Partho's aim was to create a new visual language. The social aspect of it emerged gradually over the years. His vision, he says, is to start photography as a vocational subject in blind schools in India, and making not just photography, but even art accessible to the blind in public museums. As a step forward, the exhibitions he conducts include, along with the photographs, a raised thermal print of the image for the visually impaired to feel. Alongside, there is description in Braille, text print-outs in large fonts, and an iPod-like audio device to listen to the description. He views photography for the blind as a social equalizer. "If they can manage to click pictures, they can do anything," Partho argues, adding, "What we need to do is give them an opportunity, not just because they are blind, but because they are at par with the sighted."



An audio aid describes the photograph and guides a blind visitor to feel the raised thermal image of the actual photograph to understand it.

then it becomes a little complex. Here they arrange them first by maybe having the tallest person stand in the center and take a picture. Similarly, if they want to click a photograph of a space, then they will first feel it by walking around and touching the objects. If they find something interesting, then they go about composing the image. They

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