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Bright darkness

What happens when the blind pick up cameras?

By Mathew T. George/GOA & MUMBAI

Satvir Yogi has low vision in both eyes. He is a final year student of BA Sociology at St Xavier's College, Mumbai.

The new century was still in diapers when Mahesh taught me to 'see'. There we were, in the room adjoining the principal's office of Mar Thoma College, Tiruvalla, Kerala. He an examinee, and I his scribe. Halfway through the exam, a gust whipped the hall ticket off the table and dragged it across the floor. "The hall ticket fell off," he said. I picked it up and teased him, "It was the question paper." He grinned, as if at a slow child, and said: "Well, the sound would have been different. For one, the hall ticket is only half the size of the question paper. And, the question paper is fresh from the packet, while the hall ticket has creases from being in my pocket for a few days now." Mahesh S. Panicker, who is congenitally blind, now teaches political science at the Lady Shri Ram College for Women, New Delhi.

This year, the monsoon was in full spate when I went to Goa, to 'see' again. At the Goa Centre for Alternate Photography (Goa-CAP), Calangute, Partho Bhowmick was holding an analogue photography workshop for five students, all blind. "Mooche hai mere (Do I have a moustache)?" asked Bhowmick. Sitting barely three feet away, Vivek S. Yeralkar, 43, squinted, his brow furrowed in con-



Ravi Thakur shot this on Marine Drive. He was born blind and works for the National Association for the Blind in Mumbai.

centration, and then shook his head in resignation. Once a professional photographer, Yeralkar had lost his sight to retinal detachment. "I was dejected and sold all my equipment," he said. "I regret it now. After coming in touch with Blind With Camera, I have started clicking again. Maybe I should have just kept my old camera and lenses."

Bhowmick founded Blind With Camera in 2006, and the inspiration came from an unlikely source—a tattered photography magazine picked up from a pavement vendor. In it was an article about Evgen Bavcar, the ace blind photographer. Before

he was 12, he lost both eyes in consecutive accidents. Seeing Bavcar's work, Bhowmick was convinced that blind photography gave the visually challenged a new medium of expression.

The No. 1 FAQ about blind photography is: why would a blind man want to photograph? Bavcar provides an explanation on his website. He was 16, when he picked up the camera to photograph his girlfriend. "The pleasure I felt then resulted from my having robbed and fixed on a film something that did not belong to me," he said. "I secretly discovered I could possess something that I could not see." As Bavcar puts it, the intention is simple—to possess,

and, perhaps, share. Like their sighted colleagues, blind photographers, too, have their techniques. While shooting a group photo, most of them pace the width of the group, touch people on the ends and then pace the distance from where they click. Sometimes sighted assistants call out guidance. While shooting individuals, they usually shake hands with the subject or touch the subject's shoulder, to gauge the person's height. Accordingly, they pace back and shoot. Sound is a major trigger for moods, action and moving objects. And the warmth of the sun marks which way the shadows lie.

Bhowmick said, "These photographs are initially



MATHEW T. GEORGE

Meghna Naik, 11, takes a look at her first photograph—a self portrait.

constructed in the mind. Then they use the camera and their remaining faculties to produce a picture. There are the congenitally blind, who have some idea of how things look like, when described. The ones with partial sight have an edge over the others. Then again, some are gifted, and some are not."

All the five photographers at Goa-CAP had been clicking for some time now; some started with box cameras and moved on to phone cameras and digital cameras. Some like Yeralkar were at home with SLRs. They were at the centre to learn to shoot film and to learn developing, the old fashioned way. After working with them for three days, their instructors, Chaitanya

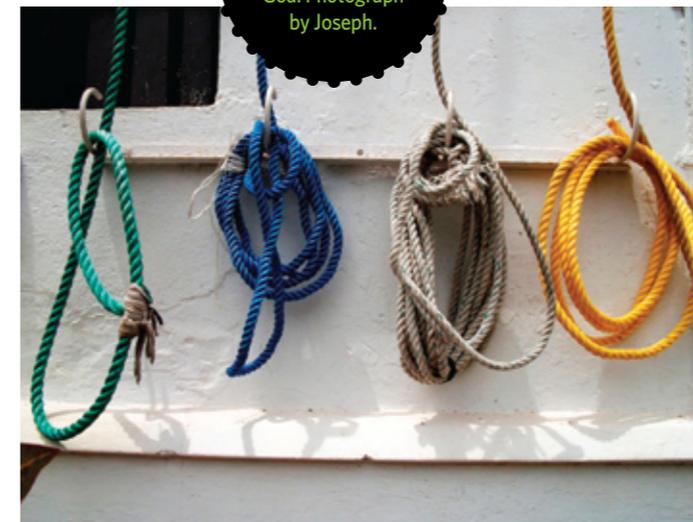
Guttikar and Edson Dias, were impressed by their images and their performance in the darkroom. "We were on the same footing there," said Dias. "Who is the blind one in a darkroom?"

To get a feel of first time blind photographers, THE WEEK followed Bhowmick to the Ismail J. Virani and Nabad I. Virani School and Home for Visually Impaired Children in Ponda. Bhowmick split the students into groups and started familiarising them with Canon IXUS cameras. As most children were familiar with mobile phones, they easily found their way about the buttons. Meghna Naik, 11, has to come within kissing distance of anything to see it. When she clicked a self-portrait and then held the display close to her eyes, there was sharp intake of breath and then, a glorious smile.

Students were then paired with sighted assistants and sent out to photograph. Bhowmick analysed the pictures and suggested corrections. Again, it is obvious that some have an uncommon eye for things. The gifted ones would get a separate class with Bhowmick later.

The blind photography movement is slowly taking off in India. Retina India, an organisation working among those with retinal issues, had a photography workshop for its members last year, where Goa-CAP sent trainers. Arvind Bhartiya, a Retina India trustee, is a chartered accountant

Shot in an art gallery by Vaibhav Girkar. He has low vision in both eyes. (Right) The touch version of the photograph.



Multicoloured bell ropes at a church in Panaji, Goa. Photograph by Joseph.



Ace photographer Atul Kasbekar (left) with Partho Bhowmick (right) at an exhibition.

blinded by retinitis pigmentosa. An avid photographer in his sighted days, Bhartiya said, "If I go back to photography, I will go back to black and white. When I compare the images in my mind's eye, colour images are nowhere as beautiful as black and white."

Internationally, blind photography is big, with travelling exhibitions drawing huge crowds. Bhowmick has exhibited his students' work at the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival in Mumbai, at the National Centre for Performing Arts in Mumbai and the India Habitat Centre in New Delhi, among other places.

Now, how does a blind person see a photograph? While those with partial vision can make out images, depending on their degree of handicap, there are aids to help the totally blind. Bhowmick's latest exhibition, 'The View From Here', was held this month at the Art & Soul Gallery, Worli, Mumbai. The exhibition was special for the audio and tactile aids

that went with the photographs. Every photo was accompanied by a tape describing the picture, a blind person could just slip on the headphones and listen. The tactile aids were raised pictures with varying textures for colours.

It is challenges that keep the blind going. THE WEEK caught up with three blind photographers at the office of the Indian Association for the Visually Handicapped in Mumbai—Rahul Vijay Shirsat, 30, Rahim Hafiz Khan, 23, and Subhash Lakshman Chaugule, 36. They decided to take us on a stroll along

These photographs are initially constructed in the mind. Then they use the camera and their remaining faculties to produce a picture.

PARTHO BHOWMICK
Founder, Blind With Camera

Marine Drive.

From the University Club House at Churchgate, we had to cross the busy road. One of them held on to me, another to our photographer Amey Mansabdar and the third to IAVH employee Sharda L. Kadam. I suggested we take the zebra crossing and threesome burst out laughing. "Just tell us when there is a gap in the traffic," said Subhash. But the median? "We climb over it, you'll see." When the gap came, they towed us off the pavement, across the first lane, over the median and across the second lane to Marine Drive.

One of the five at Goa-CAP, Sivanand Manthalkar, asked me: "Do you think I suffer?" Sivanand, a banker with congenital cataract, is married to his sweetheart Fatema, a sales tax department employee with retinitis pigmentosa. "Do you think I suffer? I don't. You do, when you see me struggle. I have been blind all my life, and I know to do things only this way. But you know there are easier ways. And that knowledge hurts you. As for me, I'm free, boss." ■