

PROJECT 3

Images Beyond Sight

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Approval Sheet

Images Beyond Sight

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Approved for the partial fulfillment of the requirement or the degree of
Masters of Design in Visual Communication
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Indian Institute of Technology (Bombay)

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Declaration

I declare that this written submission represents my ideas in my own words and where others' ideas or words have been included, I have adequately cited and referenced the original sources. I also declare that I have adhered to all principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not misrepresented or fabricated or falsified any idea/data/fact/ source in my submission. I understand that any violation of the above will be cause for disciplinary action by the Institute and can also evoke penal action from the sources which have thus not been properly cited or from whom proper permission has not been taken when needed.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people without whom this film would not have been possible:

Professor Raja Mohanty for giving me chance and inspiring me to make a film on images.

Partho Bhowmik for introducing me with the world of “Blind with camera”.

Satvir Yogi for sharing his experiences and being a part of my movie.

A very special thanks to **Suman Dutta, Vanya Jain, Satyaki Ghosh, Anirban Ghatak, Somnath Pal, Rakesh Nanda and Shilpa Bisht** for doing very special things.

Abstract

The project is an attempt to understand the possibilities of visual structure and composition of images photographed by the visually impaired. It also tries to understand the uncharacteristic shooting angles in addition to the objects and the subjects they choose to shoot- to open a window to their rich, fantastic visual world.

The documentary film explores the various tactile, audio clues, visual memories of sight, the warmth of light and cognitive skills are used by the visually impaired to create “mental image” before they take judgment to take a picture. They use the camera as an extension of “self” to explore the visual world, gain deeper insight while recording their imagination and their point-of-view. Photography by the visually impaired reveals that a photograph can be made successfully in the mind as much as by the eyes, free from the techniques and rules followed by sighted photographers. It illuminates a new line of thought distinct from the way we approach photography and demands active mental participation of the sighted viewers to understand the experience of expressing a world that is not seen or limitedly seen.

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Introduction

It started from 6th february 2010 in Kala Ghoda Art Festival where Prof Raja Mohanty had introduced me to Mr. Partho Bhowmik who himself is a photographer and teaches photography to blind people. At present he is working on a project called “Blind with camera”. In kala ghoda he exhibited the photographic work of his students under the title “Beyond Sight”. When i first heard and saw the work of visually impaired people it sounded strange to me because like other i tend to associate photography with light, vision, focusing, looking at the result, etc. However, my experience of this exhibition has exposed me to another aspect of photography: this is photography led by imagination, sentiment and all four senses (vision excluded).

And after that i went through the ‘Blind with Camera’ web site and read many articles on them and met few of these photographers and understand how they do photography. The heat of the sun, the noises, voices, smells and other signals help them orient themselves and the camera. The unusual, special shooting angles, as well as the objects and the subjects they chose to shoot, open a window to their rich, fantastic visual world.

The photography enables them to share their experience and daily life with us, express their creativity, loves and preferences and sometimes, guides us into their closer, more intimate environment.

Finally I decided to make a featured documentary film “Images Beyond Sight”.



by Mahesh Umrrania, 2009



by Ravi Thakur, 2009



by Ravi Thakur, 2009

Blind With Camera

Blind With Camera is an initiative of the Beyond Sight Foundation, a not-for-profit organization prompting the art of photography in people with visual impairment. It provides a platform for the visually impaired to share their imagination and their point-of-view of the visual world, and speak out about their unique experience, feelings, challenges, concerns and hopes. Photographs by the visually impaired helps to empower them, provide them earning opportunities and facilitate their social inclusion. It demystify the polarity between blindness and visual expression, helps to sensitize people, spread awareness and correct public perception of visual impairment.

Along with promotion of Disability Art culture, the foundation organizes events that bring the visually impaired and sighted people on equal platforms, bridge the gap between them and increase tolerance in society.

Vision:

Social inclusion of the visually impaired through imagery.

Mission:

To create a community where people with visual disabilities can learn, participate, enjoy and practice the art of photography, and reduce the gap between visually impaired and sighted people.



by Sunil Bhavsar , 2009



by Raju Singh, 2009

Value Statement:

Art opens our minds to unexpected ways of viewing ourselves and the world. No less vital is its function as an instrument of change, a reminder of diversity, a source of healing and development. Potential for creativity lies within all of us to express our feeling and ideas. Art programs can help individual express themselves, develop their confidence, use their imagination and inspire their creativity. Art education, art practices and art access should be widely available without prejudice to class, language, religion, gender or limitation.

Belief Statement:

Disability is a diverse human condition, people with disability are “differently able” and art by them is an invaluable form of expressions; prove that they have interesting way to perceive and lead life. Art “by” and “for” all can lead to an equitable society.



by Mahesh Umrrania, 2009



by Nikhil Mundhe, 2009

Impacts on Society:

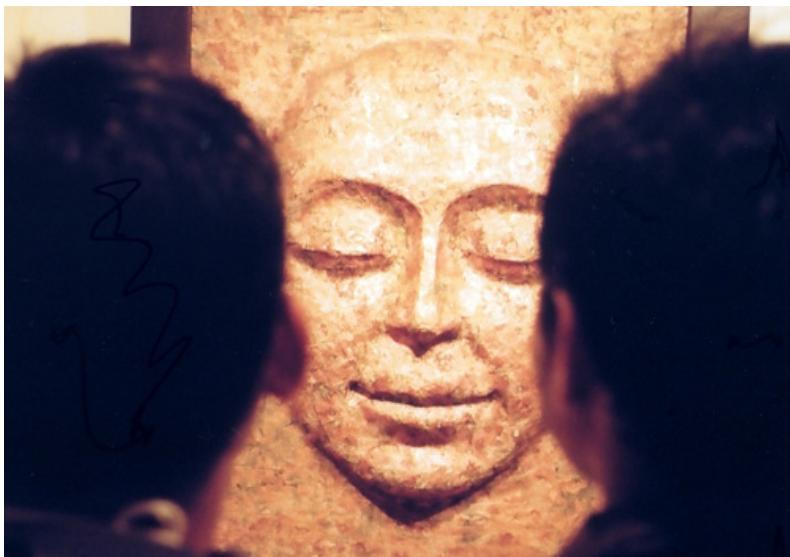
Work “by” the blind has to be “for” the blind. Beyond Sight is an inclusive exhibition that provides a combination of touchable raised images, Braille footnotes, visual aids and descriptive tour for the visually impaired visitors to access the photographs. It redefines the notion “to see is to photograph and to photograph is to see.” Inclusiveness encourages visually impaired to visit the exhibition (most are first time visitor to an art gallery). The exhibition provides a platform for interaction between sighted and visually impaired people. Demystify the polarity between blindness and visual expression, helps to sensitize people, correct public perception of visual impairment and disability in general. Bridge the gap between “Us” and “Them” and increase tolerance in society.

Impacts on approach to Photography:

The experience of being a blind photographer is a small slice of the bigger experience of being blind human being. Their work is the reunion of both these experiences and that makes it thoughtfully different and makes us recall what photography is all about – creating a picture. Blind photographers gift us with a new visual language, free from the influence of visual history and modern visual culture, free from the conscious struggle for control, free from formalistic rules of perfection and away from intellect of visual literacy. Demands active mental participation of the sighted viewers to understand the experience of expressing a world that is not seen or partially seen. Demonstration of new understanding makes the work of blind photographer much truer to photography, and much closer to life.



by Satvir Yogi, 2009



by Vaibhav Girkar, 2009

“Disability Art” Culture

Of all human disabilities blindness is the easiest to comprehend, because we can imagine ourselves eventually going blind. We know for a moment how it feels walking indoor from a sunny day, stumbling while going to toilet at midnight, and searching for matchbox when power goes off.

Disability of any kind is upsetting but it's bizarre that human has disability. Yet it is interesting as a process to understand how others parts “fill-in” for the part lost, as one adjust to the hobbling of both motor and social skills for living.

Expression of disable artist is an interesting study as it demonstrates their personal experiences with disability and gives insight on how challenges are handled by them during the creation. But their work rarely reaches out to public, if they do, critics and the public do not take them seriously.

Prejudices towards work of disable artists are rooted in our psychological, historical and sociological influences. But there are several initiatives around the world that bring forward their art, music, literature and other expressions to the public and attempt to merge it with the mainstream.



by Vaibhav Girkar, 2009



by Satvir Yogi, 2009

How do the Blind take photographs

This is the most obvious question in the mind of sighted people, and also in the mind of the visually impaired. There is no straight answer to the question.

The image first conceptualizes in the mind of the visually impaired, it then translates into a photograph, a complex reunion of mental and physical processes -

The visually impaired are asked to spend time feeling the space, sensing the layout of objects in the space, touching them (if within reach) or using their judgment. They are asked to listen to the detailed description the sighted companion and other sounds one can hear, feel the warmth of light entering the space to identify the direction of light and contrast, search for visual memories of sight (if not born blind) and correlate the visual memories to the external visual condition.

This process triggers the visual thinking in the visually impaired and the first version of the mental image is abstractly created. By seeking more clues, the visually impaired then create a refined version of the mental image.

Then by touch and judgment, they measure the distance from the object and the space around it, place the camera in relation to the object, space and light, and finally 'click' a photograph.

The reunion of mental and physical processes may take hours or sometimes, mere minutes. The reunions are guided sometimes more by touch, sometimes more by sound and sometimes a mix of both by touch and by sound. The dominance and mix of the senses is usually caught in the photographs

Interestingly, each photograph taken by visually impaired individuals is different from the another as it depends on their life experience, the extent of their blindness, clarity of visual memories, attentiveness and sensitiveness to non-visual senses, cognitive abilities, and most importantly their involvement with the subject to be photographed

Participants with low and partial sight would somewhat see the photographs taken by them by bringing the photo print close to their eyes or under magnify glass. Participants with complete blindness depend on sighted companion describing the photography to them. Discussions on the photographs focus more on the conceptual and emotional aspect that helps visually impaired photographer to recollect the mental picture and relate it to the physical prints. Surprisingly sometime they could point almost correctly the position of the objects in the prints.

Photography by the visually impaired shows that the Mind's Eye can 'see' more than actually 'seeing' and goes to endorse what photographer Walker Evans once said: "The Blind are not totally Blind. Reality is not totally real"



by Satvir Yogi, 2009



by Raju Singh, 2009

How do we See. What do the Blind see

Photography by the Blind brings up to the surface a fundamental issue in contemporary culture of 'How do we see. What do the Blind see '

We who see do not even know how it is that we see, and we are also unaware of the whole process of "learning to see". Neurologist Dr. Oliver Sacks has an interesting case -

A man born blind, in adulthood got his sight restored by miracle of medical science. At that point he can 'see' but he cannot interpret the visual data at all. A set of stairs which were familiar to him, is now a jumble of lines and shadows, and the jumble utterly changes with the viewing angle and shift of light. He literally could not recognize them as stairs. He leans to see his cat in 'visual' profile, but if the cat shifted posture he could no longer differentiate the cat's shape from that of his room

Unexpectedly, the world of sight becomes a nightmare for him. Eventually he again loses his sight, and it was a relief for him. He returns to a world where everything makes sense by touch and sound. Stairs become stairs and his cat becomes once more a cat

Seeing is learned and the blind man has never learned to see

This raises another big question, if a sighted person has to understand "learning to see", what is the parallel for "learning to see" for a blind person.

We normally think of seeing the visual reality through our eyes. Seeing is as much touching and hearing, but because vision is so overwhelming, we are unaware of all that.

When a sighted person sees a cup, he is also feeling it with his mind's hand

The Blind can arrive at mental pictures of the visual realities around them through touch, sound, the warmth of light, visual memories of sight and other cognitive abilities. Mental picture is a lot like seeing, only less powerful

When a blind person touches a cup, he is also seeing it with his mind's eye

A cup is both a “visual” cup and a “tactile” cup

Dr. John Kennedy, an authority on Art by the Blind through his research has come to believe that: “The geometry of direction is common to vision and touch and where a sighted person looks out, a blind person reaches out, and they will discover the same things”, and similarly “What you see is what you hear”

It is well established that the visual cortex of the brain, which processes all visual inputs in a sighted person, is reallocated in a blind person for processing touch and sound. It is also highly active during visual thinking in the Blind

“Learning to see” is common for both the sighted and the blind, only the vehicle and route of seeing is different. The Blind has to work much harder than the sighted person to be visually aware and translate it into mental pictures

What would be more interesting to explore is what they (blind) see differently from what we (sighted) see and how “learning to see” in the Blind is cultivated and translated into visual art.



by Raju Singh, 2009



by Mahesh Umrrania, 2009

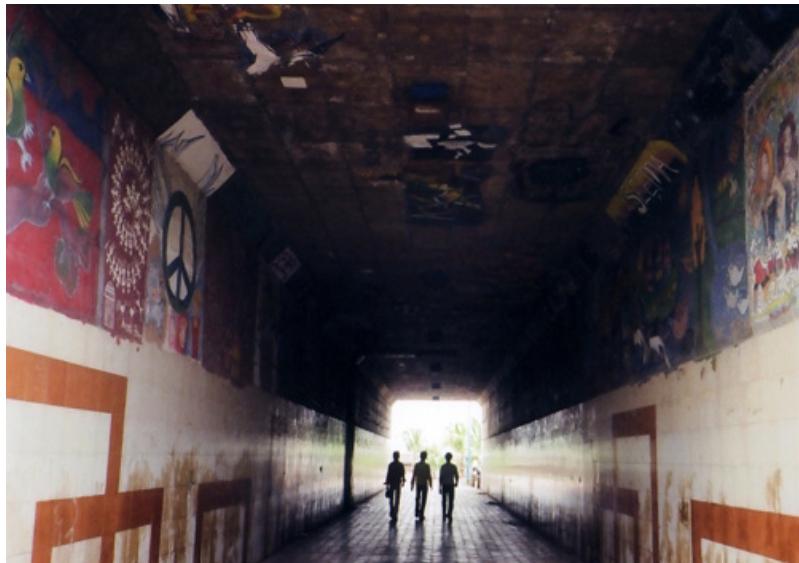
What's wrong with these pictures

Most of us would view the work of the Visually Impaired photographers in the context of their disability rather than in the content of their work. Some of us would be perplexed by the idea, and some pundits would critically rate their photographs as mere snapshots captured with a high element of luck. This surfaces a question – What's wrong with these pictures?

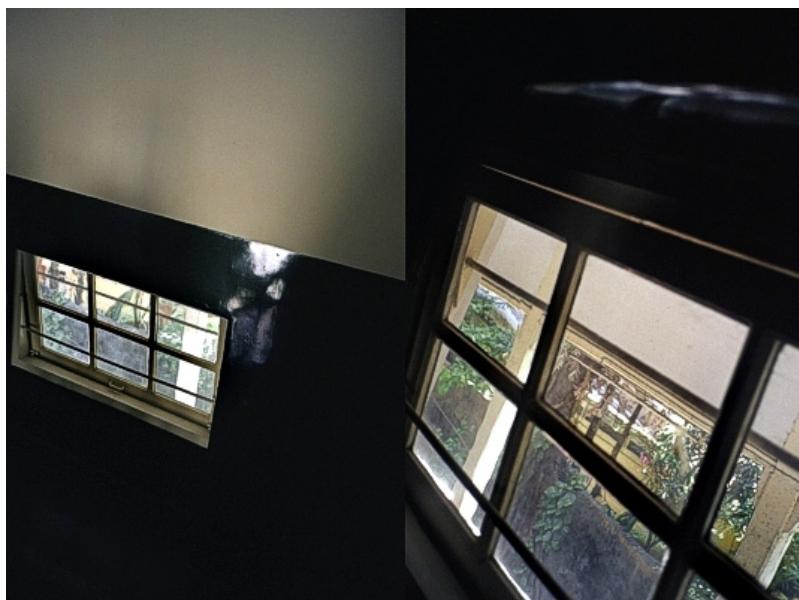
The experience of being a Visually Impaired photographer is a small slice of the bigger experience of being a Visually Impaired human being. The photographic work of the Visually Impaired is the reunion of both these experiences and that makes their work thoughtfully different.

Photography by the Visually Impaired is a photograph of the Visually Impaired, created by touch, sound, warmth of light, visual recollections of sight, cognitive skills and intuitive abilities without taking sight for granted. They are the owner of their uninhibited process of creation and their point of view.

Seeing through the Mind's eye of the Visually Impaired photographer is the purest way of looking at the visual realities around us, free from the falsehood of training, away from the influence of visual history and modern visual culture, away from the conscious struggle for control, away from formalistic rules of perfection, away from intellect of visual literacy and most importantly away from our expectations from a photographer.



by Vaibhav Girkar, 2009



by Mahesh Umrrania, 2009

The experience of sight is structurally idiotic; we end up seeing what we are trained to see, what we want to see, rather than the whole world which lies unseen before us. Interestingly, the process of sighted companion describing places and objects in great detail to Visually Impaired photographer make the sighted see details he would not notice otherwise. A reciprocal process, it visually enriches each other's world.

Many great works of photography are created by a unique collaboration between the photographer's luck (to be in the right place at the right time) and his ability to make most of it. The element of luck cannot be applied in the same context to the Visually Impaired photographers. For visually impaired photographers it's like casting fishing net and pulling it up to discover what one had caught. Nothing for days, and then, one day, the unexpected, most amazing picture, caught.

Photography by the visually impaired reopens the critical gap between what we 'see' in the photograph and what we are supposed to 'read', it invites the viewer to visit the question - How do we read these photographs?

Without getting overtaken by sympathy and carried away by the idea, viewer has to "read" by penetrating beyond the surface of these photographs to understand the play of conscious and unconscious, present and absence, sure and unsure and alternative perceptual experiences, experienced by the visually impaired photographers while taking a photograph. It also demands the viewer to imagine the 'visual synergy' between image created in the mind of visually impaired photographer and visual realities in front of the camera to understand the illustration of expressions and the feeling anchoring the images.

Only after having mentally participated the viewer may attempt to draw conclusion on the whole new perspective. One can't refute the demonstration of new understanding, which makes the work of the Visually Impaired photographer much truer to photography, and to life.

The story

It's a Blank frame. Hariprasad chaurasia's flute starts, with the music Sun rises and camera open in a room where a guy is taking photographs from his window. Next short same guy is packing his bag and left the room. Guy walked through the corridor and climbed down from the stairs. Walk on the road and go to a lake side start clicking photographs of nature and his surroundings. Next short another day the guy goes to st.xaviers college and click the photograph of the arhitecture. Then he goes to J.J college of art and clicked the photographs of the murals. Next scene he go to gate way of india and do photography. Next short he moves to a seashore from where he clicked the sunset with the worli sealink in silhouette. Next short another day the guy goes to a over bridge and tries to click the railway tracks and the local and express trains. On the last day early morning he goes to a lake and starts clicking scenic beauty. In that spot another person is clicking photographs, unknowingly the guy comes in front of the other persons camera frame. This person asked him about his un usual way of clicking photographs. And the guy revels that he is partially blind and he loves nature photography and he learned it in his collage. Then they will start conversing about how this visually impaired clicked photographs and about his experiences. Last scene the guy open his stick and start walking and the other person who is sighted click's his photograph.

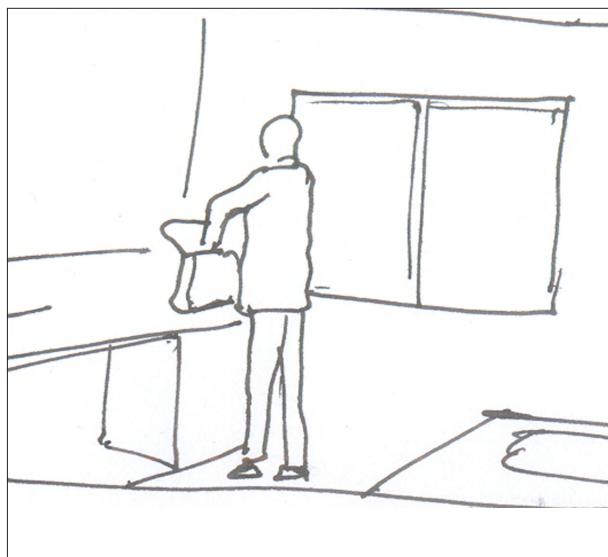
The story Board



Short: A guy shooting photographs from the window of his room.

Camera: Rear view, Mid short, OTS.

Music: Flute.



Short: Guy is packing his bag.

Camera: Close up of hand, top angle shot.

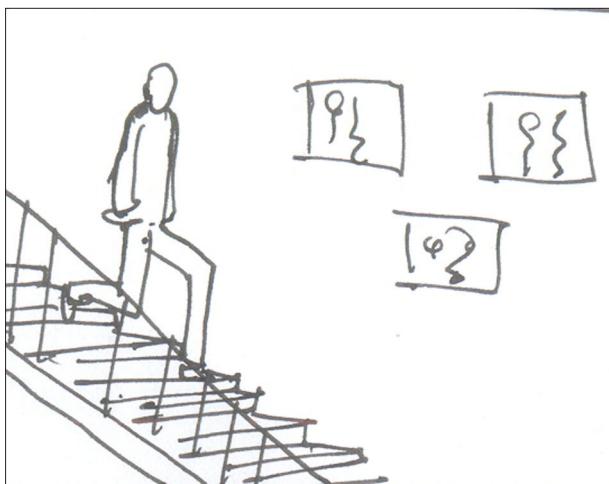
Music: Flute continues.



Short: walked through the corridor.

Camera: Long short.

Music: Flute continues.



Short: climbed down the stairs.

Camera: OTS walking and mid close up of foot.

Music: Flute continues.



Short: Walking on the road.

Camera: Establishment short and then following him.

Music: Flute continues.



Short: Clicking photos in lake side.

Camera: Long and mid short.

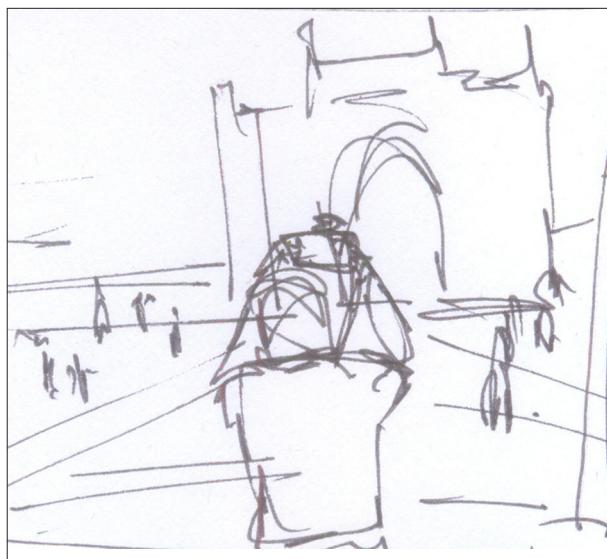
Music: Flute continues.



Short: Clicking photos in st. xaviers college.

Camera: Long, tight close up and close up.

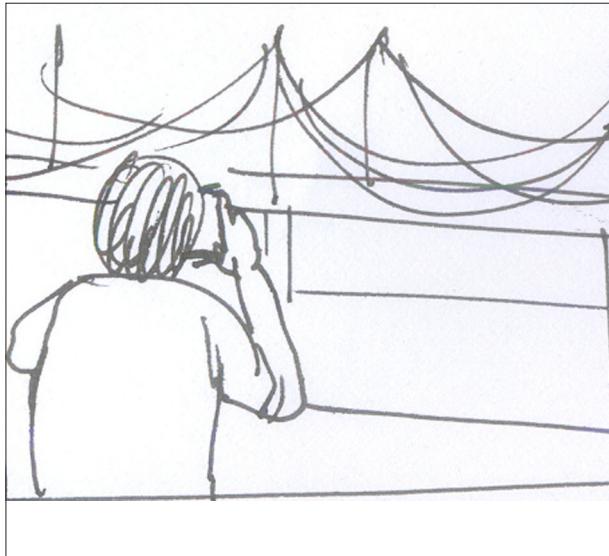
Music: Flute continues.



Short: Shooting in gate way of india.

Camera: Long short.

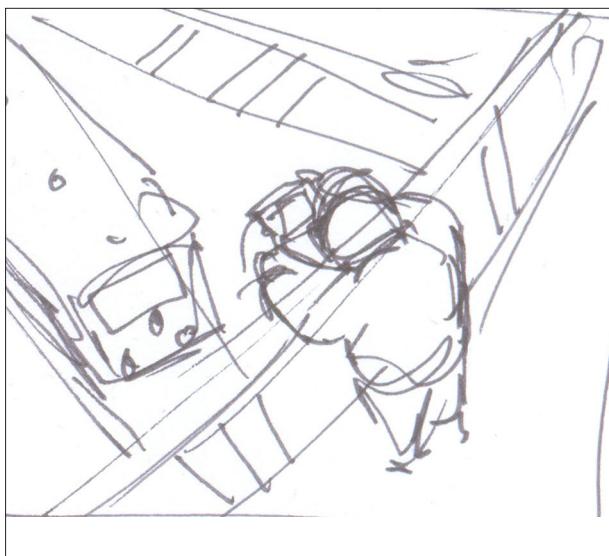
Music: Flute continues.



Short: A seashore from where he clicked the sunset with the worli sealink in silhouette..

Camera: Long short, mid short.

Music: Flute continues.



Short: Train and rail tracks from over bridge.

Camera: Tight short, mid short.

Music: Flute continues.



Short: Lake side conversation with another photographer.

Camera: Tight short, mid short and long short.

Music: Flute continues.

Pictures taken by satvir yogi the Protagonist of the film



Lake Side



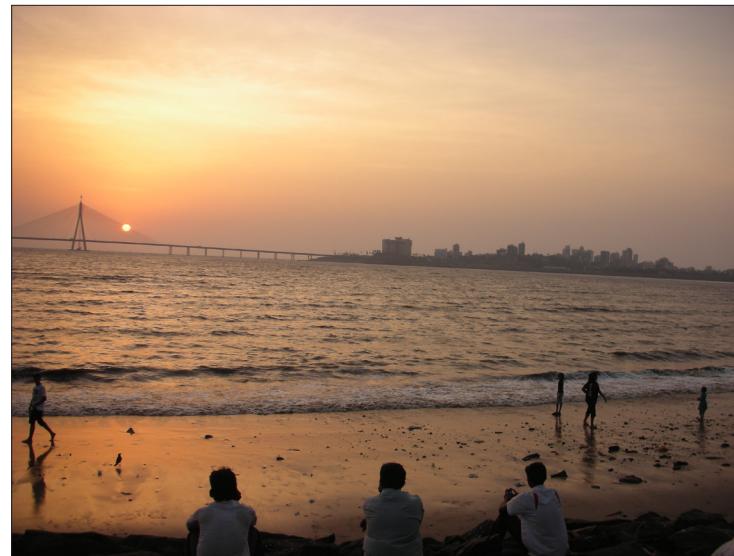
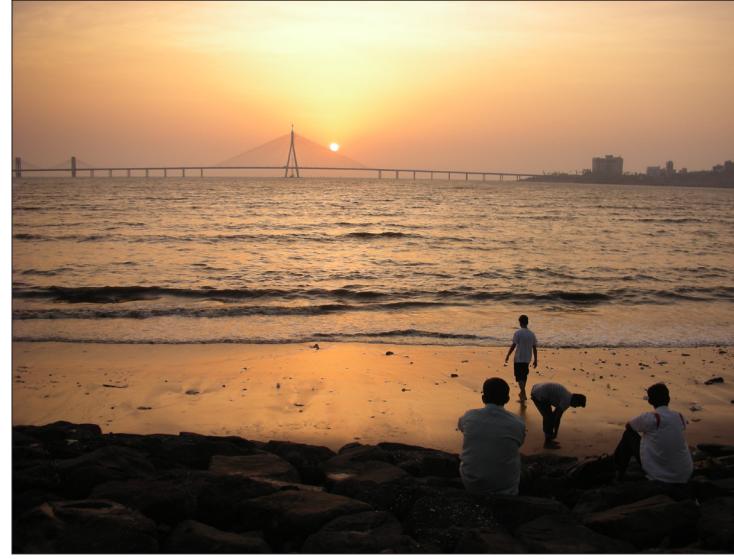
From window



St. Xavers



J.J college mural



Gate way of India

Worli sealink



Train

Powai Lake

Thought Process

As the common notion of image almost always directly correlates with the hidden assumption of physical vision and visibility, I was at complete shock and awe to see a person without vision (vision, as the visualizing capability of human eye) clicking some award winning pictures. It was something that cannot let itself ignored and unattended. You are bound to be attracted towards it, be inquisitive, get fascinated, and so was I.

They all were part of Mr. Partha Bhoumik's "Blind with Camera", an organization where he teaches photography to them who are deprived of the colors and frames and lights of this world. Some of them are completely unable to see, some are partially, but at the end of the day, the truth remains that they are "blind people" and "not like us".

My notion of vision and visibility, which strongly carried the notion of image and image making till that day, was devastated badly on that day, and that feeling precisely triggered this urge which made this film about them. I found a new world in them, which we can never think about. They have their own images, they have their own colors, frames, lights, and everything else what we boast off of having with us, still they are so different! They can measure a frame from sound; they can measure the light through heat. They have their own colors which come to them in a form of temperature and illumination. They always have the image behind their defunct visionary organ, which normally do not differ very much from what we "see".

This film, thus, deals with the deconstruction of the notion of image "viewing". It says and shows that images are not always seen, they are built, destroyed and felt also. It shows that images are not related with your medical ability; rather it depends on your expression and sensibility. The pivot element of this film is to break the barrier of image making world, to celebrate the joy of feeling an image and the freedom of image making for everyone.

SCREEN SHOTS



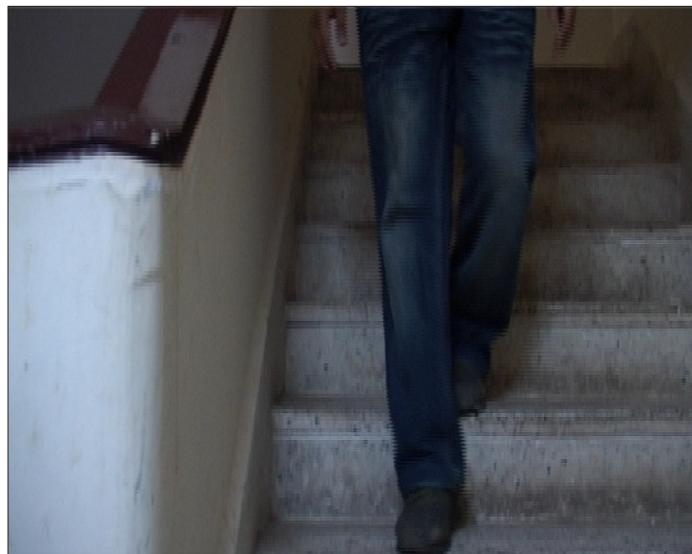
Protagonist in his room



Protagonist packing his bag



Corridor



Stairs



Road



Lake side



St. xaviers college



J.J college



Gate way of India



Worli sealink



St. xaviers college



Powai lake



The others and him.

The screen shots

A lot of improvisation happened during the shoot. Special care has been given to light and backgrounds.

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