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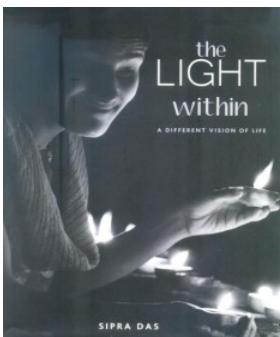
OUTSTANDING PHOTOGRAPHS: A UNIQUE BOOK FROM SIPRA DAS

No



I have in the past attended many book-release functions. But the one that I participated in on Monday this week (November 18, 2013) was really unforgettable. The function was held at the Rashtrapati Bhavan, in the presence of the President, but the book was not released by him. The formal release of the book, titled "The Light Within" was done by two sweet little girls by name Pragya and Prachi. The two are twin sisters; since birth both cannot see. The two are now studying in XII Standard. Sipra's book carries an earlier picture of theirs with their father.

Prachi and Pragya, when they were 6 years old with their father, a Delhi Businessman



The book, which I have described in the title as 'unique' is a compilation of photographs by a photojournalist, Sipra Das.

I have been in politics for decades, and based in Delhi. And so I have known Sipra Das for years. No one can describe her better than Gulzar, himself a great artist, who has written the Foreword to the book. The very opening paragraphs give the readers a graphic idea of both the photographer as well as her photographs, which truly make the book unique. Gulzar writes:

Sipra Das had a heart in place of the lenses on her camera. Those who see and feel the faces with their fingers, have an inner lens to see with their hearts.

Sipra has the same.

Mr. Jawahar Kaul, visually handicapped is the principal of the "All India Confederation of the Blind". He said: "You can see with your eyes, but cannot see with your heart, as we can." But Sipra sees with both.

After going through the photographs of Sipra Das, the life seems so normal with the fisherman Misri Sahani, Safat Ali Hasan, Riyazuddin, the motorcycle mechanic, that I felt my own capabilities were so less, lacking, and handicapped.



Misri Sahani

This book has been published by Niyogi Books. The invitation for the function indicates the venue, date and dignitaries who would attend, not only in conventional print, but also in Braille.

It was in 2005 that Sipra had first invited me to inaugurate an exhibition of her photographs in New Delhi. The theme was the same she has now considerably developed to publish this full-fledged 204-page book. I gather that she organized that earlier exhibition also at eight different cities of the country.

As the publishers of this book have aptly summed up its contents :

"The Light Within captures the extraordinary lives of the visually Impaired through images that stimulate genuine empathy and a certain degree of awe.



They enthrall you with their wit, their perspicacity, their ability to see beyond the obvious. In the Light Within, Sipra has sought to narrate tales of struggle and survival, of despair and hope, of resilience and triumphs.

Each story in this book is filled with drama. The characters in the book open our eyes. They teach us to see life in a new light. They help us evolve as a human being. They bring us face to face with blinding flashes of truth that would have remained outside our ken had their amazing lives not touched us through this book. They inspire us."

Beginning her career during the early 1980s, Sipra first worked with the *Anandabazar Patrika* group and then with the *Aajkaal* newspaper in Kolkata. She joined the Press Trust of India (PTI) in 1987. She developed the PTI photo service in Kolkata before moving to New Delhi to take charge of the news agency's national photo coverage.

She later worked with the *India Today* magazine for more than two decades, covering major political news, the country's senior politicians, and politically and historically important events."



RESHMI SONAWANE



RIYAZUDDIN



PREETI MONGA



SANGEETA

The pictures given on pages 2-3 provide the readers of this blog with a sample of the extraordinary lives the sightless chosen by Sipra have lived.

SANGEETA, 38
School Teacher

Daughter of an iron trader in Muzaffarpur, Bihar, Sangeeta runs a residential school for the visually impaired, besides being the brain behind Shubham, an NGO that helps poor children from the villages in the vicinity. Being sightless, she found all her efforts to study in a school for normal children thwarted. But her academic record has been nothing short of spectacular. She went to a school for the visually impaired and passed with flying colours, ranking tenth on the merit list. She went on to acquire MPhil and PhD degrees. In 1986, she was among the 300 university toppers who were invited by the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi for high tea. She was the only visually challenged person on that select list of invitees. The PM asked her what she wanted to do next. Her reply was prompt. She said she wanted to help the visually challenged lead normal lives the way she does. The rest, as they say, is history. Sangeeta has since gone from strength to strength in her mission.

MISRI SAHANI, 30
Fisherman

Misri Sahani is a sightless fisherman in Buddhanagara village, Bihar. He never returns home empty-handed. The eldest of seven siblings, he lost his eyesight at the age of two. He was under treatment for two months, but the doctor passed away. Misri received no medical attention thereafter – his family and neighbours believed he was a victim of black magic. His luck took a positive turn when he began accompanying his fisherman-father to the Barigandak river. Misri swims and is a more than competent fisherman. He earns up to Rs.5000 a month when the going is good. The haul, he says, is the best in the months of September and October.

Misri also owns a general Provisions store, which he set up with the help of a small government loan. His father and mother run the shop when the young man is out fishing. He often spends the entire night in his boat.

RESHMI SONAWANE, 32
Beautician

Reshmi Sonawane isn't your average beautician. Nor does she fit into the image of a visually challenged woman. The mother of a boy, she is genetically blind. But that hasn't stopped her from running a beauty parlour from her well-appointed Mumbai home. She provides a range of services – from basic beauty treatment to hairdressing to aromatherapy. Reshmi's condition was detected when she was a five-year-old student of Hillgreen school, Peddar Road. "I do not know the cause of my blindness," she says. "It was during my 12th standard exams that the letters of the alphabet began to merge," she recalls. A counselor helped her tide over the disability and she completed her education – Reshmi is a History Honours graduate – with the help of readers and writers. She then went on to acquire additional training in export-import management. Because of her pretty eyes, Reshmi often encounters boorish behaviour from bus conductors who refuse to accept that she is actually sightless. "I find it very humiliating," she says. Her husband is a Tata Motors dealer. She married him against her family's wishes. Her parents severed all ties with her. Today, the gutsy Reshmi has no reason to regret her choice.

RIYAZUDDIN, 55
Motorcycle mechanic

Riyazuddin is a motorcycle mechanic in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. His skills in his chosen field are legendary. Engineers and mechanics from around the country consult him when they need specialized help with repairs. One of ten siblings, Riyazuddin, also known as Munnabhai, lost his eyesight at 23.

In the early 1970s, he had been taken to a doctor with an insect bite on the eyelid. The doctor gave him a medicine that was past its expiry date. He lost vision in one eye. Six months later, the strain affected his other eye as well. His family was too poor to afford further treatment. In 1980, he went to a shop in Delhi to buy tyres. Hoping to take advantage of his sightlessness, the shopkeeper gave him a used tyre. Riyazuddin felt it with his hands and instantly realised that it was defective. He returned the tyre and asked for another. The shopkeeper gave him three old tyres one by one. Each time, Riyazuddin called his bluff. Eventually, the shopkeeper realised the futility of his ploy.

The fifth tyre that he handed over to Riyazuddin was spanking new. As the latter turned to leave, the sheepish shopkeeper apologized. "I've shortchanged many customers over the years, but you've opened my eyes. I will never cheat a customer ever again," he said.

Riyazuddin is a finicky mechanic – he handpicks every part. His repairs come with a one year guarantee. The early days were tough, but thanks to the consistent quality of his service, his clientele expanded quickly. Today his eldest son, Faisal – Riyaz has nine children – has learnt the ropes from him.

Engineers from Enfield Chennai often come to Bhopal to seek his assistance. Even other mechanics, when they cannot repair a motorcycle, turn to him for help. He hears the sound of a motorcycle on the mobile phone and can tell what is wrong with the engine. It is not without reason that his customers swear by Riyazuddin.

PREETI MONGA, 49
Public Relations Executive

Punjab-born Preeti Monga is an exceptionally driven woman. Sightless since the age of six, she is a public relations executive with an eye hospital in Delhi. "I follow my heart. Nothing can prevent me from achieving what I want to. It might take time, but I don't give up," she says. Her life is a living testimony to that spirit. She was a student of Loreto Convent, Delhi Cantonment, until Standard VIII. Expelled because of her condition, she had to sit at home for a while. She then enrolled in an open school, but that didn't help matters either. She felt frustrated and unhappy. Her marriage led to more problems. Her jobless husband, who fathered two children, was abusive and physically violent. Back then Preeti was an aerobics instructor for the blind and earned enough to sustain herself and her children. She divorced her husband. Preeti's second husband is a colleague ten years younger. "When I proposed, he took two days to decide," she recalls. They've been married for over a decade now. Today a proud owner of a flat in an east Delhi locality, she designed the interiors all by herself. Preeti loves to be in control.

TAILPIECE



Going through the wonderful pictures and amazing stories in Sipra's book, I am reminded of an extremely astounding such case that I

have encountered in my own political career.

When in 1998-2004, I was Home Minister in Shri A.B. Vajpayee's Cabinet, my counterpart in U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair's Cabinet was, at the outset, Jack Straw (1998-2001) and later, David Blunkett (2001-2004).

Of these two, Blunkett's case is not just astounding, for many it would seem incredible. David Blunkett, born June 6, 1947, has been a Labour Party MP for Sheffield Brightside from 1987 to 2010. Blind since birth, and coming from a poor family in one of Sheffield's most deprived districts, he rose first to become Education and Employment Secretary, then Home Secretary, and later Work and Pensions Secretary in Tony Blair's Government.

It was in 2002 perhaps that Blunkett visited India. He came a couple of days after Republic Day Parade. He attended Beating the Retreat function at Vijay Chowk. I had arranged to ensure that the entire programme and the music of the various bands were provided to him in Braille.

The longish write-up about David Blunkett in the Wikipedia gives the names of his guide dogs – Ruby, Teddy, Offa, Lucy, Sadie and Cosby – and says that they have become familiar characters in the House of Commons, usually sleeping at his feet on the floor of the chamber, inspiring occasional witty comments from Blunkett and his fellow MPs from both sides of the House. In one memorable incident, Lucy (a black Labrador curly coat retriever cross) vomited during a speech by a Conservative member. On occasions when Blunkett was guided by (then PM) Tony Blair the wry comment was made, "Who is guiding whom?"

L.K. Advani
New Delhi
22 Nov, 2013

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3

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- [October 2013](#)
- [September 2013](#)
- [August 2013](#)
- [July 2013](#)
- [June 2013](#)
- [May 2013](#)
- [April 2013](#)
- [March 2013](#)
- [January 2013](#)
- [December 2012](#)
- [November 2012](#)
- [October 2012](#)
- [September 2012](#)
- [August 2012](#)
- [July 2012](#)
- [June 2012](#)
- [May 2012](#)
- [April 2012](#)
- [March 2012](#)
- [February 2012](#)
- [January 2012](#)
- [October 2011](#)
- [September 2011](#)

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- [July 2011](#)
- [June 2011](#)
- [May 2011](#)
- [April 2011](#)
- [March 2011](#)
- [February 2011](#)
- [January 2011](#)
- [December 2010](#)
- [November 2010](#)
- [October 2010](#)
- [September 2010](#)
- [August 2010](#)
- [July 2010](#)
- [June 2010](#)
- [May 2010](#)
- [April 2010](#)
- [March 2010](#)
- [February 2010](#)
- [January 2010](#)
- [May 2009](#)
- [April 2009](#)
- [March 2009](#)
- [February 2009](#)
- [January 2009](#)

• Categories

- [Blog in English](#) (186)
- [Blog in Hindi](#) (183)
- [Wisdom Soup for the Poll](#) (4)