

Aesthetic Concepts
of
BLIND Persons.

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MSR-2

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AESTHETIC CONCEPTS OF BLIND PERSONS

Special Project

by

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INTRODUCTION

It is an inherent, original capacity imbibed within all of us that often makes us exclaim beautiful, wonderful and so on in rapturous tones, stumbling upon the creation of Nature and man himself alike. We can term this capacity as aesthetic sensibility. So natural is this trait with us and apparently so single its outcome (i.e. the exclamations), that none of us would be able to divulge any information as to why we find something/ someone beautiful. The simplicity is but a consequence of a highly complex process, which is till now being amply investigated into and has been quite comprehensibly discussed in texts authored by a few psychologists. It would still be useful here to go through some fundamental theory.

Naturally, the first question that arises is, what is it, in the creation that makes us exercise our aesthetic sensibility. Analysis offers, that there are some definite elements in the creation which work either individually or in a group upon our senses. The basic elements are balance, symmetry, proportion, rhythm etc. There have been established various concepts of these elements, and how they work on our senses. For example, there are various orientations of an object in a given space. All the orientations do not appear as balanced

to our eyes. But on the other hand if there are various objects, then relatively they may appear balanced or otherwise. This concept of balance is co-related to other concepts like scale and proportion. The eye has its own measure of comparing sizes and volumes of positive and negative spaces and this measure results into an effect of balance or imbalance on the psychology. Similarly there is the concept of symmetry, bilateral symmetry, multidirectional symmetry etc. which involves perception of proportions of various elements in an object. (for example, the human body) with the perception of a particular form is attached the concept of pattern and its rhythm resulting out of repetition of units and the whole effect may be one of harmony, where there is a definite connection between a whole and a part (for example, the various notes in music).

Scope

All these ideas are connected mostly with the vision of the eye and the very thought that associates with this is that, in the absence of this faculty what would be the method of aesthetic judgements, and if other faculties like tactile and auditory are employed would the outcome be related to these established concepts of aesthetics? This investigation is the main idea behind taking up this project.

Now, the work presents interviews of only two blind persons and this really cannot generalize into concepts of blind people at large. But it gives an insight into the basic process that could be working in their minds. A methodology has been adopted for this kind of research wherein there has been an attempt to study an individual and his perception of environment set up around him. This requires an indepth study of many persons. Due to certain time limits I decided to restrict myself to the study of two persons only. Though for such type of work video recording is the best method, again due to certain difficulties of transport, only tape recording was done. This is of paramount importance because meanings of certain statement which one may not get immediately on hearing once could be got by re-hearing and moreover analysis becomes easier. Even then I would like to point out that this type of recording should be done only after informing the subject and this might affect inhibitions in the subject, which was the case with one of my subjects, and I eventually did not record that interview.

Finally, the comments made by me about the subjects' statements is essentially an attempt to co-relate their ideas to the concepts of persons with all faculties intact which have been investigated into by me before interviewing. The statements are still open to different conclusions, and my comments to questioning by anyone.

I was moving around Bombay, trying to get access to Blinds' institute/home and found myself talking to Mr. Sharan one of the managing staff at the Braille Press run by NAB (National Association of the Blind). Well, he said "your subject is new", when I had briefed him on my seminar topic. "That is my subject". This one from a lady sitting beside me busy clicking away at a Braille writer who I noticed was blind. She was a very soft spoken person, somewhere around fortyfive years of age, tall and slim, dressed in a saree. She was introduced to me as Mrs. Usha Sharan. Afterwards I gathered from her that she had lost sight due to viral infection of iris, when she was about 23 years old. If you wish, we could talk about it some time she said. I was just too eager and after two days I met her at her residence, a small two room flat in the institute itself, housing the couple. The room I entered was a small one with a bed adjoining a glass door opening to the big terrace. There were cupboards at the opposite side parallel to the bed. Entrance door lay between the two which led to another larger room. We settled ourselves on a double bed facing again a glass door opening out to a large terrace looking down to a sea. There was a big steel table near this bed. Along the perpendicular wall a kitchen platform and along the opposite wall a small seat and a fridge.

Since she already had certain knowledge of the aesthetic elements, we settled to discuss these points.

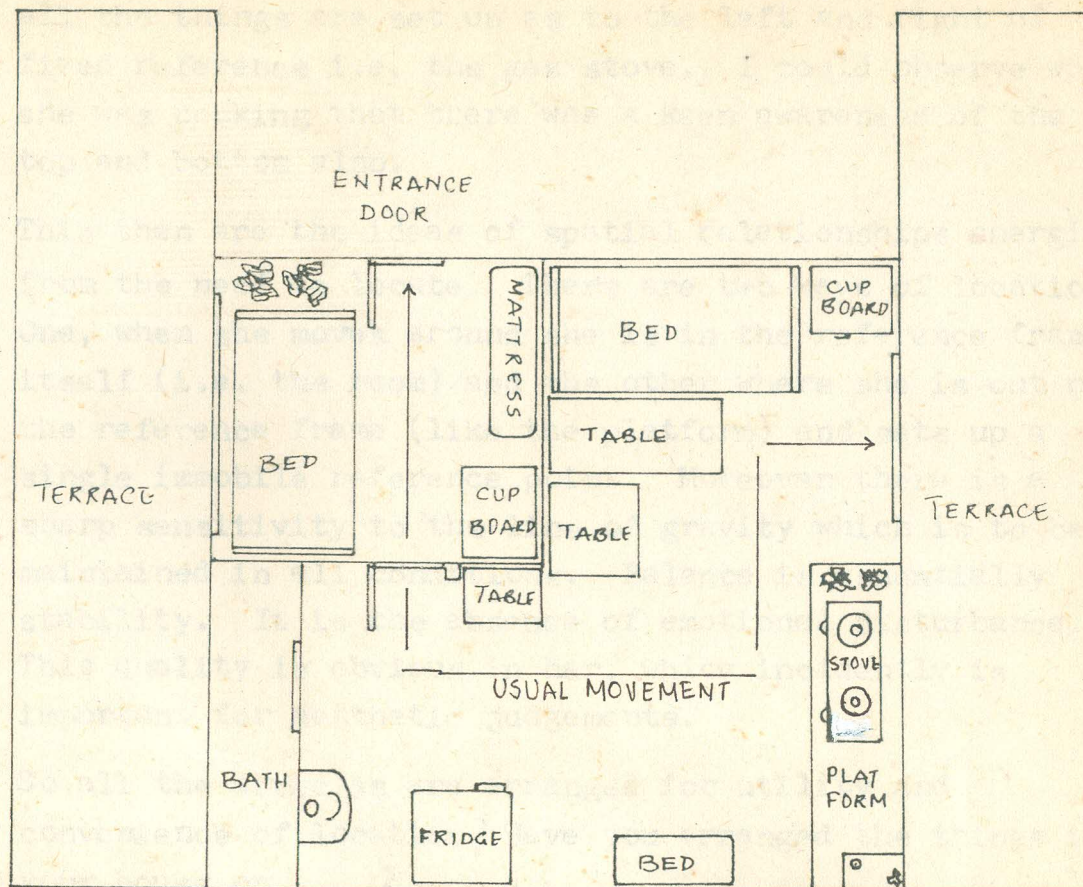
We have these ideas of balance, rhythm, symmetry etc. I would like to know whether you also have these concepts.

First of all, there are no such categories like the seeing and the non-seeing [very politely]. Everywhere in the world the term blind is not used now. They use the term visually impaired.

Taken aback though, I thought it was the usual emotional crib against the world, or was it really? No. As she further proved to me, and I gradually ceased to categorise. What about balance?

Yes, balance is a very nice thing. It is the location that is important. Balance is overcoming the problem of location and for locating a direction is necessary with reference to something immobile. The line of gravity is also important.

Saying this, she demonstrated to me, as to how she moves around the house [Ref. fig. 1]. Key according to her is the setting up of a fixed reference which is permanent and then a clear idea of left and right of that reference is established. This gives a sense of direction and the whole process of location is carried out thus. This feature is quite highlighted even in the arrangement of



SCHEMATIC LAYOUT OF THE HOUSE.
[FIG. 1]

the household articles on the kitchen platform, wherein all the things are set up as to the left and right of fixed reference i.e. the gas stove. I could observe while she was cooking that there was a keen awareness of the top and bottom also.

This then are the ideas of spatial relationships emerging from the need to locate. There are two ways of location. One, when she moves around she is in the reference frame itself (i.e. the room) and the other where she is out of the reference frame (like the platform) and sets up a single immobile reference point. Moreover there is a sharp sensitivity to the line of gravity which is to be maintained in all conditions. Balance is essentially stability. It is the absence of emotional disturbance. This quality is obvious in her, which incidently is important for aesthetic judgements.

So all the articles are arranged for utility and convenience of location? Have you arranged the things in your house or?

Yes of course I have. And I will tell you how much I am fond of changes. I feel creative and powerful. Not only that, it gives me an idea of scale.

Oh scale. That means you have a pre-notion of your surroundings ?

Yes. Look at this double bed. It is about 7 ft x 5 ft. And there is this wall, which is 10 ft. long with the door on the other side. So I know where to put the bed. In fact to get the idea, one likes to change.

And proportion ?

Levels are important. If I want to put up frames, I have the idea of small and big. I would put it up on the wall, whose length I know and then according to the shape of the frame, the one I would like to touch the most, I would put it above the head or at an arm's distance.

Not only proportion. I think an object also has a personality. An oil can has a dignity and should be placed in a dignified way. Proportion also in colours. I would like to know whether the bottle has cobalt blue colour or indigo blue. I like things to be described to me. The sense of touch is primary and vision secondary. I should know the tomato colour to feel tempted to eat it. But this was earlier when I had just lost sight. Maturity comes and I feel tomato does not cease to be so, because I cannot see its colour.

I observed a definite order in the arrangement of the objects. The scale is generated through the priorities of need and liking. It seems probable that the two flower pots on the platform are placed not only for easy access but also to break the monotony of a relatively flat surface.

Colour of objects is an important factor that aids the appreciation of the form. For example, what she says about a tomato. Tomato's state of ripeness and its form is recognised kinesthetically. Now it is known that the kinesthetic experiences are supposed to register depth and volume in their correct dimensions. The sensations derived from the organs of touch, i.e. muscles, joints and tendons contribute to the awareness of the space. But because she lost sight at quite a later age the old associations of the colours are dominant and the full appreciation of the form comes only when colour is also known.

The form recognition also includes a search for expression through colours, shapes and textures. And these elements build up an idea of rhythm by comparison of sizes and proportions of the various elements contained in an object. This for example becomes clear when she explains the process of recognising the form of a bedsheet that has textured red and blue stripes, which are raised and flat.

Thus ended our first meeting. The whole conversation was recorded which helped me to come to certain conclusions. I analysed this part and I thought that since she tended to be verybsensitive to the environment that had set up around her there was a possibility of going into the details of her comprehensions of that environment which could include some stark changes in her perceptions after losing sight. And also, some objective tests could be helpful to know the exact choosing methods and some understanding behind it. So there was a lot to be discussed and she did not seem to mind a next meeting and once more I was there at her residence warmly welcomed by her.

Oh, it is you Kashmira.

You recognised ?

You know from the voice. One generally notices things like a round face or a certain figure, but I judge from the voices. I like a relaxed voice. Not the one with gusto.

We were chatting, positioned on a very spacious open terrace looking down on a really splendid sea. There were crows squawking around. I had hardly heard it.

Do you hear these crows ? I like to listen to the birds. One will say something and I will wait for the other to come. There will be so many sounds and a whole patternis created. I can create a lot of imagery on my mental canvas.

What a capacity ! It must be a sheer joy to be able to detect a pattern in the calls of a crow. There is such a lot of awareness and sensitivity developed to the different types of sounds. But I would like to point out here that though she felt the sound was created by many cross they were actually two crows. This directs towards a possibility of increased sensitivity of the auditory sense which aided her in separating the many sounds which are made by a single bird, which we may not be aware of. It seems this sharpness of the auditory sense has developed to compensate for the lost faculty of optical vision. What about music then?

Do you like music ?

Oh yes, I am very fond of music. I will tell you once I had asked for some Russian music from Bulganin, when he came to India. But when I heard it I was surprised that I found the music very harsh and hateful. At the same time then I started liking Nadaswaram. I feel music is very psychological. There are moods, and moods have to do with the action. From the sea you will hear a mixing sound. There is the rhythm of 'tandava' in the high tide. It is like Nataraja dancing on the sea.

I think there is an identification with the emotional state?

Yes. And this emotional state has to be transferred to something creative. I started writing poems. I learnt typing in a record time of three days. Earlier it was a dull job of a steno, the same typing is a symbol of hope for me now.

A very positive approach to the life indeed. Though I do not understand the sudden preference for the Karnatak music, it may be due to the more rhythm attached to this style of music. Moreover certain sounds have been light perhaps due to its connection with certain events (e.g. typewriter). What about selection? How do you choose your personal things of use? I think we can make some experiment

Oh, these are watch straps. Six of them [counts].

Yes. Given all, what would be your preference?[Ref.fig.2].

This is very metallic. It is good only for men.

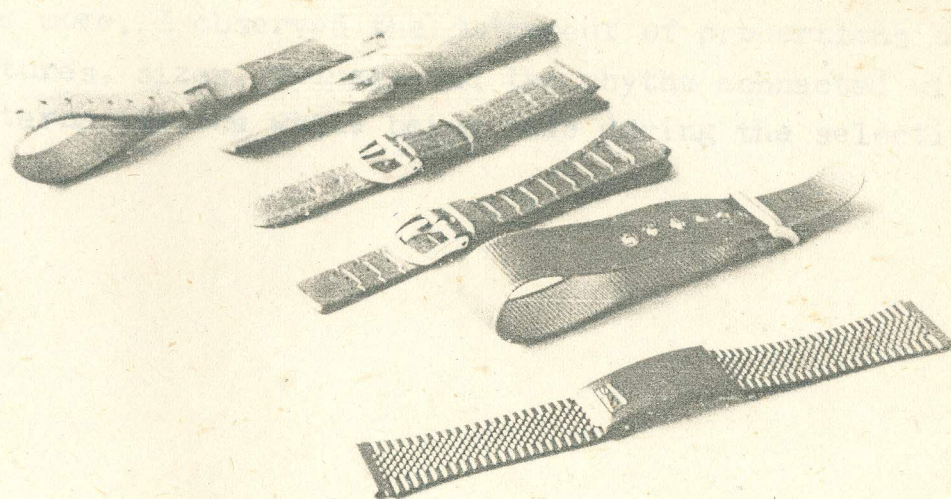
This is very flimsy. This has a rubbery feeling.

But it has a pattern.

Yes, but it is too shallow. To me it is like a bridge of stepping stones. If it was sharper, I would like it.

This one? [I passed the one with fluffy surface]

Yes. This is really good. It has a good width and moreover a very good texture on outer surface



ORDER OF PREFERENCE (L to R)
[FIG. 2]

and inner surface is smooth. The thickness is just right. Moreover the holes are also prominent.

And this last two ? [both leather but with different textures].

They are O.K.

Once more, I observed the judgement of proportions of textures, sizes, volumes and the rhythm connected with the patterns all the while being made during the selection.

After this interview, there were two options open :

1. To continue with this person and go into more details.
2. To take up as a contrast, study of someone who has lost sight at an early age.

I decided to opt for the second alternative. I met her at the workshop for the blind (NAB), sitting in the telephone booth, very dutifully taking the calls. "Can I talk to you" I asked. "But I am on duty" came a soft, polite reply. Finally, we did manage to get some time and soon both of us were alone in a big auditorium. Her name : Ms. Radia Champa. A simple girl who after her tenth standard of the school was being trained as a telephone operator. She lost her sight at the age of eight due to cataract (thanks to a negligent eye surgeon). But even at that tender age, she courageously faced the calamity and has no complaints to waste time in spite of not very encouraging parents, who just took for granted that her capabilities were few now.

Where do you stay ?

Mazgaon dock.

How do you come here everyday ?

By bus.

Alone ?

First time my mother came to leave me afterwards
I came alone. I get down at Band Box.

How do you know it has come ?

There is a very sharp and a big bend before Band Box.
Also I get that medicine smell from the Glaxo
factory, so I know it has come (laughs).

You cross the road by yourself ?

No. This is a very big crossing and many vehicles
are there, so somebody always helps me in crossing.
The one near my house is small and I can cross it
alone.

You studied in braille ?

Yes.

What were your subjects ?

All. But Maths, we had only arithmetic. No algebra
or geometry because we cannot understand the angles
and all.

What dresses do you like ?

All. Mainly salwar-kameez.

Do you select the pattern ?

No. My mother selects for me. They say I would not understand. But I will tell them the length of the kurta, its sleeves, according to the fashion.

How about two sleeves of unequal length?

(Laughs). It will look so funny!

Why ?

Our hands are of the same length, how can we wear different sleeve lengths ? Would you wear ?

[My question backfired ! I could only laugh].

What would you call beautiful ? Let us say, when you meet someone.

Someone who is talking well. Kindness. Not rude. I think he is beautiful. From the clothes he is wearing.

Clothes ? But how can you make out?

No, I can tell that you are wearing a skirt and blouse. You are shorter than me. Not very thin nor fat. After talking I can make out.

[I am taller than her].

Do you like music?

I listen to film songs. Not new songs, but old ones. New ones do not make any sense. I like instrumental music also.

Which Tabla, Shahnai, Sitar?

Harmonium. It has all types of sound. I also go for movies.

Oh, yes? Which did you see last?

Ghulami.

Someone tells you what is happening?

No, the dialogues are sufficient. In English movies there are less dialogues, so I do not see them. [pause] I can also make out, whether the dance is outdoor or indoor or whether it is disco or some other.

You like ornaments?

I like them. All, but I prefer round or square shape. Also stones.

"Radia, why have you left the booth" This was from a lady (her teacher). I explained to her but this was the end of the first meeting. You must come to my house Radia said. So spontaneous I could not decline the offer.

Three days later, I was standing at her door step, panting (climbed ten floors, lift was not working) and it took me ten minutes to recover. We were in a small room, where her mother was reading Kuran and her aunt generally relaxing.

Today I have got some objects. Let us see. What would you like?

You have brought combs.

Yes, and bangles too. Let us see the combs first. They are six of them. Which one you like? Let us have an order of preference.

This, this ... and this. [Ref. fig. 3]

Why?

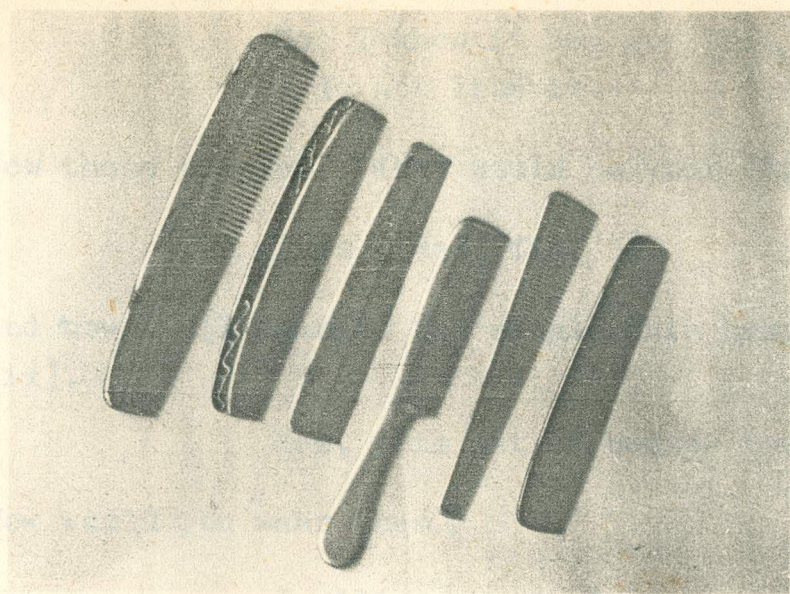
The first two have a good grip and will comb the hair quickly. The second two have a smooth feeling on the hand. This one (fifth) is very thin and light.

O.K. If all the combs function equally well, what would be the choice?

It will be like this [Ref. fig. 4]

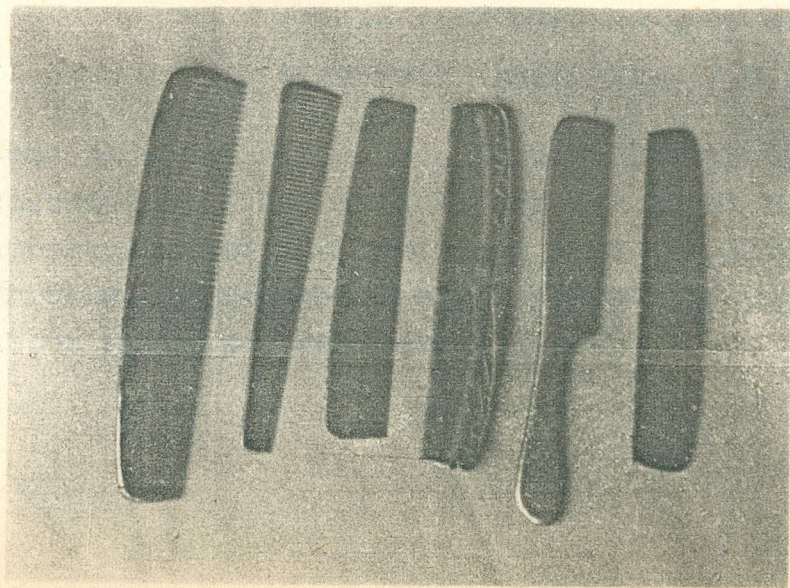
This one has two different end lengths (passing a hand over the slant) so it is nice. This one has a different feeling on the teeth. It is smoother than others.

You do not like this? (I passed her the ornate comb)



ORDER OF
PREFERENCE
[FIG. 3] (Lt

How would you like to wear these beards?



CHANGED
ORDER OF
PREFERENCE
[FIG. 4] (Lt

You do not like this? (I passed her the ornate one).

No. I know it has got this carving, still
I do not like it.

Now these bangles. What would be your choice?

This [Ref. fig. 5].

And how? [I changed the single thin bangle into a set of
six].

Yes, this set is better than single [Ref. fig. 6].

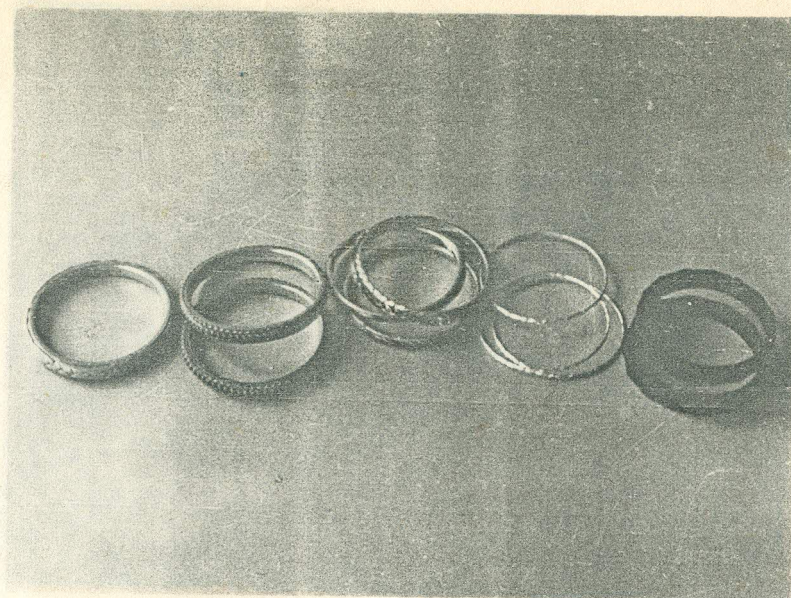
How would you wear them?

I will wear equal number on both hands.

How would you like to wear these bangles?

Either like this or only two of them, but not any
other way. [Ref. fig. 7,8].

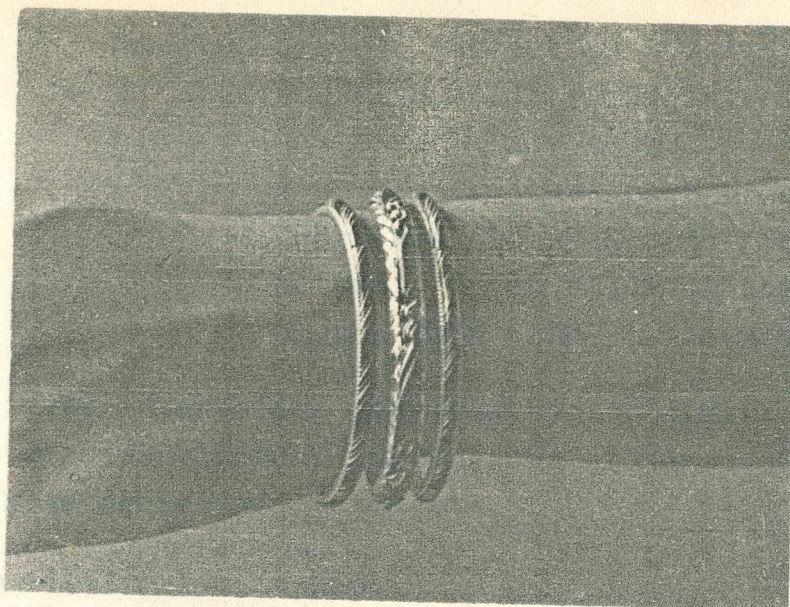
Some nice, hot coffee was brought for me and while I
consumed it I happened to ask her about her school
curriculum and she mentioned that she likes essay
writing. I thought I could ask her to say something
about where she has actually been.



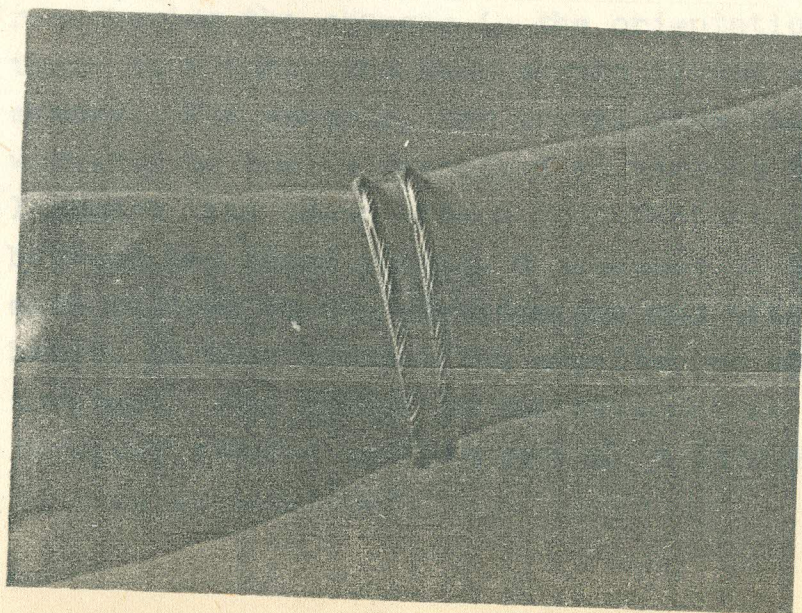
ORDER OF
PREFERENCE
(L to R)
[FIG. 5]



CHANGED
ORDER OF
PREFERENCE
(L to R)
[FIG. 6]



ORDER OF
WEARING
BANGLES - 1
[FIG. 7]



ORDER OF
WEARING
BANGLES - 2
[FIG. 8]

Have you been to the sea-shore ?

Yes. I like it in the evening and morning. The sun rise and the sun set. Also the waves of the sea make a nice sound. Waves are like small mountains (I have been to the mountains also). There are clouds in the rainy season. They are like cotton. I can relax on the beach. I like to walk on the sand without footwear.

A very interesting conversation of simple statements. I gathered certain impressions of her concepts reflected in these series of statements.

Spatial relationships

The idea of spatial relationships is very vivid in the memory. A new surrounding and its location is sensed essentially by remembering the changes in the orientation of the body. If there is a turn, the body senses it and stores in the memory. For example, her travel from the house to the workshop by bus is described as various turns and other landmark like odour from a drug factory. So there are between two fixed points, a sequence of directional changes, each related to the previous one and after a certain habit, it also arouses the expectation of the subsequent movement. Any change in the sequence is termed as disturbance. Moreover after a certain period, a fairly accurate sense of time is developed.

Forms and Shapes

The recognition of the form comes through various channels. There is an idea of basic shapes like circle, square, triangle (which apparently has been registered in the mind during her childhood before losing sight). But there is a preference for round shape which may be because the tactile feeling is easiest to get out of this shape. It has no angles and is most complete form.

Symmetry

Secondly the idea of bilateral symmetry is the most appealing one. Various instances show this. Bangles - where only in a particular order, a set of three bangles is worn or not at all. Also wearing of the bangles in both the hands and that too an equal number of the same type. This strong inclination seems to have come from the bilateral symmetry, the human body exhibits and there exists an inherent awareness of it, which strongly reflects on certain judgements.

Textures and Rhythm

As far as the textures are concerned, apart from the tactile feeling of the nature of the surface such as hard, soft, sharp etc. there is also a good deal of sensing done of the pattern and the resulting rhythm. Example, bangles - A subtle rhythm is liked more than

a pronounced one. Also there is a preference for textural difference in the same object, like having stones in the ornaments. Moreover, most of the elements in a group appeal more than the existence of a single element. It gives a scope for comparison of sizes, volumes and in the process a formation of the image of a pattern.

Sound feedback

If the voice of a person does not sound rude and is well meaning content-wise, the person is beautiful. This judgement may not be termed as aesthetic. As Immanuel Kant says of purposiveness without purpose; Rather than an extraneous purpose, there is a design enjoyed for its own sake and having no purpose or function beyond arousing the mind to enjoyable contemplation. But in this case, the content imparted by a certain type of sound seems primarily important, and then a further investigation is done which may change the judgement.

From the direction of the voice, it becomes possible to make out whether the person is short or tall (this is with respect to herself) which adds to the image being found. As to the detection of the clothes that someone is wearing, it may be entirely due to the culture detected through the talk and its association to the taste of a person. To be able to make out in the

movies whether the dances are pop ones or classical is also quite a capacity. An image of movement is formed by co-relating the beats. These beats when follow a particular pattern help to build up the form of the stance. In fact the detection of complex patterns gives scope for an involved search and appreciation results out of this absorbing process, which is aesthetic experience in itself.

gain more of functional value. Moreover, what is important to note is the extra sensitive use of the other faculties which results in experiences and perception of their environment, very different from what normal persons perceive. But as in the case of every individual, the background, the upbringing, the exposure of the person matters a good deal and they reflect very strongly on the aesthetic judgements made by the blind persons.

scope of further work

The work does not help to conclude the aesthetic concepts of blind people in general but gives a direction in two ways. Firstly it gives an idea of the methodology that could be adopted for such type of research wherein after this stage, it could be possible to study in much more details the blind person's behaviour in the aesthetic contexts he is concerned.

CONCLUSION

Though the instruments used to recognise an object as aesthetic are very different from the ones used dominantly by people who have an intact optical vision, the aesthetic elements seem to affect the judgements of blind persons in a similar fashion. But the difference is that they enjoy the aesthetics of the process of judging much more than the aesthetics of an object itself which tends to gain more of functional value. Moreover, what is important to note is the extra sensitive use of the other faculties which results in awareness and perception of their environment, very different from what normal persons perceive. But as in the case of every individual, the background, the upbringing, the exposure of the person matters a good deal and they reflect very strongly on the aesthetic judgements made by the blind persons.

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Secondly the work gives an idea to the designers about the considerations they should make when designing for the blind people and moreover its role becomes of paramount importance in transforming the perception of any designer. It gives an insight into the search for facts and their understanding from a totally inbiased stand points, a feature very important to become a useful designer.

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