

Vision and Not Visibility: The Power of the 64 Squares

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One day in 2014, I sat across a familiar board against a visually impaired player. It was the very first time in my competitive chess career that I had competed against a person who couldn't 'see'. I was fascinated by this encounter. A variety of questions ran through my mind as I played, clearly distracting me from thinking about what was happening in the game. I thought- how did this person play the moves when he can't 'visualise' the board?, how did he learn the rules?, what is it that makes him play so well despite his ailments?, amongst others. After a gruelling encounter, which lasted for a few hours, the game ended in a victory for him. I was shocked and surprised- he was the National Blind Champion of the Country. Post the match, I asked him multiple questions, and he was kind enough to answer all of them patiently. Today, this same young man is one of the consultants for my flagship project Checkmate and the non-profit, the Devanshi Rathi Foundation, that aims to empower the underprivileged and disabled through the force of chess, education, and healthcare in my hometown of New Delhi, India.

India is a country that has one of the world's largest populations, if not the greatest, which is growing as time passes on. Therefore, we, as a developing nation, face vast challenges in many areas. However, one must realise that with every obstacle comes a silver lining. I found one of those during my match with the visually impaired player that day in 2014. After discussing my queries with him, I realised that we had a problem but a solution was already waiting with untapped potential. The issue was that chess was not being promoted and supported well-enough for the blind in the country. No one in the abled society had the knowledge about the many blind players competing on the circuit, and there was no way that our country could achieve success internationally in tournaments without sponsorships and the right backing. In short, we had the unmatched talent but lacked the resources. However, the solution was to use one's own knowledge

and experience in this game to benefit these players. So, I took my interests in chess and inclined it with my passion for entrepreneurship to design a program called Checkmate. By 2016, it was up and running with full-force. I had organised training camps, simultaneous exhibitions, and more events for the blind students who were learning under Checkmate. Towards the end of 2016, the project had received its first internationally rated students by the World Chess Body, FIDE and top national medallists. Today, after four years in existence, Checkmate has impacted the lives of almost 60 players individually and more than 200 competitors in total through the tournaments and other initiatives that it has conducted. It is also the first partner organisation of the All India Chess Federation of the Blind, which is the official governing body for blind chess in India, conducting chess coaching for the visually impaired.

Now, as we move forward into the near future, the goal of the program is to impact the lives of as many underprivileged and disabled students as possible through the power of chess. By applying for this prize, I believe that I could use its scholarship to create that next step in the development of Checkmate and my foundation. Currently, despite these successes with the projects, a major issue that arises is the lack of accessible materials for the visually impaired, which reduces the quality of the training by a large extent. Moreover, in order to gain the most accessible supplies, one must spend an ample amount of resources. I aim to, therefore, remove these barriers by adding onto the two books that I wrote in 2017 on improving one's chess. I hope to publish material in accessible texts that will help the players improve with the help of my Grandmaster chess friends. I also envision to build an online learning portal for the competitors in assistance with the All India Chess Federation for the Blind, which will be fully customisable towards the needs of the contenders, with audio recordings, a chess playing portal, game analysis software, a podcast channel to showcase the achievements of the competitors, and a digital library for enhancing one's chess knowledge.

In conclusion, I would like to discuss the need and my own passion towards these projects of mine. I started out by just seeing the power of chess in my own life. It made me experience different cultures by playing in international tournaments, helped me write reports on sports as an analyst, developed my logical thinking skills, and ultimately brought me into entrepreneurship. Watching myself grow in my intellect through this game has made me realise its potency. Chess, from all levels, is a healer and could be the secret ingredient in the so-called successful life of an individual who participates in it. Whether for competitive causes, or just for fun, chess has the brutal force to excite the mind of the competing individual, and can bring together people from different levels of society. There is no boundary in chess and the World Chess Body FIDE's tagline "Gens Una Sumus", We're One Family, is a reminder of the same. Chess imitates life as its three parts- Opening, Middle Game, and the End Game are journeys that we as humans also experience. Right from the first move until it's Checkmate, there are hundreds of lessons to be learnt. In the case of a visually impaired person, who has his or her impairment coming in the way to achievement, chess brings hope to succeed. My friend, India and Asia's current highest rated blind chess player says, "Chess is a game of vision, and not visibility," and I believe that it's true. Now, I hope to use it to impact positive change in India.