



A shot at fame

The story behind the lens of a Pune adolescent whose remarkable photograph of an eclipse won him the prestigious Royal Greenwich Observatory Award

Malini Nair | TNN

Like every other eclipse-gazer gathered at Kanyakumari that cloudy January afternoon, 14-year-old Dhruv Paranjpye was disappointed. There were no signs of the great heavenly show. Dark clouds scuttled across the sun. It was edging ever closer to the fullest phase of the annular eclipse, when the sun and moon are exactly in line. But there seemed to be no way now that his

Young Astronomy Photographer Award for 2010.

"I didn't pay much attention to the image once I clicked it. It was only on our way back to Thiruvananthapuram that I started going through the lot and when I stopped at this one, I gasped. 'What is this?' I asked myself. When I downloaded it on to my computer, it left me amazed. I couldn't have got it better with an advanced camera and fancy accessories," says Dhruv, who entered his photograph in the competition in July.

A keen astronomer and photographer, he was up working on a history project past midnight this Thursday when he saw his name come up on the observatory website as a winner. Rebekah Higgitt, one of the judges, said of the photograph: "I loved how the perfect geometry of the eclipsed sun contrasts with the chaotic shapes of the clouds. By using the clouds as a filter, Paranjpye has been able to reproduce wonderful, contrasting colours."

Dhruv probably used the least fancy lens in the competition, a Nikon E 3700 digital camera. As anyone who has ever tried to aim at the sky and shoot a decent photograph will say, astrophotography is not child's play. It needs good equipment, lots of luck and skill. Dhruv clearly had two of the three, if not the right equipment.

"Since I work with a low-cost camera, I have to use more skill and imagination to capture a good image," he says. His father is an astrophysicist in charge of science popularization at the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics in Pune. The IUCCA campus is where Dhruv has been practising his photography skills.

He had the option to be at Greenwich for the results but Dhruv chose to stay at home, follow the proceedings on the internet and save up for his dream camera. The award money of £250 will go towards buying a DSLR or CCD camera that costs roughly Rs 40,000.



ZOOMING IN: Dhruv Paranjpye; his award-winning eclipse shot (top)

camera would capture the great image he had hoped for.

Just a few seconds before 1:15 pm, the Pune teenager aimed his camera at the sky once again. He found, to his amazement that the clouds had turned into a perfect filter – thin enough to show him a clear disc and thick enough to protect his eyes from the glare. At exactly 1:15, his fingers pressed the shutter, no filter in his camera and no protective film to shield his eyes.

The freak image he clicked was what he called 'The Perfect Circle'. To the viewer, it seems like an immaculate circle drawn on the dark clouds with a white pen. You can see why it left a panel of veteran astronomers and photographers impressed enough to award Dhruv the Royal Greenwich Observatory's