

A story of experiments in multimedia

'Eternal Gandhi', the innovative, interactive multimedia exhibition at NGMA, invites viewers to use their bodies as well as their minds

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Touch, breath and the mere presence of a human body can kick off a chain reaction. The installations that make up 'Eternal Gandhi', an interactive and computer-based multimedia exhibition at the National Gallery of Modern Art, attest to this. They respond to pressed buttons and interface-navigating computer mice, besides reacting to body heat, movement and sound waves.

These installations are sure to enamour with their technical wizardry. But it is the tactile experience they offer that sets them apart. Ranjit Makkuni, who has conceptualised the show, says they are inspired by Gandhian thought. "Most computer-based transaction is about shipping homogenous bits. Using our hands — and our bodies — is missing from modern communication. The role of the hands was central in Gandhi's work. So, information retrieval in this exhibition takes place through hands," he explains.

Stambha, for instance, consists of a pillar with eleven wheels that rotate around a central axis. They represent the eleven vows of Satyagraha. Viewers are invited to spin the wheels, and as soon as they do, a video projection appears on the wall. The videos are "abstracted Bharat Natyam interpretations" of each of the eleven vows by dancer Navtej Johar.



Hands-on experience: Ranjit Makkuni

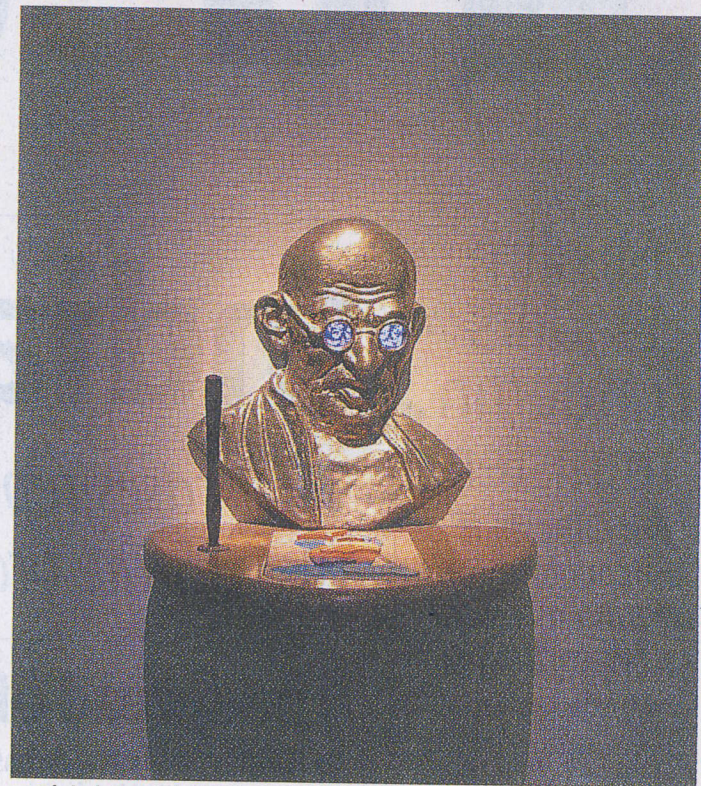
"Gandhi-ji has been associated with *chatai* (mat) presentations and old, faded photographs (that don't promote interaction)," says Makkuni. He says that the Sevagram Ashram in Wardha, Maharashtra, has the eleven vows of Satyagraha written out as a list and posted on the wall. "In this exhibition, each vow is represented using a wheel because people remember tactile interactions better. This kind of a display is more accessible to young and old people," he points out.

The multimedia presentations use photographs, footage and sound clips from Gandhi's life and the freedom struggle

that have been procured from the National Archives and All India Radio. Besides the truly innovative piecing together of these installations, there are documentary videos with scholars expounding Gandhian philosophy, animation videos that recreate the scenes from his life; and quilts woven by women weavers in Bhuj, which light up when touched by viewers. The latter is an example of what Makkuni calls "a collaborative interface" between technology and the traditional arts.

"Archives about Gandhi-ji have been very scattered. There's no single place with a database of information about him — and he is the father of the nation. The value of our content team is that we built a multimedia database," he adds. His core team of 15 people and 200 consultants, consisting of researchers, craftsmen, Gandhians, performers, philosophers, artists, and potters, among others, worked consistently for two years on this exhibition.

Despite the wondrous powers of technology, Makkuni still believes there's nothing like communication between human beings. He has placed volunteers at every installation. "People are the best communicators. They draw out tacit information, which you cannot get from a text panel. I may even put a Gandhian in place of a volunteer soon," he laughs. Eternal Gandhi will be on display at the NGMA till March 12.



Global Gandhi: This interactive 'computer' presents historians' views on the father of the nation