

## THE PIONEER

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# Attn, Kashi has just moved to New York!

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New Delhi

IMAGINE INTERACTING with your computer through a button on your dress. Or, consider making a long distance offering to the Ganga in Varanasi from a computer that replicates the Kashi Ghats. Depicting the holiest of holy cities through the eyes of a Benarasi, the Crossing Project, a multimedia exhibit for museums in Delhi, Mumbai, London, Paris and New York will change the way we look at interactive technology.

Every single exhibit at Crossing will have a host of traditional craftsmen from India behind it. And the scope of what

### MULTIMEDIA SHOW TAKES TEMPLE DARSHAN TO NEW TECH HIGH

museum visitors will be able to see is unlimited. For example, visitors in Mumbai will use a model of a temple in Varanasi to point at any part of the real temple. A hidden camera near the temple will transmit relevant sections before users. A museum visitor in New York will be able to float flowers in the Ganga and receive the results of her offerings, live, in America.

The package has been designed by PARC labs, the development hub of Xerox. The Media Lab in India is headed by musician cum multimedia designer cum IIT graduate Ranjit Makkuni from PARC and some 300 Indian scholars, designers, printers, video filmmakers, graphic artists

and computer technicians.

The gallery, scheduled to open in mid-April will combine digital technology with art, music, religion and Hindu spiritualism. Though the exhibits are digitally created or enabled, none involve the use of keyboards, mice or other familiar paraphernalia.

Instead, interaction with the digital content will be through a variety of smart, high-touch interfaces such as physical icons, pop-up boxes, body-adornable accessories like jewellery, rings, wearable computers and computing augmented books. Click on the embroidered star on a jacket and a starlit scene in Varanasi will

pop up before you... Use a scanner-like device to highlight a Kerala-style temple painting. A screen then shows up with pre-recorded content in the form of scholars comments, or dancers re-enactment of ancient postures etc.

The Crossing re-examines the relationship between the human body and physical space through the combined use of multimedia technology and traditional Indian art forms.

The entire research, development and conceptualisation of the project has been done in India and cost Xerox's invention engine, PARC, \$ 300,000 over an year and a half. "This is another first for our project", says

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Makkuni. "Traditionally, technology has moved from the West to India, and carried with it interfaces that are unique to the West. But we have used designs that are not only sensitive to the human body, but are also India-centric and made right here."

It must be time for a change. "Back when Xerox invented the personal computer", says Makkuni, "we used traditional mediums like the television and typewriter to base the PC on. The human body was gradually isolated from the medium and the object of communication." In other words, though multimedia has enhanced and enriched the output we see and hear on our computer screens and speakers, the input methods remain the same. We still use text-based keyboards to feed in and search for data and mice to click and point. This reduces humans to mere button pushers, constantly clicking and pointing.

Insted, why not use a gesture, or a sound or a movement of the hands to access data? "After all, our hands have produced crafts and expressed emotions since time immemorial."

This is exactly what Crossing will let us do. Ergonomic new interfaces that are graspable and touchable and invite the users to join the exhibition through media beyond computer screens have been developed. Crossing people call these devices High Touch interfaces. So users can draw a figure with a flute, and their computer will show them pictures of Lord Krishna.

Each tool is modelled in shapes that fit the context of a search. One can look at the lingam, signifying Shiva, through the hidden eyes of a lingam-shaped pointing device and camera. The tools therefore, serve not only as means of interaction but also as memory aids. Visitors to the Crossing gallery can even take the objects home and be re-

minded of their powerful learning experience.

But why did Crossing choose Varanasi as the setting? The project scholar, Dr Madhu Khanna explains, "Varanasi, the holy town of 2,000 temples, with its throngs of pilgrims flocking to the Ganga, has ghats that symbolise the interplay of life and death. Understanding life through the ghats can be a transformative and healing process.

The chief human quest is to place the individual within a 'whole'. All pilgrim sites, including Varanasi, are 'power-places' which help modern man resolve this crisis of understanding."

Crossing sees the Internet as representing modern computer society's yearning for the collective. It also provides the tools to understand the relationship between individuals and their universe — something we always thought technology would prevent us from doing.