BRIDGING A DIFFERENT DIVIDE

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The problem with paradigm shifts is that you can never make them obvious enough, and they're always hard to explain. Even if the project director of *The Crossing*, Ranjit Makkuni, puts up a sign saying "Ignore at your own risk" atop the exhibition hall, some of us still might miss the point behind a multimedia exhibition that delves into art, mythology, science and learning. That's probably because India is still used to searching for more utility from technology than ideological shifts.

Ranjit Makkuni, musician, IIT graduate, PARC researcher, multimedia expert and Indophile has finally come up with a near-complete version of *The Crossing*, which will travel to New York next year and Mumbai by September.

The Crossing is part of Xerox's (The document company) Living Documents project. It re-examines the relationship of the human body to technology. "Traditionally, the computing technology we use has placed human hands a step away from the real action which takes place at the monitor, and placed the human body outside the physical space of a computer. Living Documents and *The Crossing* change that." He argues that since humans have relied on hands to create works of art that we consider a treasure, modern technology need not invariably mark a shift from that. The exhibition was on display at Xerox's year-old media laboratory near Nehru Place on the 19th. It included interactive paintings, motion-sensitive displays, wearable computers, always-on mobile devices and several other gadgets and gizmos developed under a single theme to represent the holy town of Banaras through the eyes of a Benarasi.

The Crossing has three basic levels — that of technology, that of the content and that of human interactions with both these. Through these three, Benaras is seen as a place of enjoyment and sensual pleasure, as a place of worship and faith through it's ghats, temples and associated myths, as a place of learning, by spanning the various scholars and saints who learnt or taught there from the Buddha to Mahatma Gandhi and as place of death and purification associated with dying there.

The Crossing has also evolved a new way of displaying these digital documents. Instead of disembodied onlookers who are encouraged by today's technology to only push buttons, it immerses the onlooker into a complete experience, through sight, hearing, touch as well as gestures. The interactive devices and new interfaces like touch screens can be manipulated with "smart touch" wireless hand held devices. These devices, when held and touched unfold the desired environment of Benaras—the 40 ghats, the temples, the river Ganga and so on.

The Crossing has been developed as a multimedia cultural learning project. It focuses on Benaras since the city is one of the world's most celebrated pilgrimage sites and has been a centre of learning for over 2000 years. Visitors to the exhibition in November in New Delhi's IGNCA will be able to hear the project scholar Dr Madhu Khanna and several hundred other religious persons, dancers, musicians, scholars and eminent personalities explain the exhibition and comment on it's different facets. More than 300 people have been interviewed and placed on video and audio for the exhibition. Musical forms like thumri (The musical inputs are credited to Ustad Ali Akbar Khan and Mithilesh Jha) and dances from Kuchipuri to Manipuri, Kathak and Bharatnatyam, different scholastic and scientific positions (including Prof Anand Krishna and Ram Shankar Tripathi from Benaras) and the expertise of graphic designers, video film makers, robotics experts and many, many others have been put into the effort of representing the ghats of Benaras.

Another interesting part of the display is that each one of them has been developed in India, right from the conceptual stages to the building of the prototypes. The contributors included Xerox India Software, IIT Delhi, Archaeological Survey of India, National Institute of Fashion Technology and IGNCA.