

VIDYA VISWANATHAN

B-15 Chirag Enclave, New Delhi doesn't quite look like a place where a radical technology-interacting-with-culture experiment is taking place. It is a nice, white-washed, red-roof house with a neat, well-watered lawn. It looks like a pleasant place to live in.

Last week if you had stepped through its front doors though, you would have revised your opinion rapidly. For you would have walked straight into an unusual experiment where technology and culture meshed together to create *objet d'arts* that interact with you.

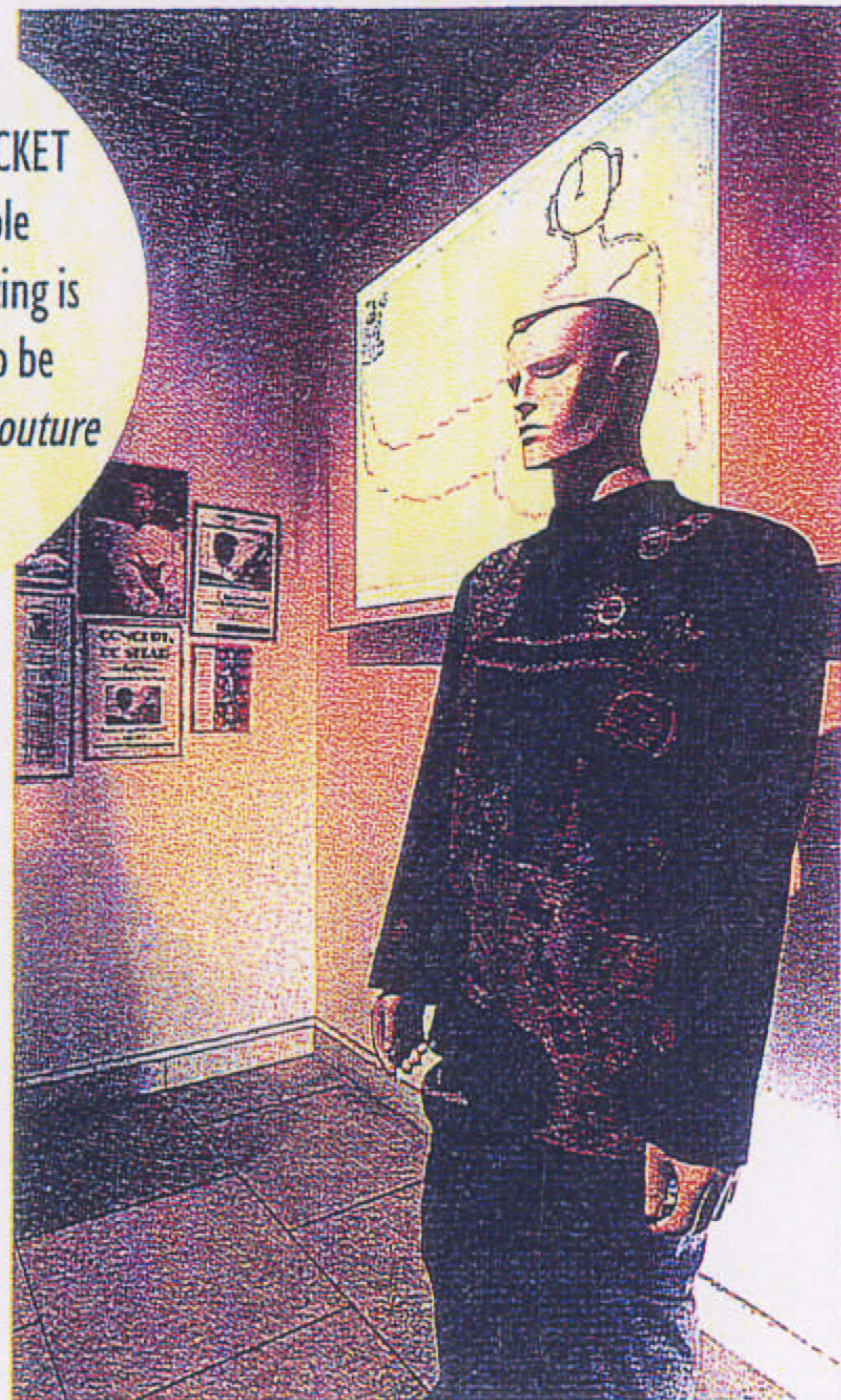
To describe it as "a multimedia cultural learning experience", as some of the project designers did, would be to severely understate the case. Actually, a motley crew of scientists, researchers, engineers, programmers, designers — product, graphic, accessory and textile — had got together to create a sort of cultural three-dimensional history of Benaras that you can virtually 'experience' instead of seeing it in a flat two-dimensional form.

Walking in, you would have been greeted by a large, colourful and beauti-

ful mythological panel painted by an artist from Kerala. So what's unusual about that? Simply this — you actually saw it by manipulating a browser, a large eye-shaped object which moved on two axes. As it reached hotspots on the panel, a video would switch on in the browser depicting the stories behind the myths with Madhu Khanna, a scholar on Indian religious practices, offering detailed metaphysical explanations.

If you walked further inside you could see a tastefully shot video of women worshipping a tree playing on a large screen with some soulful *shehnai* music accompanying it. You could opt to view the video with your own headphones on a smaller television screen

ZARI/JACKET
Wearable
computing is
going to be
haute couture
soon



Photographs: DILEEP PRAKASH

PUSHING

that was mounted on a swank metal top of an understated, terracotta, *dhol*-shaped display created by a Delhi master potter, Giriraj.

In another room, scattered on a table were intricately painted wooden objects — a cosmic egg, *bilva* leaves and *trishuls*. Yet another room was dominated by a mannequin wearing a beautiful *zari* embroidered jacket. In the atrium stood a 'tilty' table on whose top was a moving vision of the streets of Benaras as depicted by a Mithila painter in Madhubani style.

None of these were your average *objet d'arts*. Each one could be 'experienced' because of the technology integrated with it. The software designer, the product designer, the textile designer, each had contributed his unique skills in creating a truly innovative object.

The exhibition was really a sneak preview of a project funded by the legendary Xerox Palo Alto Re-

search Centre (Parc), which has given birth to so many of computing's innovations. And the current project is easily one of the most challenging, given the sheer number of disciplines that need to come together to make it a success.

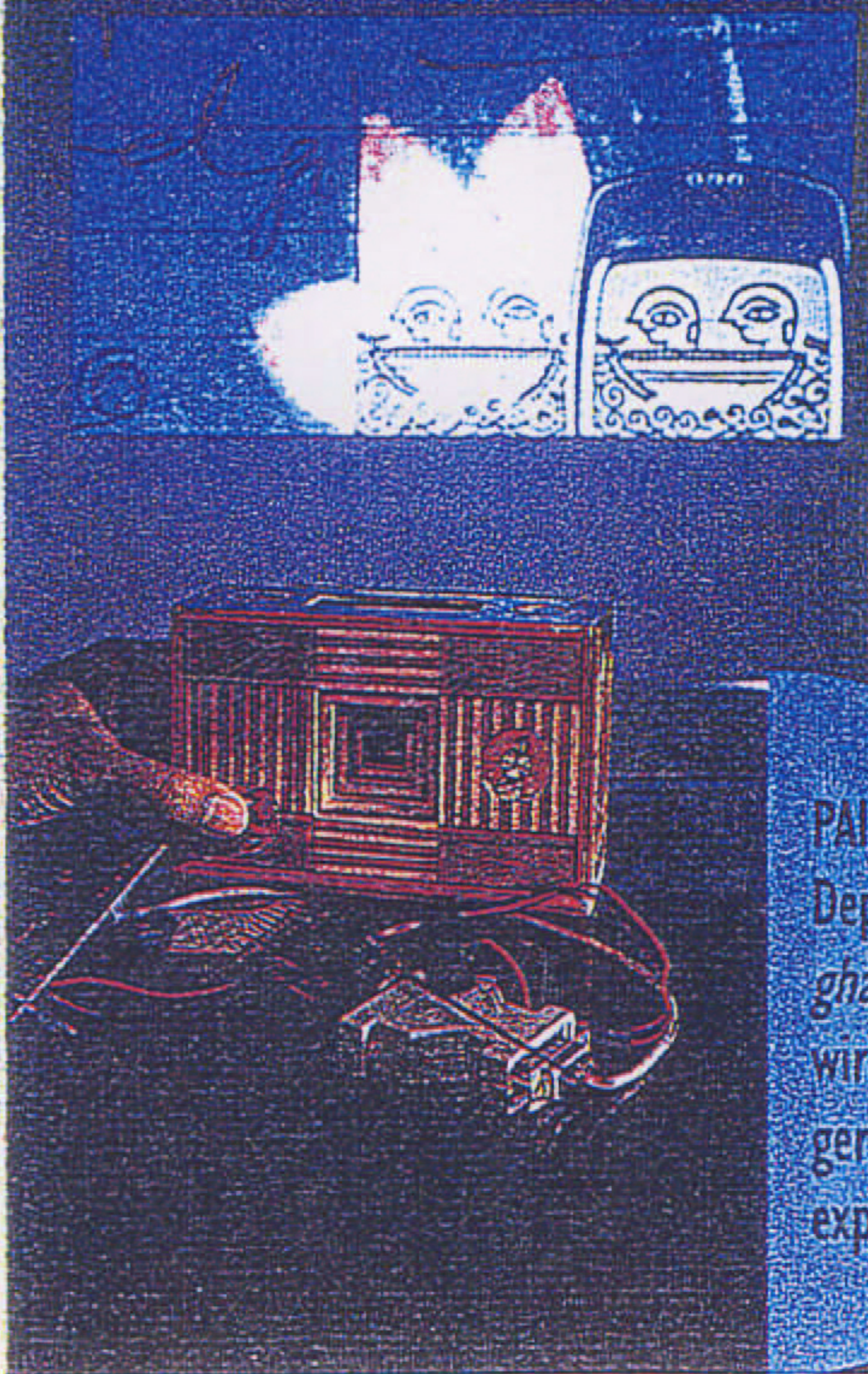
"The project is truly multi-disciplinary and just like the courses at National Institute of Design (NID). It involves pottery, textiles, graphics and is also interactive," says Kalpana Subramaniam, an NID-trained videographer who has spent a couple of months shooting in Benaras.

The entire media lab is the dream project of Ranjit Makkuni, a Parc researcher who has spent over 15 years researching interactive and immersive user interfaces. He spent a year at Parc visualising the project and brought back many technology ideas from there. He calls the whole effort the Crossing project (www.crossingproject.net).

The name of the project has a deep significance. Explains Makkuni: "In traditional societies, a pilgrimage provides the setting for reflection, learning and

The Crossing Project

DAVID WILSON, Project Director



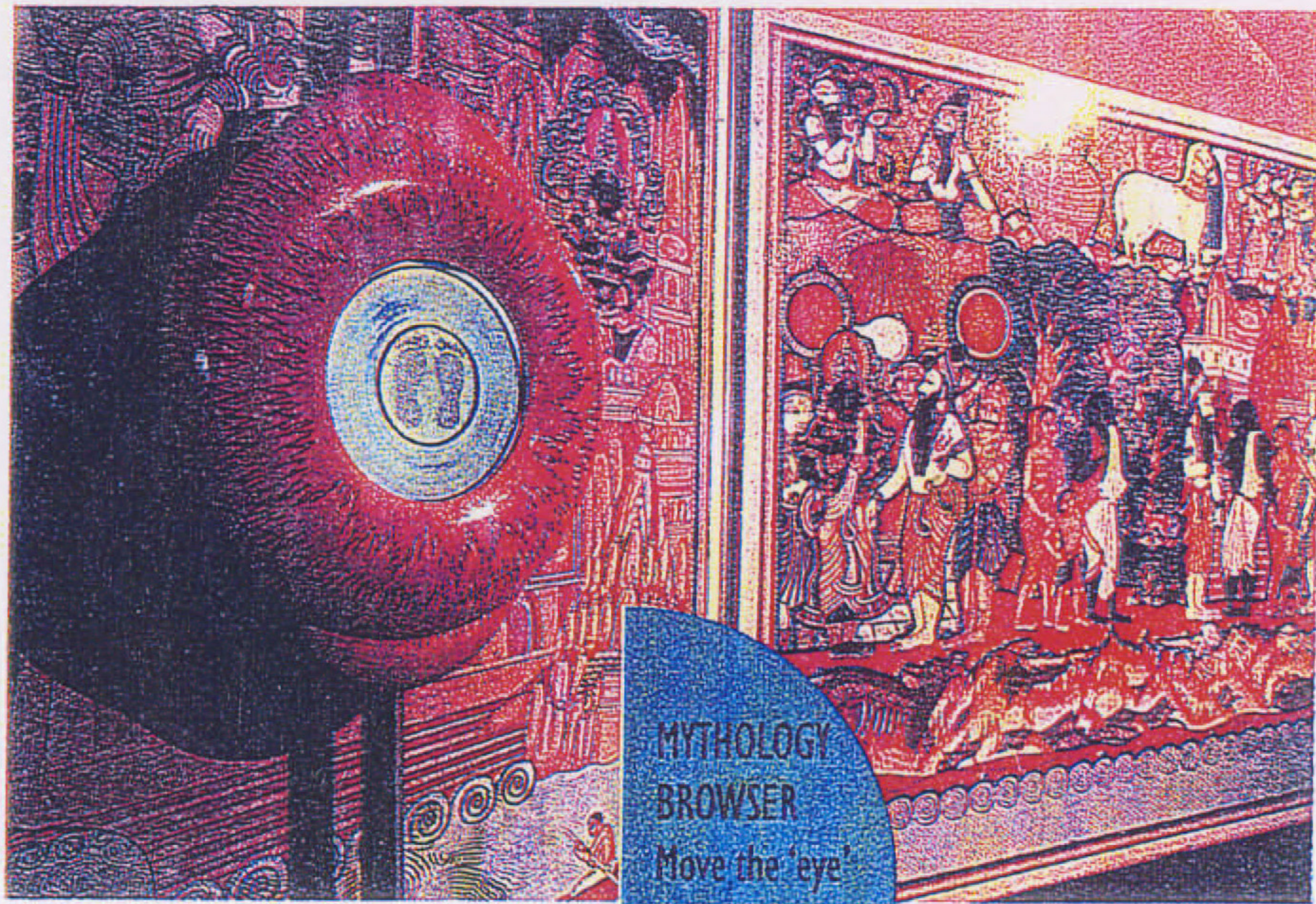
PAINTED BOX
Depicting a
ghat, this can
wirelessly trig-
ger a virtual
experience

inner transformation. A pilgrimage site is called *tirtha* in Sanskrit which means a ford across a stream or a cosmic crossing point or a sacred place for transformation. Each centre, whether Benaras in India, Jerusalem in the West, or Mecca are crossing points, that provide people with potent living symbols of the relationship of man to the larger cosmos, life and death, matter and energy."

Makkuni's aim was to create a virtual method to 'experience' these crossing points from, say, a distant museum or even from home. Makkuni himself has had multi-disciplinary training. He is an architect from IIT Kharagpur and got a masters from UCLA where he developed software for architecture.

But since 1985 he has been demonstrating new technology to bring alive ancient cultures. The need to get people to 'experience' culture seems to spur him to create technology.

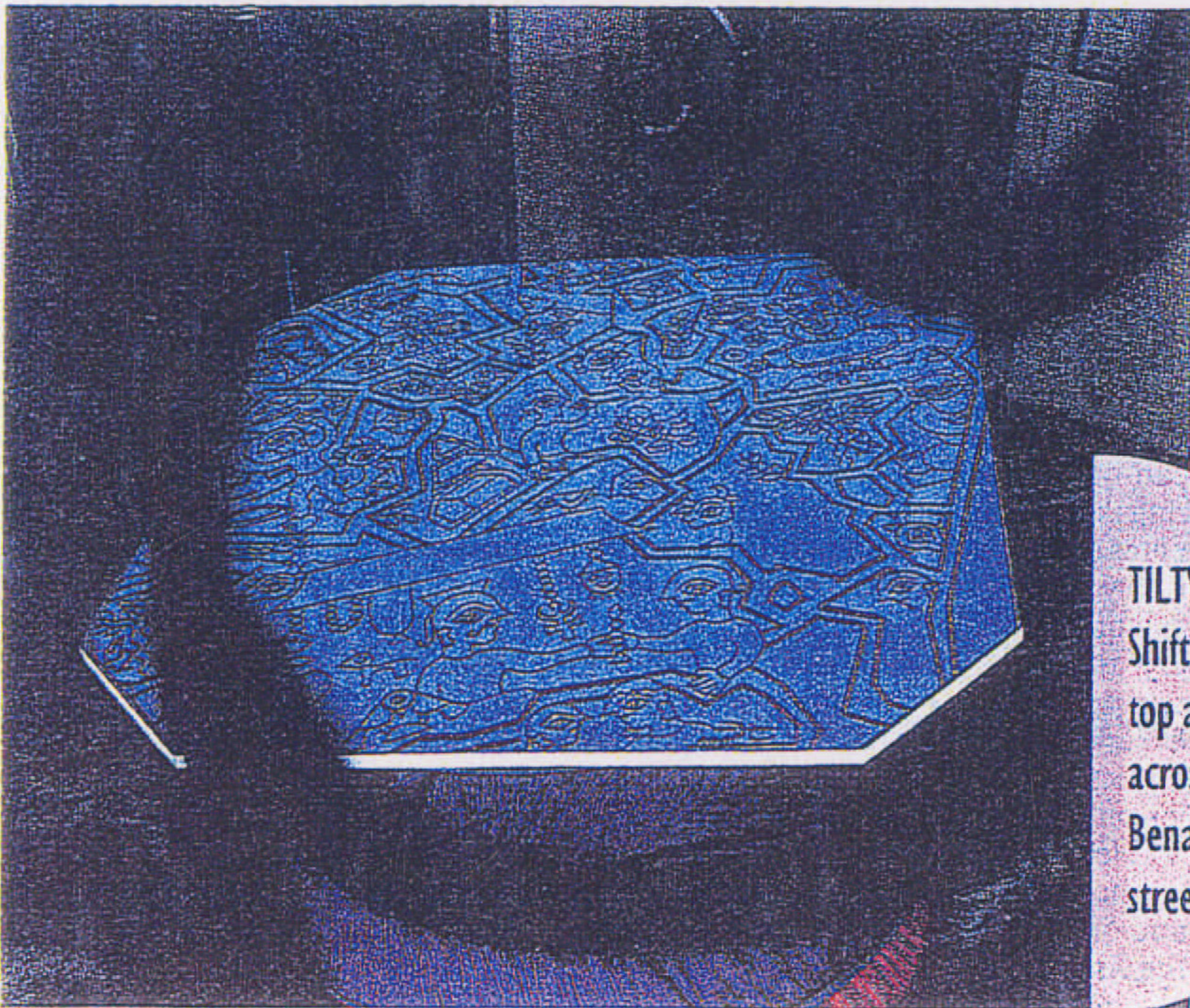
The crossing project too is no excep-



MYTHOLOGY BROWSER
Move the 'eye' to make the story come alive

A unique project sees technology, art and design meshing together to create an interactive experience

THE LIMITS



TILTY TABLE
Shift the table top and pan across the Benaras street scene

tion. It has three aspects to it. On the one hand, it documents Benaras in a way that has never been done before. Says Khanna: "We are going to show the city from many viewpoints. From the boatman's, scholar's, sage's, philosopher's and that of the ordinary person." This documentation will also address multiple levels of understanding. At one level, it is fun and play and, at another level, it interprets the notion of body and awareness. At a third level, it attempts to unravel myths. Like the myths and stories of Ganga.

Not only does it have so many perspectives, it spans a timeline from 7th century BC till modern times. "From Buddha to Gandhi there were several sages, philosophers, travellers, architects, scholars, poets who came to Benaras. We are going to take 40 such people and document them," says Khanna. The people chosen are an eclectic bunch — including Panini, the Sanskrit grammarian, Adi Shankaracharya, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Dara Shikoh — Aurangzeb's brother, who had the Upanishads translated into Persian — the Daniel brothers who were architects, Mark Twain and Chinese travellers Fah Yian and Huen Sang.

The forms of documentation also vary. The scholars could be explaining the meaning of life and death. Or these could be in the