

Wisdom should be accessible



LIVING, DYING & TRANSFORMATION IN BANARAS

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Ranjit Makkuni is the director of Sacred World Research Laboratory, former director of the famed Palo Alto Research Centre at Xerox Corporation and visiting faculty in various universities around the world in the area of multimedia. He has written a book, *Living, dying and transformation in Banaras—The Crossing*.

Excerpts from an interview:

What is the agenda of Sacred World?

The Sacred World Research Laboratory explores innovation created by building bridges between techno and traditional cultures. In an era of accelerating change, the laboratory works with the world's spiritual cultures to develop new forms of media and documentation so that perennial wisdom can be made accessible to all.

The digital divide is a chasm created by several factors including economic and cultural. While economic factors make products unaffordable, cultural factors can result in products designed with a western or literate world-view or products being neither usable nor useful to people living in traditional cultures.

Can you explain the theme of *The Crossing*?

The Crossing presents a vision of Indian creativity and interactive design, combining traditional and modern technology. As computing technology proliferates in the world, retaining identity becomes an important value in the new millennium.



PRASHANT NADKAR

Through physically tactile computing interfaces, the Crossing project allows people to access, for example, the sacred spaces of Banaras.

Banaras simply looks like a city by the river. But it is more than just that... it is a pilgrimage station, a crossing point, a site of mythology, a site of ritual, a site of healing and a site of sacred geography. It is amazing that we could take a physical place and transform it into a setting for healing and transformation. It is amazing that we come naked to the river when all other hopes of healing have failed. Divinity exists in Banaras not just as architecture but also as the element of fire and water.

Can you explain your new project, *Saraswati*?

It traces the origin of the goddess of arts and creativity, Saraswati, her stringed lute, the veena, and the

veena's transformation across Asia into various forms of lutes, including India, Burma, Indonesia and Korea. Through electronic music, music synthesis and digital recordings of performances by Asian masters, the project allows people to enter the world of Asian sound, musical imagery, cultural and spiritual aesthetics.

The project also looks at the power of computing to create larger than man instruments. What if a bamboo could become a sound production device like a gigantic lip? What kind of sounds could this new instrument produce? What if the Golden Gate bridge were a gigantic harp? What kind of music will that produce? The project also looks at the notions of creativity, left and right brain thinking, music and healing, creativity as the dropping of the ego to experience states of flow... ♦