e-Gandhi: the soul digitised

The Multimedia Museum at Gandhi Smriti redefines the presentation of history.
Ishani Duttagupta reports

HERE'S history with a difference. If you find most museums in India, specially the historical ones, very dull, welcome to an experience that's totally out of the box. The Eternal Gandhi, Multimedia Museum at Gandhi Smirti and Darshan Samiti in New Delhi is probably the first of its kind in Indian history.

The highly interactive museum at the site where Gandhiji was martyred in 1948 uses futuristic interface technology involving physical tactile media and digital documents. "This is an attempt towards the cultural preservation of history. The entire museum is, in fact, a digital archive on Mahatma Gandhi, which can very easily be replicated anywhere else in the world," says Ranjit Makkuni, the project director of the museum and president of design think tank Sacred World Foundation. In fact, what germinated as an idea after Rajashree Birla, chairperson, The Aditya Birla Centre for Community Initiatives and Rural Development, visited one of Makkuni's earlier exhibitions, *The Crossing: Living, Dying and Transformation in Banares*, has now carved out a unique new space of 'culture-conscious product design'.

The exhibition starts with an interactive Time Line Browser where an entire wall is transformed into a historical retrieval device that de-picts images and events from Gandhi's life from 1869 to 1948, or his transformation from Mohandas to Mahatma. As one walks along the wall the screens
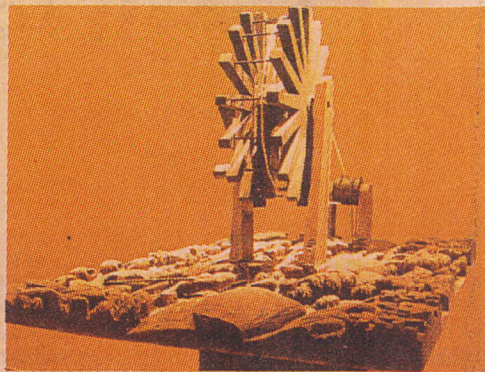
scholars and Gandhians to create an information mosaic. Other sections include an e-train, an installation of a compartment of a train which allows the viewer to recreate and trace Gandhi's journey through India and the historical significance of the places he visited; e-prison, an installation with interactive prison rods depicting scenes from his life in prison; Dimensions of the Salt March which plays back audio-visual content as the visitor picks up symbolic salt from an urn. Other equally interesting sections include the Pillar of Castelessness, e-harmonium, Ashram Story and Charkha Mandala.

"The vision behind the exhibition goes well beyond just historical chronology. It depicts innovation and crafts in a village in India while also delving into the unity of religions. Both these aspects form very important pieces of Gandhi's philosophy. Besides these are also important ideas globally now where we would like to give the Indian villages their identity back as well as talk about unity. Finally, the museum is also a new application of IT, the digital media and product design," says Makkuni, a multimedia researcher, designer and musician who gave up a top job at the Xerox Palo Alto Research Centre to set up the Sacred World Research Laboratory in New Delhi and San Francisco.

Besides the team at the lab, other key inputs came from a top research team headed by Dr Madhu Khanna of the Indira Gandhi Centre for Arts, leading Gandhians and Gandhian insti-

MEDICI frame-work and Milan Politecnico, Italy, HP Labs, California, designers from France, Thailand, Indonesia and Mexico and MIT. The project is sponsored by Gandhi Smiriti, Darshan Samiti, Grasim and Hindalco.

The lab explores new relationships between traditional art and crafts and technology. "We are trying to explore different aspects of computing and computers like the tactile senses. Our projects are about cultural personalisation of the digital experience and also about breaking the digital divide. For instance, the different kinds of material that village workmen use have been enhanced and digitally explored in the Gandhi museum," feels Makkuni, an IIT-KgP grad who has a masters in design theory and computer-aided design from the University of California. Before setting up the Sacred World Foundation he was a leading researcher at Xerox PARC for 17 years and later the lab director of its multimedia lab in New Delhi. In 2000, he was nominated as a founding member of the explorers club of the Ivrea Interaction Design Institute, Italy. He is a consultant to HP Labs Palo Alto, HP Labs India, and an adjunct professor at IIT Kanpur. "I'm now working on a project on music with Saraswati as the central theme. The central symbol is the unity of music as a language," says Makkuni.

He is passionate about redesigning computing displays as well as digital user interfaces. But beyond technology, cultural and creative innovation also drives Makkuni who would love to do a project like the Gandhi show on Rabindranath Tagore at Santiniketan. So, is the West Bengal government listening?