

# Business Standard

# WEEKEND

NEW DELHI CITY EDITION SATURDAY 3 JANUARY 1998

## The medium and the message

A multi-media exhibition shows how technology can help preserve art

What is wrong with the museums of today? The problem,

according to Ranjit Makkuni, is that they value form more than the process. The exhibits are displayed out of their cultural milieu, the method of their creation ignored and their deep significance not even hinted at.

Makkuni, a researcher at the prestigious Xerox Palo Alto Research Center (PARC), has spent the better part of a decade grappling with the idea of cultural learning. He passionately feels that it is important that people are stimulated to actually *engage* with the content rather than just browse through the form. "Hang a stone Durga in a museum and it will look stupid," he scoffs. "What does a label which says 'this is a 3 feet by 6 feet model', of such and such period, made during this dynasty with some material or the other, do for you?"

So how exactly are people to be stimulated? Through technology, and that is where PARC comes in. The philosophy of the Centre is that if you are deeply involved in the content and want to communicate its essence, you can use technology to do so.

All Makkuni's projects revolve around Asian culture and art. He explains why: "In Asia, art is a communal activity as opposed to a individual self-actualisation exercise. That appeals to me."

One of his first successes was the project, *Electronic Sketchbook of Tibetan Thangka Painting*, exhibited at the Asian Art

Museum of San Francisco, in 1987 — when computers were still processing text — Makkuni designed a multi-media kiosk to display Thangka paintings. "It was revolutionary at that time!" claims Makkuni, "you could see a painting and if you touched parts of it, short video recordings would play back. You could see a lama praying to the deity and becoming one with her. Then he would draw the two axes and the grids and the deity would be drawn out proportionately."

And now, a decade later, he has completed a three-year project on a much grander scale — the *Project Gita Govinda*. The multi-media exhibition is currently on display at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts in the capital. Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* is a poetical work consisting of 24 songs or *ashtapadis* which describe the love play between Krishna and Radha. Over the last 800 years, the 12th century poem travelled to all corners of the country and inspired painting, music and dance in a range of styles.

The project itself originated with Dr Kapila Vatsyayan, director of the ICNCA, who wanted to find a way to depict the amazing influence and mysterious spread of the *Gita Govinda*. In 1990, Vatsyayan — who has spent 40 years researching the work — approached PARC. Why PARC, and why Makkuni? He replies, "The Thangka exhibition was well-known. And who else in PARC knows the *Rasa* theory?"

Makkuni can appreciate the theory through the ears of a musician and the eyes of an architect. He has studied the sitar under Ustad Ali Akbar Khan and

performs solo. He also holds a masters degree in architectural design from the University of California, Los Angeles.

This exhibition is designed along a circular concept, split in two levels. The first is a circular hall with a central column. What greets the eye first is a large map of India showing 18 schools of art which have used the poem. "The list is by no means exhaustive," cautions Makkuni, "Kuchipudi is missing, forms from Karnataka are missing. But such an exhaustive exercise would mean setting up a company solely devoted to this project — Gita Govinda Inc!"

Behind the map is a computer screen embedded in the column. The screen displays icons for each