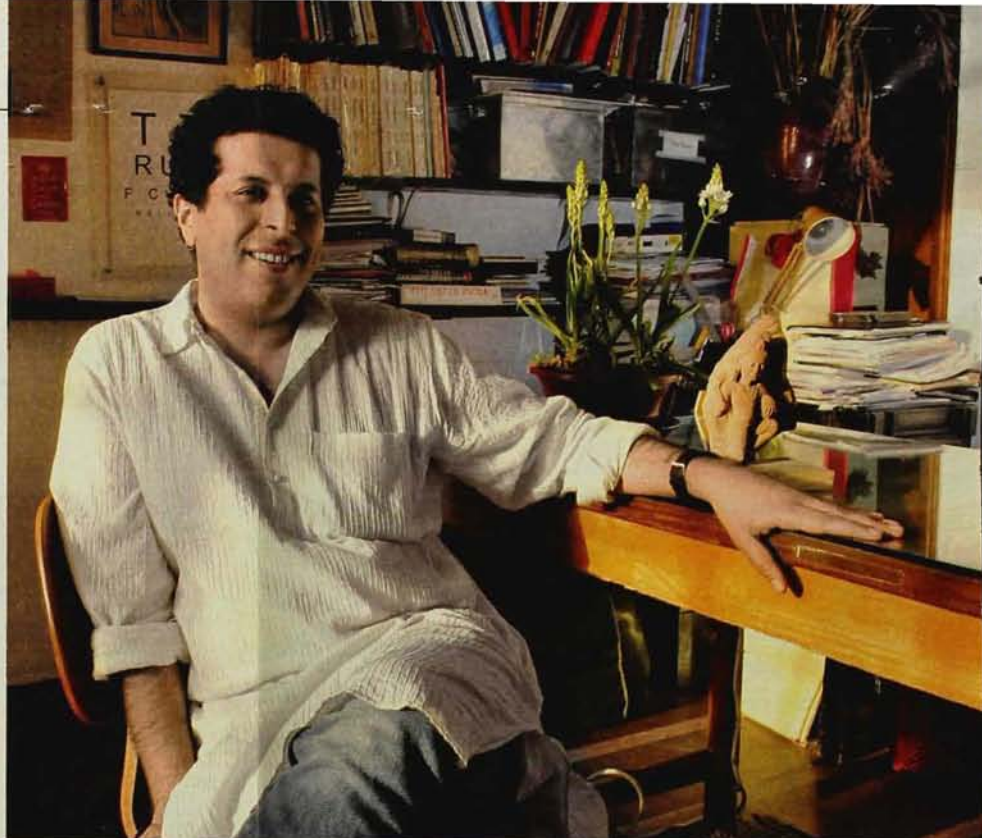


# The Scholar Gypsy

Art historian Naman Ahuja, the man behind the spectacular show on the Body in Indian Art at the National Museum, is a nomad at heart

by Aasheesh Sharma



ON A LAZY Saturday afternoon, when close to 125 people are clinging on to every word he says, describing a Shunga period carving, or why putting together an art exhibition about the body should begin with the yoni, it's difficult to imagine that nerdy, academically-curious Naman Ahuja transforms into a party animal in the evening. That he discards his suit for kurta and goes out dancing.

To begin with, Ahuja, associate professor at JNU's School of Arts and Aesthetics, curator of *The Body in Art* exhibition, on at the National Museum till June 7, is not as old as many academicians tend to be. Also, he wears his eligible bachelor status lightly. "Being single at 40 is a luxury," Ahuja says. "My involvement in scholarship has become a vicious circle; the work keeps me single and because I am single I can do the work. In a way, I am incapable of settling down as I just get off on work! I am waiting to be shocked out of the scholar gypsy groove."

Ah, the scholar gypsy! One can almost visualise Ahuja on a field trip, camera slung on his shoulder as he deliberates over which hat he'd like to wear to the next exotic destination: art historian, teacher, amateur potter or curator. How does he manage to juggle so many balls at one time?

"They complement each

other," says Ahuja. "The pottery, which involves physically working with my hands in the studio, sensitises me to the processes of making. To know what it is actually like to make things with your hands makes you appreciate others who make with their hands." He says that teaching forces him to develop a clarity of thought. "By the time you stand up and articulate something, it is no longer just an unformed feeling in your subconscious," he explains. "You are talking to a group of young adults who are paying for your time and you have to respect that."

How about his avatars as curator and art historian? Ahuja insists he is not a linear thinker and this helps him forge connections. "Since I travel widely, I have a visual archive in my photographs and in my mind which is so large that I am able to make connections," he says. "That is why as a curator, an art show allows me to communicate diverse ideas in an unconventional manner, unlike in a classroom."

## THE STORYTELLER

Nomads at heart, gypsies usually tend to have stories to tell, and as one settles down in his tastefully-appointed studio at Lado Sarai, that south Delhi urban village, one realises Ahuja is no different. "Give me the name of a region in India and I'd tell you a story about

## IN A HAPPY PLACE

Curator Naman Ahuja took 15 months to put together *The Body in Art* exhibition, but he is happy with the response

what's special about an exhibit acquired from the place and how I learnt about its importance."

The double-sided carved Ardhanarisvara relief from Kannauj, UP, for instance, isn't just interesting because of its craftsmanship, he says. Acquiring it for the show has a last tonga twist to it. "I took a train to Kannauj from Kanpur. Once I alighted, I realised the only local transport was a tonga. That day the tongawallas happened to be on a strike. The guy who finally took me to the museum asked for double the fare. In the evening I took pictures using a light charged by a car battery. That is how I got this treasure for the exhibition's archives," says Ahuja.

His missions to certain other parts of India were not as fruitful.

"The Ashutosh Museum in Calcutta University is legendary for being unhelpful. I arrived there to shoot an artefact but it wasn't easy. Permission was granted to photograph only five objects. When I took out the tripod, they asked for a permission letter again and another one for using a light. I was so frustrated that I had to approach the Governor to intervene."

## THE IDEA OF INDIA

One of the challenges for art historians in the country is to rescue the idea of a museum, says Ahuja. "The museum is a Colonial construct. We are not a culture that collects art to decorate or spaces or go to museums to be suffused with a sense of aesthetic rapture. When museums were first constructed in India in the mid-19th century, they functioned fine for the first 100 years as they catered to a colonial audience. Independent India didn't know what to do with this legacy

## BODY OF ART

The show Ahuja curated has more than 300 rare exhibits. A few of these include:



## DOUBLE IMPACT

The 8th century AD carved relief from Kannauj in UP, has Ardhanarisvara on one side and Buddhist Tara on the other

## ANDE KA FUNDA

An untitled egg by Subodh Gupta, displayed in the Birth gallery, shows utensils from the family hearth, the sustainer of life

