



Art historian and eminent scholar Dr. Devangana Desai, author of such seminal works as *Erotic Sculpture of India-A Socio-Cultural Study* and *Khajuraho*, talks to **Dhanishta Shah** about India's rich cultural heritage

A BRIGHT yellow door greets me as I enter the Pedder Road residence of eminent scholar and art historian Dr. Devangana Desai. We make our way through a passage laden with tomes and books that speak of our rich, glorious past. Her passion for Indian art and heritage can be clearly seen. It is not surprising as this scholar has many books to her credit and has contributed immensely to our understanding of Indian art and artefacts.

Demure, gentle and soft spoken, it is hard to conceive of the bold and complex topics she has tackled in her research. For example, her work on the temple art of Khajuraho and the erotic sculptures of India have made her a living authority on a subject many people would shy away from.

Her knowledge goes deep into the wide realm of Indian art and culture. She has written on ancient Indian terracottas, *kurma* (tortoise) symbolism in Indian art and culture, the Goddess *Hinghalaja* at Khajuraho, and more recently on *Vatapatrashayi*—Krishna on the Banyan Leaf.

On the face of it, the subjects seem simple. For example, Krishna on the banyan leaf is a ubiquitous motif. But there is a wealth of knowledge behind this symbol. “We had a painting that my uncle had commissioned. It showed Krishna, or Vishnu specifically, on a banyan leaf with Markandeya praying to him. I still have the painting with me,” she explains.

The painting got her interested in exploring the topic. She began by collecting objects and artefacts that depicted this picture-painting as well as books on the subject.

“The subject is highly philosophical. During the *pralay*, or the destruction, it is the *rishi* Markandeya who lives while everything else perishes. He is exhausted and he sees a banyan tree. On it he sees a child and the child talks to him. That child is Vishnu. In my research, I discuss how this theme came

TEMPLE triumphs



PICS: PADMINI BORADE

In *Khajuraho*, Devangana writes: “On coming closer, greeted by whistling birds and parrots, one enters a medieval world inhabited by gods and goddesses, mythical animals, warriors, dancers and musicians.” She has had a long-standing passion for the 25 temples of Khajuraho

into art. I have found so far that it was the South Indian *bhakti* poets who popularised it. We also find the theme in the Mahabharata. The earliest depictions of the same are in the temples of Tamil Nadu. Now it has spread in the art form. I am working on a book on the subject and exploring the theme in popular art, *kavad* and calendar art as well,” she states.

She has visited the only temple featuring this motif near Madurai, as well as the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, that have paintings with this motif. She has lectured extensively on the topic as well.

Call of art

What are the roots of this deep-seated love for Indian art? “I was brought up in a very religious family. I was constantly encouraged to visit ancient temples,” she recalls. This background exposed her to the rich art found within temples.

Devangana grew up in South Mumbai. She went to New Era School and then Elphinstone College. All along, she was always encouraged to pursue her passion and it continued even after she got married.

Her husband, a businessman, has been one of her greatest inspirations. He supported her passion as did her in-laws and parents. In fact, she pursued her doctorate after she got married. Her Ph.D. was an eye-opener of sorts. Her guide made her read Sanskrit literature for a year, which helped her grasp the roots of Indian culture and at the same time place her research in the context of ancient India.

“I was curious to know about the erotic sculpture of India. I investigated it by visiting five regions in India, not just Khajuraho or Bhubaneswar

where they are more on display. I wrote about it in *Beyond the Erotic*.”

The book is perhaps the most significant of all her works, as it dispels many of the misconceptions that exist in the popular understanding of the art of Khajuraho. She establishes that it is time to delink Khajuraho’s sculptures from the Kamasutra, demonstrating that Khajuraho has erroneously become synonymous with erotic sculpture. The religious imagery of Khajuraho far outweighs the erotic in numbers and importance, and iconology is the key to the understanding of the conceptual basis and the architectural and iconographic scheme of the temples.

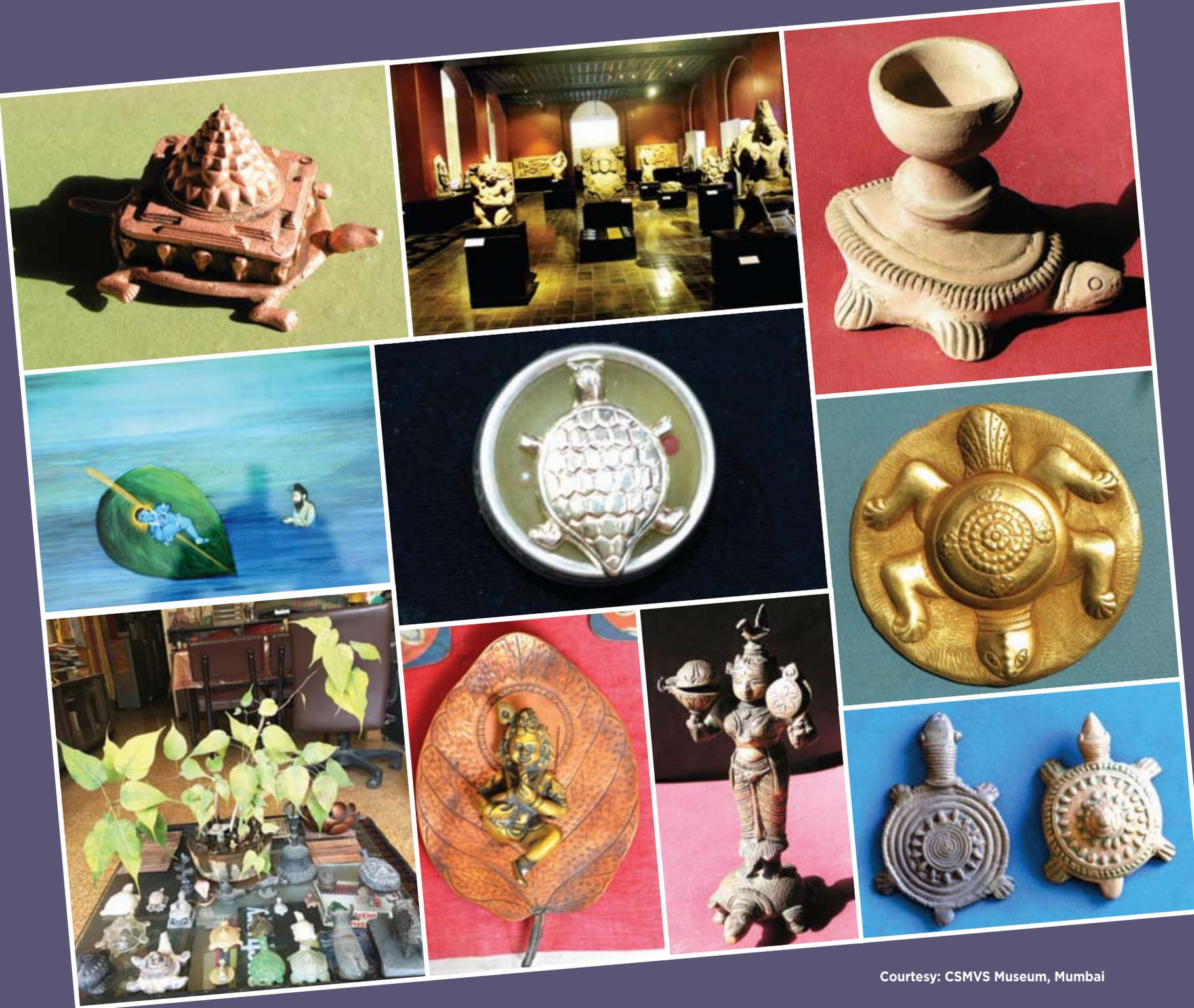
Her book was read by a filmmaker who lives in the U.S., and it was turned into a film as well.

Over the years she has continued to visit these exotic sites soberly dressed in saris! “I have visited many important temples. I used to stay at the sites, meet people, visit museums and libraries,” she explains.

The entire process has given her a unique insight into Indian society as well. Does she believe that society was more liberated then? “I don’t think society was freer then. It was only for the upper classes. They had their own ideas in feudal society. I feel we are freer now. But I also see people bringing in more rituals in religion as compared to before,” she observes.

“There were also double standards. Men could have sex with as many women as they could afford while women were confined to their polygamous husbands. In fact, I think today’s generation growing up in cities is much more emancipated.

She has always preferred research work over academia. “I wanted to



Courtesy: CSMVS Museum, Mumbai

continue in my own way. It is the life I have chosen. I am pursuing my passion now as well. Others who have taken jobs are retiring, but I continue my research,” she explains.

It is her research that connects her with a broader group of scholars and institutions bound by their common love for Indian art heritage. She is closely connected to key institutions and museums.

She has been the Vice-President of the Asiatic Society of Mumbai (until August 2015). She is a Trustee of the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai, and Trustee of the Sarabhai Foundation (Calico Museum), Ahmedabad amongst many other enviable positions. She sponsored the renovation of the Sculpture Gallery of the CSMVS Museum, Mumbai, in memory of her husband Jayant Desai.

Talk the walk

“She has also participated in many national and international seminars and conferences, and has delivered lectures at prestigious institutes around the world. Quite expectedly, the art community has honoured and revered her. A Festschrift, a collection of writings published in honour of a scholar, entitled *Art, Icon and Architecture in South Asia—Essays in Honour of Dr. Devangana Desai*, was edited by Anila Verghese and Anna Dallapiccola in 2015 and published in two volumes.

While she enjoys being a part of the local and international community of scholars, what does she think of the infrastructure that supports art study in her hometown? “We have a lot of heritage. There are more scholars abroad,

western scholars, who are working on Indian art. Here, we have a few, but in Mumbai there is not much importance given to teaching art history. But, for those who are interested, there is a lot happening. In association with museums, there are many art lectures organised that are well attended,” she opines.

She has kept pace with technology. It may seem ironical that someone with such an affinity with the past imbibes current technology so seamlessly. “Whatever I understand, I do,” she says matter-of-factly. She photographs the images for her books herself. Her iPhone has replaced her Canon for convenience. Her lectures are all PowerPoint presentations. In fact, she had her website updated recently and is Facebook savvy, using the platform to get in touch with like-minded scholars.

She starts her day with reading the newspapers, and then is on her laptop, checking emails. In the afternoons the work starts. She goes to the library twice a week or so, even daily, depending on what she is working on. She travels a lot to either visit places for research inputs or to deliver lectures.

She has entered her eighties, but her passion for research burns brighter than ever. As we end our interview, she is already dreaming of her next topic and next book. In fact, she has already started the groundwork.

“I am collecting material on Yamuna. I will have to go to Mathura and visit the temples there,” she says with childlike excitement. I ask her if she is thinking of slowing down the pace of life. She dismisses the notion. “I will never change. I will continue to foster my passion. After all, my time is my own!” ☺

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