



Growth pangs of Indian languages

B G Mahesh does a status check of Indian language publishing on internet. The opportunities are huge, so are the bottlenecks.

India is a country of over one billion people. But a mere eight crore or eight per cent are using the internet. Up to 2005, high cost of PCs and connectivity was the main barrier. But things have changed, and now, you can get a decent broadband connection starting at Rs 150 a month. Over the last six years, there was a good increase in the number of internet users in India, and in turn, the regional language content consumption has also gone up.

Experts have argued for over a decade that Indians are not going online because of the lack of Indian language content. Online publishers want to invest more in the language space only if the readership grows. Readers want to go online only if they get more language content. A classic chicken and egg situation prevails here. But as internet penetration increases in smaller cities and towns, we can expect more investment to create content in regional languages.

In the Indian print industry, regional language papers are growing faster than English. This is mainly because of the expansion of literacy and readership in non-metros. A similar phenomenon is likely to play out online as well.

Language publishers, readers

The main sources of language content on the web are newspaper websites and blogs. Indian newspapers are reasonably aware of the online opportunities but lack urgency as the digital revenue remains miniscule. More so, language newspapers, who feel they can always join the digital bandwagon later on, when it becomes absolutely necessary. However, there are newspapers like Dainik Jagran, who are quite tech savvy.

There are also a handful of independent news websites, which do not have a print media background. Not many have ven-

ured into the language space as they are more difficult to run. To build a language portal you need to create your own content, unlike in English, where you can 'refer to several other sites while writing stories.

Blogging took off in Indian languages after 2005. Language blogs, like their English peers, usually cover entertainment and current affairs. But you can see more literary blogs here, given the traditional emphasis on creative writing in Indian languages. It takes a lot of effort to maintain a blog on daily basis and a majority of them die within a year of their inception.

So, who is reading Indian language content online? India has anywhere from 80-100 million Internet users. On Oneindia we can clearly see that over 50 per cent of the readers are bi-lingual, that is read stories both in English and one Indian language. I would imagine that India has over 50 million internet users, who read stories in a regional language. As internet spreads, you will find more mono-lingual users.

Most of the Indian language readers, very much like their English counterparts, fall in the age group of 18-25. The next largest chunk of users comes from 25-35 age group. In the coming days, you will see a lot more students going online as internet will be increasingly seen as an important tool for education.

Hindi is the most popular Indian language on the internet simply because over 500 million Indians speak the language, of which about 240 million can read. Other languages that are popular online are Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Bengali and Gujarati. Oriya and Assamese also have some presence.

Interestingly, the legendary Indian diversity extends to online reader habits as well. In Tamil, politics and cinema content is in demand. In Kannada, people like poetry and short stories. The typical Hindi reader likes to read crime stories.

Advertisers, ecommerce

For a long time advertisers stayed away from language sites as they felt there was limited readership. But language advertising has now begun with real estate, finance, insurance and travel companies exploring the channel. But still companies, which reach out to language audience in print, TV and radio, are yet to embrace online advertising in a big way.

Similarly, ecommerce is just beginning to happen in regional languages. The most successful ecommerce portal in India, the Indian Railways ticket reservation website (www.irctc.com), has just a few pages in Hindi. The only way to develop language versions of ecommerce websites is to build

dedicated teams to translate and manage the site. But that is yet to happen.

So far, ecommerce sites have struggled to establish themselves in India. Now that, their business has begun to tick, they would have to turn towards the language audience to grow further. I believe travel portals would benefit the most from language versions of their sites.

Email, search, social networking

Besides content, people need various services when they are online. There are growing options of emails, search and social networking services for Indian language users. Popular email services such as Gmail support typing in Indian languages. Google has done an exceptional job in developing Indian language tools (search 'google indic' to see their tools).

Guruji.com, the first Indian language search engine, was launched many years ago. But Google.com, which supports Hindi, Bengali, Telugu, Marathi, Tamil, Gujarati, Kannada, Malayalam and Punjabi, is ahead in the race.

Facebook has been quick to recognise regional opportunity and supports many Indian languages. Unlike Chinese, who prefer indigenous social networking websites, Indians prefer international brands. So it will be difficult for an Indian social network company to compete with an already established Facebook.

Mobile barrier

India has over 700 million mobile users of which, according to Google, 150 million are using internet on their handsets. Unfortunately, Indian language content has not taken off on mobiles as very few handsets support language fonts. You cannot install language fonts on your handsets, only the handset maker can do that. Many handset makers are not headquartered in India and so, have completely missed the opportunity.

Mobile internet browsing is pathetically slow in India. 3G has arrived, but it is not affordable for majority of the users. Affordable, fast mobile internet plans and font support will change the mobile internet scene in India.

While Indian languages have a long way to go on internet, there is little support coming from the government. None of the state governments have done a good job in promoting their language online. Each state government should create one Unicode font of its own and make it available for free. Most government sites are only in English, where they have a language version, you can expect it to be done poorly.

(Mahesh, CEO of Greynium Technologies, blogs at www.mahesh.com)