

# Hindi Web World

## Tentative Steps in an Optimistic Direction

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The presence of Hindi on the World Wide Web is still limited and tentative. Since the language has had to negotiate a new technology, which is otherwise available to English, the initial attempts in the '90s have been to develop basic computing tools such as fonts, keymaps standardization, word processing, electronic dictionaries, spellcheckers, etc. The task is by no means accomplished, and browsing the net is still a huge struggle as every fresh Hindi site demands font download and configuration. The late '90s boom in the IT sector has by and large bypassed Hindi, and the language of technology continues to be English.

Insofar as this technology is in search of a wider bazaar and a greater catchment zone for professionals, Indians have taken to computers in a big way to grab the new job opportunities here as well as abroad. 'Computer Education' is one of the hottest selling propositions, and to cater to students in the ever-proliferating computer centres computer magazines have become a ubiquitous sight in pavements stalls and malls alike. A couple of these magazines publish Hindi editions (*Chip Hindi*, *Computer Sanchar*, etc.) as well, but the overwhelming vocabulary of computer words even in these magazines is in English. This implies that readers would have to have a degree of access to English if they wish to comprehend the fundamentals of computing. The language of programming being English, the texts, which are basically teaching aids to supplement the materials taught in computer classes, read like alien technological jargon packaged in Hindi.

Given these circumstances, it was natural that the early web pages in Hindi were devoted to providing technical support and services. Institutions such as CDAC, Pune ([www.cdac.org.in](http://www.cdac.org.in)) NCST ([www.ncst.ernet.in](http://www.ncst.ernet.in)), Mumbai, [www.bharatbhasha.org](http://www.bharatbhasha.org), Indian Institute of Information Technology, Hyderabad ([www.iiit.net](http://www.iiit.net)) and a host of smaller outfits

continue to explore the possibility of producing machine translation, on-line dictionaries, WordNet, etc. IIT has developed a system of human-aided machine access capable of translating basic meaning across various Indian languages. They call it the *Anusaaraka* system i.e. a system that follows the original rather closely. The group has also built an online English-Hindi dictionary deploying a usage-database collected from lay users such as housewives and schoolchildren. The quality is admittedly uneven. They use the ISCII font standard, and this is freeware available on their site. At a recent workshop in Hyderabad an effort was made to establish a common pool of resources to develop lexical resources in Indian languages. It became clear that the free software developers' community has raised fundamental questions about issues of language on the Web on their discussion lists (on e-groups, for example) and personal sites, but their work has not received the publicity it should have.

The Hindi Programmes in universities in the US, Japan and elsewhere have put up websites focused on Hindi's literary heritage: selected works of well known poets and writers with a short introduction. Professor Malay of Colorado State University, for example, has a website ([www.cs.colostate.edu](http://www.cs.colostate.edu)) on which you can access a whole range of materials – from the *Siddha* poets of the 8th Century and medieval saint poets like Kabir, Tulsidas (including the *Hanuman Chaleesa*) and Meera, all the way to Ghalib, Nirala, Hazariprasad Dwivedi and Javed Akhtar. Its masthead describes Hindi as the “language of peasants, songs and scholars”, and there is a chronological account of milestones in Hindi, as well as a demographic listing of areas where Hindi is spoken. It is also by far the best resource page for Hindi/Urdu/Sanskrit in terms of facilitating links to a thoughtful selection of URLs (as well as sound advice, in parenthesis). Another NRI literary labour of love is [www.udgam.com](http://www.udgam.com). *Kaavyalaya* – the house of Hindi poetry at [www.manaskriti.com](http://www.manaskriti.com) is a slowly expanding gif archive where classical poets brush shoulders with some unknown names. A similar venture is the site [www.bharatdarshan.co.nz](http://www.bharatdarshan.co.nz) which even has an attractive looking Hindi teacher... The best literary fare from NRI enthusiasts comes from the creators of [www.abhivyakti-hindi.org](http://www.abhivyakti-hindi.org), “a non-commercial monthly magazine of a personal taste”. This unpretentious webzine has twenty-one sections dealing with art, culture and domesticity. My own favourite from the current issue is the extract from the Introduction of *Ujaale Apni Yadon Ke*, a collection of ghazals by Bashir Badra. The stories included are those by Amrita Pritam and Satyajit Ray in a section dedicated to translations from Indian languages. The Hindi language is represented by a story by Mohan Rakesh - *Ardra*. *Abhivyakti* also hosts a couple of regularly updated, uncomplicated dictionaries - English-Hindi/Urdu and Hindi-English, besides sections on humour and art. Its sister site, [www.anubhuti-hindi.org](http://www.anubhuti-hindi.org), is a weekly, and is equally well done and comprehensive, inhabiting a range of genres and poets from Jaishankar Prasad, Ibne Insha, Dushyant Kumar and Girijakumar Mathur to emergent voices that are not so well known. Both sites carry a helpful catalogue of difficult words with meanings and provide information/links on pedagogic and literary resources.

The famous poet-lyricist Gulzar has an exclusive [www.gulzar.net](http://www.gulzar.net) dedicated to him. A creation of his fans, the site is as lyrically arranged as his poems. The sections on his life, works, future plans, other links, etc. are all put under first line headers from his songs. The page follows a bipartite division between Hindi and Roman scripts. The site also provides

links to [www.urdustan.com](http://www.urdustan.com) and [www.urdupoetry.com](http://www.urdupoetry.com) which together constitute a big archive of works by most well known as well as a few anonymous poets in Urdu. The strategy of transliterating Hindi/Urdu works into Roman script dates back to the early days of the net, and the two technologies deployed to this end are known as ITRANS and JTRANS.

In the last six months or so, Hindi has registered a more substantial presence in the virtual world. Users can now write emails and read newspapers, as many newspapers - *Amar Ujala*, *Dainik Jagaran*, *Hindustan*, *Milap*, etc. - are now available online. In what is essentially a developing domain, 'First' is the buzzword and the USP, and the web is full of proud announcements such as: "First Hindi Web Magazine", "First Web Portal", "First Literary Magazine", "First Urdu/Hindi newspaper on the Net", and also the "First Mahaportal in Indian Languages". Sites like [www.lashkar.com](http://www.lashkar.com) (a trilingual) and [www.webdunia.com](http://www.webdunia.com) were pioneers in journalism. The former runs *Awadh Akhbar* in Urdu and Hindi, while the latter runs *Nai Dunia*, and the eponymous multi-channel portal exclusively in Hindi.

Apart from the usual fare on news, views, culture, religion, weather, shares, astrology etc., you also get an introductory series called the *Shaharnama*, a handy tourist guide to some Indian cities. Webdunia also provides email facility in Hindi. However, the main attraction of Webdunia is the online *Hans*, which is a widely respected literary magazine in print. Rediff.com, primarily an English site, has put up editions in many Indian languages but the Hindi edition is an eyewash as quite often the click on the columns leads you to the original English locations. Their email is neat though. The best mail provider, so far, is [www.mailjoi.com](http://www.mailjoi.com). And all of these are free, an ironic contrast to the government supported *Heap*, which comes for a price. Another disappointing site is [www.hindi.indiainfo.com](http://www.hindi.indiainfo.com), which does not open easily and finally when it does, serves such indigestible cultural stuff as a celebration of the *ghunghat* (veil) as a symbol of Indian Womanhood.

The condition of government-sponsored sites is much worse. The National Book Trust is a premier publishing agency but its website [www.nbtindia.com](http://www.nbtindia.com) has nothing in the National Language except a couple of gif lines on the masthead. Similarly [www.sahitya-akademy.org](http://www.sahitya-akademy.org) where I happened to be only the 1014th visitor starts promisingly with an image of Rabindranath Tagore's poem in his own hand, but ends disappointingly - it only provides a checklist of its publications - and that too in English. The Akademi produces many journals in Indian Languages in print, but none of these have been allowed to make a transition to the Net.

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web is full of proud  
announcements such  
as: "First Hindi Web  
Magazine", "First Web  
Portal", etc.

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A recent addition, and a refreshing one, is [www.net-jaal.com](http://www.net-jaal.com) - "The First Indian Multilingual Mahaportal". It houses a web newspaper called *Netdainik* and a magazine called *Dinman* - named after the illustrious and highly successful newsmagazine of the 70s edited by Raghuvir Sahay. Netjaal's open approach becomes obvious the moment you open their sub-site [www.dharmkarm.com](http://www.dharmkarm.com), which not only gives space to major Indian religions other than Hinduism but transcends even the Gandhian "*Sarva-dharma-sambhava*" ethic by providing space to *nastiks* (non-believers). Its editorial in the current issue is an exposè of the *Dharma*

*Sansad* organised by the VHP at the Kumbha Mela site in Allahabad. It questions the legitimacy of the democratic claims the use of the term *Sansad* (Parliament) evokes.

Interestingly, *Dinman* has also been carrying a series of discussions and interviews with prominent Hindi writers on the predicaments and possibilities of Hindi in cyberspace. The response from the writers is interesting: while most of them welcome the widening of the horizon and of readership for Hindi, some of them sound critical and/or sceptical. Their argument is that the net is a skewed medium for a language spoken predominantly by the poor. Kamleshwar points out that we have not yet been able to embrace the computer as a necessary tool in our lives. It is something we use off and on. Vishnu Khare appears more hospitable to the idea of Hindi taking the cyber plunge and proposes that copyright laws and related legalities should be carefully worked out. More importantly, he sees in the net an opportunity to break the snobbish factionalism of the print sphere, as also the split between High and Popular literature. Sudhish Pachauri in his column - *Apni Bhasha, Apni Dunia/"De Ragad ke"* - criticizes Hindi academia for producing generations of 'connoisseurs of literature'. The need of the globalising hour, according to him, is to produce professionals. Otherwise younger aspirants for jobs will simply quit studying the Humanities, a growing trend he illustrates by citing the recent exodus in Delhi University. He also bemoans the fact that (unlike Tamil) there is no initiative in Hindi to set aside a corpus fund to build lexical resources. Finally, he makes a fervent appeal to make Hindi techno-friendly and relevant without insisting on its purity.

This exhortation points to the desperate struggle that Indian languages, including Hindi, are waging to take on the challenges thrown up in the era of the Web. The quality of most of the sites discussed above is uneven. The lack of standard encoding techniques is a metaphor for the diversity of resources being produced and deployed by myriad independent initiatives. The Indian language world is crying for the intervention of an agency that could coordinate these disparate efforts. A Bill Gates will do it perhaps some day. But he will do it for a price.

Having said that, it also needs reiteration that the diverse intellectual and technological enterprise at work is also the strength of Indian languages on the web. Insofar as they have managed to shake off the burden of being officious, boring and artificial standard languages, they have already registered a quiet but significant victory. From this healthy platform of the everyday code of communications might emerge a larger agenda, a participatory environment and a genuine philosophy of difference.