

Indic, Especially Hindi, Computing

An Index of Choices

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Programmers and software from India may have been a glorified and lucrative export to the West but people here are still groping for a common language of communication. Obviously, I am not talking about the well known linguistic-scriptic diversity of the nation. What is at issue is communication – in the very basic sense of the term – because even though there have existed solutions galore, developed over a decade-and-a-half by diverse agencies and individuals, what is missing is their inter-operability. It is like living in a post-barter day and age with no bank to convert my currency into yours. To speak in computing terms, there is a plethora of software, mostly proprietary but also free: text editors, e-mail clients, chat software, transliterators, machine translators, OCRs, localised desktops and of course umpteen sites, but there is no commonality between them in terms of standards and the input/output methods being deployed. Indic developers have taken their own sweet time to differentiate between a computer and a typewriter, which allows for writing in a single, predetermined way. The result is that most packages still do not enable switching across various keyboards. So, I may have to go shopping a whole month if I want my right configuration of fonts, operating system, browser and e-mail client and pray to God that most of my friends have the same stuff on their machine. Similarly, if I wish to read, for example, more than one Hindi newspaper online – mind you, they are all there – I will have to download fonts at every fresh site. Even if I am able to install them easily on my Windows machine, I will have to sweat it out if I am a Linux-lover.

This overkill of diversity kills the very purpose of something like the Internet, which theoretically at least, enables you to connect with multitudes at one keystroke. The diversity on the other hand is also a reminder of multiple levels of technological evolution, distribution and access; and an index of the whole history-in-the-making of Indic computing, where the future is as crucial as the present and the past.

Presently, if you wish to work with Indic scripts, the interface of your system will look something like the electrician in Hollywood films, with tools of different shapes, sizes and makes dangling from his waist. That is why people are waiting for a user-friendly standard to emerge. Hopefully, Bill Gates will fulfil his promise of releasing complete Operating System level support this October, and hopefully the lucky ones will immediately upgrade, probably by acquiring illegal copies. This may make their lives simpler but their connectivity will depend on others' acquisitions. Further, this may not be an ethically or professionally viable choice for everybody, especially for those who wish to contribute creatively in the ongoing voluntary efforts in Indic computing. So here is a select history and future of choices.

Notes and Links:

<<Moment of Departure: When ttf Fonts Ruled>>

Most pioneering Hindi web sites, put up by Hindi-lovers abroad, either hosted material in the Roman script,

ASCII-based transliterations, adopted Shusha fonts, devised their own fonts, or put up stuff as .pdf or .jpg images. The phonetic nature of Shusha came in handy for expatriate programmers working primarily with the qwerty keyboard. For samples see: www.manaskriti.com/kaavyaalaya.com; www.abhivyakti-hindi.org; www.anubhuti-hindi.org; www.hindinest.com – all of which run on Shusha.

For popular transliterators **ITRANS** and **JTRANS** go to: <http://www.aczone.com/itrans/> and <http://www.sibal.com/sandeep/jtrans/>

The **Devnag** package of LaTeX, for both Linux and Windows, has been usefully tested for publishing, printing and web hosting. For downloads visit: <http://www.tex.ac.uk/tex-archive/languages/devanagari/>

For a fairly comprehensive listing of Devanagari fonts and links to their sources see: <http://www.cs.colostate.edu/~malaiya/devafonts.htm>

If you are looking for Mac phonetic fonts go to: <http://www.flash.net/~patelvk/Hindi.html>

Some other good links for fonts are: <http://theory.theory.tifr.res.in/bombay/history/people/language/hindi.html> and http://rkk@acharya.iitm.ac.in/ind_fonts.html

Recently, www.akruti.com released a set of Indian language fonts under GPL, also accessible at <http://fsf.org.in/software/software.html>

<<Word Processors, E-mail, Web and Chat Tools>>

Baraha 5.0 (www.baraha.com) for Windows is a fair use ware, for phonetic word processing in Kannada, Marathi and Hindi. The problem is you cannot selectively write or edit directly, you have to go through a transliterator. **I-leap** is another multilingual, versatile tool which, like Baraha, allows for Unicode conversion. <http://tdil.mit.gov.in/humis/download/menu.htm> offers a host of free downloads including fonts, keyboards and, if you like officious Hindi, a technical glossary as well. An advanced commercial version of this multilingual package is **Indiapage** from www.mitthi.com

<<Unicode: Arrival of a Viable Standard?>>

In the context of the unacceptability of the ISCII standard, the emergence of Unicode is a viable long-term option and both corporate companies and free software communities are working hard to develop solutions based on Unicode. It has the potential of making computing platform-independent and therefore exchange and circulation of information easy. For basic information and debates see: www.unicode.org; <http://www.alanwood.net/unicode/devanagari.html> and itm.ac.in/multi_sys/uni_iscii.html

Unicode support comes bundled with Windows/XP 2000. For phonetic typing one can use the free **Takhti** from http://www.geocities.com/hanu_man_ji/ or the **DevromU** (developed by Bob Eaton) keymap along with **keyman 6.0**; or the wide ranging **Aksharmala** solutions (www.aksharmala.com). On the other hand **Yudit** (<http://www.yudit.org/>) is an excellent multilingual, multi-keyboard text editor that works better for Linux machines. Unicode has facilitated the development of standardised desktops across Indian languages. One can see the status of translations and downloadable packages at: <http://indic-computing.sourceforge.net> and <http://www.indlinux.org/>