

Host

Last week, Amazon India added four new Indian languages. It helps now to provide online shopping access to about 300 million customers. The four languages they added a Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil and Telugu yes, all four South Indian languages. This comes ahead of the festive season that accounts for a significant chunk of ecommerce sales in the country. In fact, last year, Amazon had also launched an automated messaging assistant in Hindi. Two years ago, Google had introduced voice search in nine Indian languages on Google Assistant. Today, Hindi is the second most used assistant language globally after English. We know the language diversity in our country but what role can Indian language play online. Has Indian language finally found its voice online?

Host

I spoke to BG Mahesh, Mahesh pioneer Digital technologies in Indian languages way before Digital India charter took place. Till recently, he owned India's largest multi lingual portal oneindia.com. In fact, Mahesh's digital journey started way back in the US in 1992. It started with mahesh.com. In 1999, he moved to India and launched Indiainfo.com one of the earliest portals to focus on Indian languages, he built India info as a media venture that used technology smartly, you can in fact follow Mahesh on mahesh.com Incidentally, he also owns the domain karnataka.com Here is my chat with Mahesh.

Host

Hi Mahesh, welcome to the show This whole conversation about Indian languages right and the importance of Indian languages is something that has come to the forefront in the last probably four years five years or so, even from a media point of view, even though when newspapers were you know, like any Indian language newspaper, outsold an English newspaper, even then the conversations around you know, the importance of languages in India never came into picture as much as it has come today, but you are one of the few people and very early entrants who spotted the need for having Indian languages way back in 1999. So, I just wanted to understand how did this language affinity growing and what do you think is happening with Indian languages today?

BG Mahesh

So, if we have to, you know, go back about 20 years or I mean, yeah, it is 20 years. Now, if you see, okay, then see in India, as you know, we had only a dial up modem. Okay, like in India and in the world and I think we can all recall that sound when we connect, and while we are browsing, we used to drop off, and obviously all this was there only in the cities. Now, when we started in 1999, I think because since I came from a home, where you know, the language importance was there, you know, actually, we all at home were, you know, subscribing to get Kannada newspapers. And we were seeing, you know, on TV, I mean, we used to see Hindi, Kannada, Tamil, because my mom and dad were in Calcutta, we were also seeing Bengali movie. So, I was seeing that there was a lot of attraction in the media for non-English. And by like about you know, not 99, maybe in 2000 the language newspapers, were already uploading their news as a scanned copy, you know, okay, so you could actually browse like what now you have your E paper, that whole thing was being scanned and put, according to me, it was very, very hard to read it to begin with. So, so, like in about one year of operations, you know, while we had planned in within one year of launching Indiainfo for as you know, we all sat including you and we said we have to launch the Indian languages. And I mean, it was a bet. It was a bet. I mean, I think if you see about 20 years ago, anything you actually needed was a huge gamble. We don't know what meets, what doesn't meet? And we thought that we got to focus on, you know, actually publishing, you know, the content in Indian language. There were

challenges, obviously, you didn't have access to people, the journalists like, you know, you joined. And, you know, we had, you know, the people joining us where we had to come in where you explained to them, and how it should be written and up now, I was explaining to them, what is internet, you know, what people are interested, it was hard, because, you know, at that time, you didn't have Google, you had, you know, you had few search engines, but they were not anywhere close to Google. So, it was a new actually concept. I mean, most of them have been never browsed. You know, nobody had access to internet. So, it was a new thing. And everybody was very excited to learn, and think and to find a someone to move from the print to the digital was very hard. Because, like, about 20 years ago, for you to find a journalist who had a actually, a job like in say, Hindu or Deccan Herald means, okay, we are all set, you know, we'll be there forever, there'll be no problems. And if anybody would leave and come they had to answer everybody, why are you leaving? What is this.com? So, it actually started like that, we because I had experience abroad, that there was a need, I mean, there was a demand, we know for language content. You know, I said, Okay, how about we start on it.

Host

We're taking a short break, stay tuned.

Welcome back, we are in conversation with BG Mahesh. Now, recently, we both you know, we were in fact exchanging some conversations also around Amazon launching voice search right. So, from that time to now, how much as you know, Indian language technology itself has moved online, I mean, whether it is, by way of search, for example, or whether it is by way of translation or now the voice-based services, how much has it changed?

BG Mahesh

I think, you know since 20 years, the amount it has changed is a lot and for the good. Now, you know, while for a long-long time, we had you know, the content which was in Unicode you know, actually it was not in a searchable Okay, it was on Google, but it was not searchable. So, you know, sites like ours, whether Indiainfo or oneindia, to a large extent, we were at most of the traffic we got was okay, direct traffic, it was never from search engines. I mean, I think we had only about 8% 10% you know, from search engines, Now, of course, everywhere it has increased. Now, so it was good. And, you know, the like, you know, we have many people say even people like me, I can speak, you know, in a few Indian languages, but I'm not able to read and write or I mean, I can read, but I can't write. So, you know, now things have changed, but at that time I could have if it allowed me to search in English I could say and say I want this in Hindi the result it should go and search for you know, the same article which will be in Hindi so now all that has improved a lot number one, regarding the Voice search I think it's very, very important. I think yeah, I mean, we saw that it's not only in language, in English also I have seen everybody when they go to a search engine, they actually speak and they actually search because nobody wants to type and especially again, as I said, when it will be you know, when it will it will come to an Indian language people can read, okay, but they are not that fluent in writing in that language. So only the voice will actually will come to your rescue. I am still speaking here about about a B2C, like about the about for the publishers, you know, how they increase the engagement with the end consumer and the reader with the help of voice. But in the, in the b2b space, which we all hardly actually get to see. The amount of voice being used is a lot. It's, you know, for example, we all know about bots. You know, so many of the, in a banks, or the actually consumer thing, the first few levels of the support happens with bots. Now, many of those are supporting the where you can ask in the language.

Host that's interesting.

BG Mahesh

Okay, so yeah, so I mean, that's a huge thing. So even for the end, end consumer, he feels that, okay, I know, this, like, actually product actually cares about me, they want to hear my feedback, they want to hear my actually the complaint. And you know otherwise, you have to open an email explaining your language and said, now I'm able to speak with the bot. And you have now fantastic, actually, companies in India, I mean, you know, if you see the entrepreneurs when we started, and the ones who are now, I mean, they're far more-bolder, you know, extremely smart, they're not afraid to, you know, go into new fields, they're not afraid to do new experiments. So, it's an excellent thing. And, of course, you will agree that in the last 20 years, the entire start-up space has change, you know, when we started, there was no, not about language, it's about internet, like any precedent in India for you to lean back and see, okay, this will work, this will not work. So now, all that, in the last 20 years of thing, you know, in openly people are able to see the amount of the funding is, I mean, it's a lot more, and the entrepreneurs nowadays are far far they're much more educated, they have a lot more information. Okay, and the thing and I think that way, it has actually changed a lot.

Host

This brings me to my last question, which is that you feel that in there is going to be more hope and there is going to be more future for Indian language media, compared to English media, as we go maybe in the next 10 years or so. Do you see a lot more innovation also coming in that space?

BG Mahesh

See, the innovation will actually come in Indian language according to me, I'm being blunt. It's not because they feel they're obligated or for the love of the language. Everybody sees the usage of English as under saturated. Okay, now, they need to expand the market Okay, they have to expand the market they need to increase the new users okay. So, now, if you see you know, the same product if they add that language feature, suddenly you see the user base will increase by I don't know what 15x, 20x, 30 years I mean, it becomes you know, with a small amount of effort. So, actually I find it very, very, surprising that in India even the e-commerce sites first you know, they have launched only in Hindi, okay, because I think they all need to come out of that their narrow thinking Indian language is equal to Hindi. So, you know, it's Hindi and a lot more of the you know, the you are the full of Indian languages you have actually Bengali, Marathi Asami and all of that, I do agree that, you know, they will have to launch where there is some amount of user base that they cannot launch the support where, you know, only some 100 users are there or 100 cases. But after the launch Hindi I don't know why they almost a year and a half to two and a half, three years to expand the number of languages they are actually supporting. That part, I'm not able to understand because these ecommerce sites they have the financial like actually backing and for them to add that support. It is not all that a big deal now that you know, for example, know, Amazon added I think Hindi support exactly about two years ago, and now it has been expanded to four more languages, I guess, four more languages. On the other hand, if you see the you know US presidential thing the democrat the campaign this year from the starting You know, they're already having 14 Indian languages

Host-Wow

BG Mahesh

Okay but in India, it is being slow. So, so I'm just saying but by adding this for five Indian languages, or if the foreign any English thing, right, if they add about at least four to five Indian language support, the user base will increase, at least by 300 million. Okay. And they also need to look into they can't iterate saying that okay in Hindi if it clicks only then I will go into the South Indian language, because there is a chance for a kind of, you know, the product it may do well, only in one language. I mean, I'm just giving you a wide example that, you know, say for example, you know, your personal finance, it may do well in Tamil, but it may not do all that, you know, well in Hindi. Hindi numbers are very easy because the size is huge. But if you look at the percentage, according to me, it will be you know, far more good, or far more impressive in the South India actually

Host

Thanks, Mahesh Thanks for your time. Future of Indian language or Indic is very promising. It's a space we all need to keep a tab on.