



Digital Nepal

Language and technology

It is currently argued that 3000 of the World's 6000 or so languages will be lost by the end of the twenty-first century through the erosion of oral traditions in language. It can be further argued that digital technology contributes to this erosion. But can it also offer the opportunity to record a culture's heritage in oral, visual and literary forms?

AMAR GARUNG

Nepal, according to the last census has about ninety-two different language groups - ethnic groups - and out of these ninety-two, only four or five will have a written tradition. So most of these other languages would be a language with the oral tradition.

AMAR GARUNG

Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya was established about 60 years ago. So, the initial mandate was to sort of promote as well as preserve the Nepali language. And it has now sort of become the official legal deposit library in the country.

AMAR GARUNG

The reason the MPP moved into technology was about ten years ago and we wanted to automate our catalogue records. And then we found out that the problem was the, whatever software that was used did not have support for the script that the Nepali language uses: the Devanagari script. And we tried different options. I mean, private vendors, universities... And nothing, it could not work. And so we thought that maybe we will try it ourselves. To give an example, I mean we had to start from scratch. Like, spell checkers; for English, it's taken for granted, you know, grammar checkers is taken for granted. But none of them existed. And so to develop a spell checker we had to collect the vocabulary of Nepali words, you know. I mean, that in itself is a lot of work.

AMAR GARUNG

We digitise every periodical that we get, every day, that's about two hundred titles. The proper scanner to do it we would normally not be able to afford and maintain it and all that. We rely heavily on open source software to do a lot of our stuff for cataloguing, for scanning, you know? So we use open source depository called Dspace, to upload everything online.

AMAR GARUNG

Because we use a different script other than English we have to customise most of the software ourselves. Devanagari is the script that the Nepali language uses and the script is also used by Hindi language. And Hindi being the sort of national language in India there was a lot of work already done, being done, on Hindi you know? So when Unicode came along, I mean they just basically adapted ISCII, the Indian standard for Devanagari.

AMAR GARUNG

Unicode is a fairly technical, I mean, consortium; it only works with scripts, it doesn't care about languages. So in order to get registered in, er, in the Unicode consortium you need a script, and the script has to be totally unique from whatever there exists in the Unicode currently. And so it's very difficult, even for existing Nepali languages. The main problem is we are stuck with the keyboard the hardware, you know? I mean, we can only do modifications on the software side. But, I mean, it would be difficult to, sort of, create a new keyboard, just for Nepal.

SUBODH TRIPATHEE

Even today, er, er, we don't have that much of content in Nepali language. So, you know, there is a situation whereby you need to know, where, you know, English to have a, you know, to, to really, you know, reap benefit out of these technologies.

MANESH SHRESTHA

Most people want their children to study, er, study in English, because English opens a lot of doors. Once you know English and you're good at English then you get better jobs, you have better opportunities for further education.

SUBODH TRIPATHEE

You know, use of language in the digital technologies, I think it's a, you know, one of the, very controversial, you know, area.

AMAR GARUNG

Most of the population in Nepal, because they only have a language with oral tradition, and for them I think the technology that would enable them would be speech based, interface available on the computer. The much more advanced technology, I mean like speech and all that you'd actually have to do a lot more work then.