

Free knowledge for one and all

Isbani Bose traces the history of the 'Knowledge for Free' movement and speaks to science educator Arvind Gupta about his contribution to making knowledge accessible to one and all

TGS NEWS SERVICE

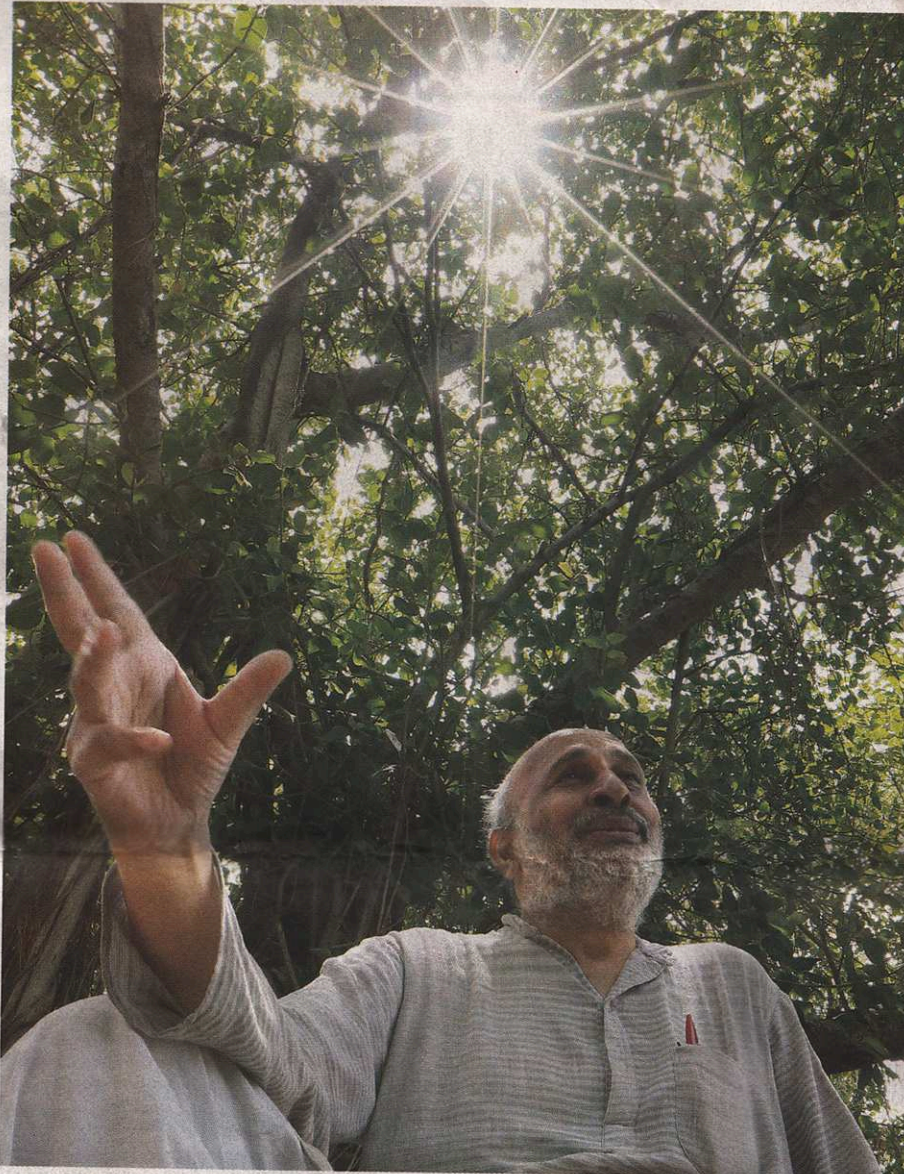
At the University of Pennsylvania Commencement Address in 2009, Executive Chairman of Google, Eric Schmidt said, "We have an opportunity for everyone in the world to have access to all the world's information. This has never before been possible. Why is ubiquitous information so profound? It's a tremendous equalizer. Information is power." Schmidt was indeed right when he said that. Information is influential, especially in a day and age when knowledge, skill and vision are everything we need to work towards achieving a more equitable distribution of power in a diverse democracy.

While the Internet, and especially, Google has played an instrumental role in making information accessible to a larger audience today, the 'Knowledge for Free' movement had its genesis way back in history, with the establishment of the first universal library, the Library of Alexandria. It gathered books from all over the world at one location. Its origin lay in the inquisitive Greek mind and in Alexander the Great's conquests. The Boston Public Library, founded in 1826, also has the logo 'Free for All' inscribed on its door till this very day.

For renowned Indian science educator, innovator, toy inventor and head of the Children's Science Centre in the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics (IUCAA), Arvind Gupta, the 'Knowledge for Free' movement is something worth dreaming and striving for. "Today, we can make available every single book in every single language to every single child on the earth. That is something worth striving for. In India, there are a few public libraries, but there is a lot of hunger for knowledge in our children. If good books are made available to them they will certainly get benefitted from it," says Gupta.

BIRTH OF A UNIQUE WEBSITE ARVINDGUPTATOYS.COM

Gupta set up his website arvindguptatoys.com ten years ago, and has been trying to digitise books which are out of print (especially



Crusader for the 'Knowledge for Free' movement in India, Arvind Gupta

in the Indian languages) and upload them on his website.

Today, his website consists of 4,000 books on education, environment, science, maths and children's literature. Almost 15,000 books are downloaded each day across the globe from his website. Besides designing fun toys and simple science experiments, Gupta makes two-minute videos and uploads them on his website.

"Today we have 4,400 videos in 18 languages and everyday, 40,000 children across the world view them. In the last five years, over three crore children and teachers across the world have viewed our videos," says Gupta.

CREATION OF LEARNER'S LIBRARY

Gupta and his team have also compiled a DVD titled, *The Learner's Library*, for teachers in small towns with no Internet access. "It contains 900 wonderful books, 7000 photographic instructions to make low-cost science models and 200 videos of 'Toys from Trash'.

And it costs less than Rs 15, the price of a blank DVD! Over 700 schools are using this DVDs. *The Learner's Library* is being circulated freely in South Africa, Nepal, Pakistan, Ghana and a few other countries. Last year, an organisation in Gujarat made 1000

copies of *The Learner's Library* and gifted them to local schools."

Gupta agrees that in the process of printing books that are not easily accessible or which are over 25 years old and copyrighted, there have been some instances where people have issued copyright notices to him.

However, he has a straightforward method of dealing with them. "If we get a notice we say 'sorry' for the inconvenience caused and remove the book. However, by that time many thousands have already downloaded the book thus fulfilling our task. We make no money on these books and share them with people who have no access to books. This is what the Internet was designed for — to share," he says.

According to Gupta, who is playing an instrumental role in popularising the concept of making knowledge freely available for one and all, "Every human being has a desire to contribute meaningfully to the society. This desire to share is deeply encoded in human nature. It is only a matter of time before all books, in all languages will be available for free and accessible to anyone who seeks knowledge. I am waiting for that day," he says in a tone full of hope and conviction.

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Sharing knowledge for free

In 1971, pioneer Michael Hart set up Project Gutenberg (PG), which is the world's oldest digital library, to divide and share e-books for free.

Along with its partners and affiliates, PG, over the years, has managed to upload over 1,00,000 books on the Internet. With a slogan that reads, 'A million books for a billion people', the project has been a source of deep inspiration for millions across the world and has used cutting-edge technology, not for personal gain but for public welfare — to allow books to be accessed by millions of people.

In 1993, Microsoft bought all the world encyclopedias to set up Encarta — a digital encyclopedia. In 2003, Richard Stallman envisioned a free online encyclopedia 'for the people, by the people'. The result was the Wikipedia — the largest multilingual repository of information in the entire world. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) too, is playing an integral role in the movement by placing all its course content online for free. Today, the most inspiring talks on earth — the TED talks (ted.com) — can also be freely downloaded.