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IUCAA loads website with 700 books

Lack of good public libraries pushes scientist to open online library with English, Marathi and Hindi books

Pia Chandavarkar

Pune, June 26: It is a movement that will make President APJ Abdul Kalam proud. With the goal of bridging the digital divide and taking knowledge beyond boundaries, an online library of over 700 books in English, Marathi and Hindi is being built at the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics (IUCAA)'s Muktangan Exploratory Science Centre. The library, available on www.arvindguptatoys.com, has seen 53,000 visitors since it began three years ago.

Initiated by Arvind Gupta, who heads the children's science centre at IUCAA, the project was inspired by the website www.gutenberg.com, which is the world's largest online database of free books. "I was fascinated with this concept of a rich variety of books being made available for all to see. In a country where there is a dearth of good public libraries, I felt this was essential," said Gupta.

The books deal with a wide range of topics like pedagogy, environment, science and mathematics, education, war and peace, and even include popular children's literature from across the world. From the classic Totto-Chan stories to Isaac Asimov's series of Science Facts, Irawati Karve's Yuganta to Laurie Baker's Architecture for the Poor, the library guarantees something for everyone.

A unique aspect of the project is it has made available a vast body of literature in Marathi and Hindi too.

"I was disturbed to see that a huge amount of literature in Hindi was very difficult to access," said Gupta. Today the Hindi collection, which began with the literature by popular Hindi author Premchand on the occasion of his 125th birth anniversary, amounts to 80.

Popular books like Antoine de Saint Exupery's The Little Prince, Richard Bach's Jonathan Livingston Seagull, Helen Keller's Three Days to See, and Munro Leaf's The Story of Ferdinand, have also been translated into Marathi and Hindi and digitized.

"For easy downloading, all books are in the 'pdf' format, so there is no problem while reading the fonts," said Gupta. "For those who don't have access to internet or a high-speed broadband connection, the Science Centre has prepared CDs containing all the

books.” The library will also benefit the visually impaired, who can read the online books using screen reading software like JAWS.

Today Gupta’s team has collected over 700 books, a collection that keeps increasing everyday. “We are focusing on valuable literature that is out of print because publishers no longer found them viable to print another edition,” said Gupta.

A database of scientific toys

The ‘learner’s library’ also includes a database of scientific toys prepared at the Muktagan Science Centre, which conducts science learning activities for school children through these toys, made from waste material including matchboxes, cardboard, newspaper, used batteries, and even rubber slippers. This database includes labeled photographs of the toys, as well as the instructions on how to make them. “This is so that children sitting anywhere in the world will be able to learn how to make these toys themselves,” said Gupta.