A Million Books for a Billion People

Scientist, educator, toymaker, 'copyleft' lobbyist Arvind Gupta looks at the history – and future of making books freely available to all those who seek.

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The human species thrives because each generation passes on its lived experiences to the next one. These experiences were carved on rocks, scribbled on clay tablets, written on parchment for the benefit of all. Texts were copied by scribes and kept in depositories. Libraries and archives were known to many civilisations in Egypt, Asia Minor and Greece. These sundry libraries were, however, primarily concerned with the conservation of local traditions and heritage.

The first known universal library, which gathered books from all over the world at one single location, was the great Library at Alexandria. Its genesis lay in the inquisitive Greek mind and in Alexander's conquests. The book booty must have made the library richer.

(Likewise, the British Museum is often described in jest as the 'biggest repository of loot from the Third World'.

Today, we can be one up on the Greeks. We can share more books with each other than ever before. The Library of Congress in the USA is the single largest repository of books in the world with a collection of over 26 million books.

All these books, once digitized, can be put on a small server costing just US$ 50,000! Imagine, all the world's greatest books 'spinning' away for the benefit of all of humanity! The Boston Public Library,founded in 1826, has the caption FREE FOR ALL inscribed on its door. The MIT is not threatened at all by placing all its course content free online. The most inspiring talks on earth - the TED talks (ted.com) - can all be freely downloaded. Today, we can make available every single book in every single language to every single child on earth. That is something worth dreaming and striving for.

Many pioneers have worked hard to fulfil this dream. In 1971, Michael Hart set up Project Gutenberg (PG) to bridge the knowledge divide and e-share books for free. PG is the world's oldest digital library. Along with its partners and affiliates, PG has managed to upload over 1,00,000 books on the internet. Until 1989, all the books were inputted manually. But with the advent of scanners and OCR (optical character recognition) software, this process has become faster and easier. PG has thousands of passionate volunteers across the globe who proof read the scanned text for free. PG has been a source of deep inspiration for millions across the world. It has used cutting-edge technology, not for personal gains but for public welfare - to allow books to be accessed by millions of people.

In 1993, Microsoft bought out all the world encyclopaedias to set up Encarta – a digital encyclopaedia - to be sold online or by retail. Today, Encarta lies buried. Private greed failed in the face of democratic charity. In 2003, Richard Stallman envisioned a free online encyclopaedia 'for the people, by the people'. The result was the Wikipedia. Like it or loathe it, today Wikipedia is a force to reckon. In August 2009, it reached an impressive milestone of 3 million articles in English with 10 million people collaborating globally! Wikipedia now contains more than 13 million articles in 271 different languages.

Within a few years, all the books in the world will be digitised. This is for sure. The technology is pretty pedestrian. Big players like Google see big money and are perfecting a micro-payment system where people pay small sums to download a page or a chapter. Only one question will remain: Who will control it all? It can turn out to be a win-win situation, just like the cell phones. Massive volumes will ensure that companies can still make profits while people can benefit by having to pay a lot less than if they were to buy the books.

In 2005, India celebrated the 125th birth anniversary of its greatest writer – Premchand. As a child I had read all his stories. Idgah – the story of a poor boy Hamid who goes hungry but buys a 'chimta' for his grandmother - still brings tears to my eyes. I thought it would be worth checking out this story on the internet. I couldn't find it anywhere and felt crestfallen. So I typed it out in Hindi, English and Marathi and uploaded it on my website. This was my humble tribute to Premchand. Much has changed. Four years later, it is heartening to see 300 odd stories by Premchand on the site http://munshi-premchand.blogspot.com

There are no public libraries in India. Where do our teachers and learners find good books? This prompted me to set up a website (http://arvindguptatoys.com). A hundred thousand passionate books on education, environment and peace get downloaded from my website every month.

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For teachers in small towns with no internet, I have compiled a CD - Learner's Library. It contains 900 wonderful books plus 3000 photographic instructions to make low-cost science models. All this wonderful stuff for less than ten rupees! This CD has been shared freely with over 3000 schools. The Learner's Library is circulating freely in South Africa, Nepal, Pakistan, Ghana and a few other countries. Two months, back an organisation in Gujarat made 1000 copies of the Learner's Library and gifted them to schools.

Every human being has a deep desire to contribute meaningfully to society. This desire to share is deeply encoded in human nature. Given this, it is only a matter of time before we have books being available for free, accessible to anyone who seeks knowledge. I wait eagerly, to see that day. ∎