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By Tory Read

Growing Wikipedia: **The India Chronicles**



Dear Community,

As the Wikimedia Foundation began its catalyst work, we commissioned documentarian Tory Read to create a vivid description of our work in India during the important early stages of our activities. This was done in the interest of transparency and to ensure that we captured lessons from this new approach. It also serves as a window into some of the exciting developments in the Indian Wikimedia community.

Our goal is to honestly communicate about our work in this new arena and to stimulate dialogue about diverse ways to support and build Wikipedia communities and Wikimedia projects around the world.

We hope that you take away a nuanced understanding of the work in India. We encourage you to tell us what you think and ask informed questions as this work continues to unfold.

Sincerely,

Barry Newstead

Chief Global Development Officer, Wikimedia Foundation

This is a journalistic account and analysis, based on document review, interviews and observations conducted between November 2010 and June 2011, including 16 days in India in June 2011.

I planned and organized my visit based on where the most Wikipedia activities were happening at the time. The Malayalam Wikipedia community had been planning their annual meetup, and they scheduled it to fall within my travel dates so I could report on it. The views expressed herein are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Wikimedia Foundation.

Tory Read, documentarian

“Wikipedia saved my life.”

That’s what Srikeit Tadepalli, an MBA student in Pune, India, told me one day in June. He’d been a below-average student with few college options, but a prestigious school saw his Wikipedia achievements and admitted him to its communications program in spite of his test scores. Now, he’s thriving.

He’s not alone in India in his belief in the potency of Wikipedia. G. Balachandran, a septuagenarian who lives outside of Ernakulum in Kerala state, said that working on Malayalam Wikipedia helped him recover after a stroke left him paralyzed. “He’s much sharper now,” said his wife Jagadamma K. “He’s made a lot of new friends, and that’s been good for his health.”

“The 2004 South Asia tsunami showed me the raw power of Wikipedia,” said Arun Ramarathnam, a corporate executive in Bangalore. “Hundreds of contributors from all over the world worked around the clock on the tsunami article. None of us knew each other, and yet we collaborated and worked collectively to make a difference.”

“Having the community of people online being supportive—nice and nasty both—the ecosystem of passionate volunteers excited me,” said Anirudh Bhati, who started editing English Wikipedia in 2006 and lives in Gujarat state.

“At first, I contributed just to get the t-shirt, but then I started to like it,” said Shravani Joshi, a 13-year-old girl in Pune who is adding new material to the Harry Potter article. “It’s cool. Whatever I write is getting seen by the entire world.”

“The person responsible for turning me into a contributor is Angelina Jolie,” said User:A, a boisterous volunteer who for personal reasons requested anonymity in this story. “She sang ‘Satisfaction’ in a film, and it wasn’t in the article about her, so I added it. When I saw my edit staring back at me, I was hooked.”

This enthusiasm drives thousands of Indians all over the sub-continent to spend nights and weekends working on Wikimedia projects, which include Wikipedia,

Wikimedia Commons, Wiktionary, Wikiquotes and Wikisource, among others. Their zeal suggests that potential lies in this country of 1.2 billion people to produce Wikipedians of the future.

What follows is a story about early efforts to grow Wikipedia in India—including the role of the Wikimedia Foundation, which is supporting and jump-starting projects there. It includes reflections by multiple participants that can inform efforts to grow projects in other countries.

Achievements To Date

According to the Wikipedia page on Wikipedians, the people who create the content for the free, online encyclopedia are more comfortable online than in the physical world, but what's happening in India tells a different story. Many of the country's ambitious, capable and committed volunteers enjoy doing Wikipedia work out in their communities, and their families pitch in, too.

The accomplishments of these volunteers over the past 18 months are impressive by any measure. Many of the Indic language Wikipedias have increased the number of people involved and the quantity and depth of articles. (In the Wikipedia universe, depth means quality. It measures the frequency with which articles are updated and indicates degree of collaboration.)



The number of cities hosting real-world meetups has grown from one city a year ago to 18 cities at the time of this writing. A Pan-India conference is in the works, a national chapter is established, and the Foundation has put staff on the ground and launched a project to cultivate new Wikipedia contributions from college and university students.

Local monetary support has increased considerably, too. Individual online donations from India increased from \$48,000 in 2009 to \$193,000 in 2010. Local and national

media coverage has been extensive, with at least 146 news articles published in India in the 10 months starting September 2010. And activity on the Wikimedia India email list has grown from 52 messages generated by 20 contributors in January 2010 to 522 messages by 67 people in June 2011.

Why is Wikimedia Foundation In India?

The Wikimedia Foundation was created by Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales in 2003. Originally founded in St. Petersburg, Florida, its offices are now located in San Francisco's bustling SOMA area, just south of the city's financial district. The organization's goal is to create a world in which every single human being can freely share in the sum of all knowledge, and yet Wikipedia's contributors are currently 87 percent male with an average age of 26, and 82 percent of the project's edits come from the global north.

The Foundation wants to increase the diversity of contributors, and it also wants to increase their number, because data from its recent editor study indicates that the overall number of Wikipedia contributors is starting to decline. To counter these trends, the Foundation is piloting growth work in India. The goals are to support the growth of Indic language Wikipedia projects and to increase the number of Indians contributing to and using English Wikipedia. The Foundation plans to invest a total of \$2 million by the end of 2014 in this effort, which is the first such experiment that it is conducting anywhere in the world.

The Opportunities

The Foundation selected India in part because it has a committed and growing community of Wikimedia contributors and volunteers, a large and expanding number of Internet users and the potential to offer lessons for the growth of Wikimedia



projects in other countries. Wikipedia is quite popular in India—a top-ten website, according to comScore. In addition, India's wide and diverse array of languages offers the potential to grow multiple Wikipedias in one geographic area. There are 20 active Indic language Wikipedias, with at least 20 more in incubation, and English is one of two official languages in India, which boasts the second largest block of English speakers in the world

after the United States. The opportunity to cultivate new contributors in multiple languages is unprecedented.

In addition, India is frequently the site of major world news stories, from the technology and outsourcing boom to the recent Mumbai bombings. Without in-country contributors to these stories, the global Wikipedia community is at

a disadvantage in producing articles about these and other internationally important topics. Furthermore, as India continues to assume increasing power and prominence in world affairs, it is essential to have Indian perspectives reflected in a wide range of articles, in English Wikipedia projects and others. “Saying that English Wikipedia is a thing of the U.S. and the U.K. is cock-and-bull,” said Achal Prabhala, an Indian writer and researcher who sits on the Foundation’s global advisory board. “Soon, India will have the largest number of English speakers in the whole world. And it’s not just relevant for us to write about India. It’s important to get Indian perspectives on a wide range of articles.”

India is also fertile ground for Wikipedia growth because it is a democratic and secular federal republic in which the national government shares power with 28 state governments. Freedom of speech is protected, and there is an active press and a vibrant open source movement. The country also has a strong history of successful people’s movements and community organizing. The economy is strong, with average annual growth rates over 8 percent in the past few years, even during the recent financial crisis. The country’s population of 1.2 billion people also holds the promise of scale.

The Challenges

India also presents some major challenges. To begin with, there are tremendous economic disparities. At least 37 percent of Indians live in crowded, abject poverty, surviving on less than \$1.25 a day. On the other end of the spectrum, some billionaires live in a separate world of gated, air-conditioned communities, luxury cars, high-speed Internet connections, day spas and private hospitals. “There are two Indias,” said Mahitgar, who contributes to Marathi Wikipedia. “I saw it clearly in two office boys of similar age at an old job of mine. One couldn’t read or write in any language. The other was educated—he actually demonstrated Wikipedia to me.”

There are also major capacity needs and infrastructure challenges. Two thirds of the population lives in rural areas, where almost half of households lack electricity. For those that do have it, 16-hour-a-day electrical cuts are not uncommon outside of major metropolitan locales. While India has the world’s fourth largest national base of Internet users, Internet penetration is low, with just 7 percent—81 million people—currently online. The Internet is growing rapidly, having doubled in the past three years, but it is still an expensive luxury.

Even in urban areas, Internet penetration is still shallow. To take Mumbai as an

example, half of the city's 20.5 million residents live in slums, which are populated by the working poor and many middle class families, most of which rely on Internet cafes and the occasional computer-equipped community center for online access.

One slum-dwelling college student I met said that some young people in the slums access the World Wide Web from their mobile phones, but Internet-capable phones can cost as much as three-month's rent, to say nothing of pricey data plans.



Another challenge lies in India's mind-boggling array of languages. Hindi is the first official language and English is the second, and the government also recognizes at least 22 regional languages. In addition, there are classical and

regional languages, as well as hundreds of dialects. The number of speakers of a given language doesn't correlate into a comparable number of Wikipedians, and this confounds some northerners, who live in places where literacy, electricity, computer access and relatively low poverty rates are the norm.

India is a place where many people who are fluent speakers of multiple languages can't read or write in any of them. Although roughly 71 percent of Indians are literate, less than half of women are, and just 15 percent of all citizens finish high school. Socio-economic and development conditions vary widely across the country. At one extreme, Kerala state in the south has more electricity, more literacy, less poverty and more computer access than anywhere else in the country. On the other extreme are the BIMARU states—comprising Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh—where globally accepted indicators of human development are exceptionally low.

The number of active Indian contributors to English Wikipedia is still small—under 2,000 total—and while more people have heard of the project now than two years ago, large segments of the population are still unaware of Wikipedia. At the Mumbai airport, when I explained my job to an inquisitive, young professional standing next to me at baggage claim, he exclaimed, “We love Wikipedia, it's in the newspaper all the time.” In contrast, the shopkeepers, train attendants, and taxi and auto-rickshaw drivers I met in the course of my journey through parts of Maharashtra, Kerala and Karnataka states had never touched a keyboard. “Wiki-what?” they asked. The divide is palpable.

Local Language Wikipedias Lead the Way

English Wikipedia was born in January of 2001, and the first Indic language Wikipedias appeared a year later, starting a steady stream of projects that were the result of the hard work of small clusters of volunteers who self-organized based on their common mother tongues. Odia, Punjabi, Assamese and Malayalam were the first Indic language Wikipedias to “go live” and begin to grow. More than a dozen others followed over the next few years. An untold number of Indians contributed to these projects from their earliest days, and the labor of these volunteers sowed the seeds for all of the activities that came after.

Indic language Wikipedias are vitally important. Vast numbers of Indians speak, dream, count and write in their mother tongues. There are more than 400 million



Hindi speakers, 83 million Bengali speakers, 74 million Telugu speakers, 72 million Marathi speakers and 61 million Tamil speakers, among others. If they are to truly share in the sum of all human knowledge, it will most naturally be through their own language.

“We speak our mother tongue at home,” said Hari Prasad Nadig, who contributes to Kannada Wikipedia. “It’s intrinsically linked to culture, and it connects us to the roots we’ve come from. Food, Ayurvedic medicine, family wisdom—it’s all discussed in local language.”

One major barrier to growth in these projects has had to do with the difficulty of typing and rendering Indic scripts on computers. This barrier was removed when, in 2007, a handful of Malayalam software programmers created and integrated an Indic typing tool into Malayalam Wikipedia. Tech-savvy volunteers in other Indic projects began to adapt the tool to their own languages, and Indic Wikipedia growth took off in earnest.

The Chapter Starts on a Park Bench

The conversation about forming a Wikimedia chapter in India first began around 2005, when Nadig began getting together with other interested volunteers in Bangalore. “We were all just starting our careers,” he said. “We had no money for restaurants, so we met in public parks. We knew each other by just the usernames, and we wanted to connect.”

Their talk turned to the idea of forming a chapter, but they had no meeting space, no money to pay an auditor or an attorney and no clear idea of how to get the enterprise off the ground, so their efforts came to naught. The following year, Nadig organized the first-ever India meetup, and he and fellow Wikipedian Anirudh Bhati started a chapter discussion on Meta-Wiki (a wiki devoted to discussions about Wikimedia projects and related collaborations), but conditions weren't yet right.

Back in the U.S., the Foundation was growing and building momentum. It established a global advisory board in 2006, the same year as the first India meetup, and it hired an executive director and began to investigate ideas for programs in 2007. From his position on the advisory board, Indian Wikipedian Achal Prabhala, a writer and researcher by profession, suggested that the Foundation take a look at his native country.

The Foundation Enters the Scene

In 2008, Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales and executive director Sue Gardner traveled to India to meet Wikipedians and evaluate the environment first hand. They found active volunteers, a supportive local non-profit organization called the Center for Internet and Society (CIS), favorable politics and policy, and interested local donors.

“This time, CIS was around, and they offered us meeting space, food, coffee and free wifi,” said Nadig. CIS is a research and advocacy organization that makes the case for favorable IT policy in India, including openness, reforms to copyright law, greater freedom of expression and more privacy protections.

Conditions seemed right this time to form a chapter, so Prabhala sent email messages to Wikipedians connected to India. Only a handful of people responded, including Nadig and Bhati, and they began to do the work of creating a legal entity.

In the same year, the Malayalam Wikipedia community and free software advocates down in Kerala state achieved a win for Indic language projects when they successfully convinced the local government to release a monumental, state-funded encyclopedia under an open license. Local volunteers immediately got to work converting its contents to Wikipedia articles.

In 2009, Bangalore Wikipedians who weren't involved in the chapter effort began to meet at the home of Cherian Tinu Abraham, a software developer and avid Twitterer

who has been editing English Wikipedia since 2005. Sixteen people who had never met in person came. “I was inspired by Jimmy Wales saying that Wikipedians should meet in real life,” he said. “I never dreamed that it would turn into something that happened regularly, but we just had our 40th meetup last month.”

Meanwhile, the Foundation launched a wiki-based strategic planning project that yielded a community-wide mandate to support growth in the global south. In 2010, it announced India as a priority area and appointed Indian writer, filmmaker and activist Bishakha Datta to the board.

“I had never contributed to Wikipedia until then,” said Datta. “I was just one of the 400 million monthly users, and a month later, I was on Wikipedia for three hours a day. It was insanity—fascinating, hypnotic, addictive. There were days when I couldn’t tear myself away from the screen.”

Appointing Datta to the global board had a powerful symbolic effect as well as a practical one. Early on, she earned the trust of community members when she used



her personal and professional connections to help Wikipedians from India secure visas from a reluctant Polish embassy so they could attend the 2010 Wikimania in Gdansk.

Shortly thereafter, the Foundation appointed Canadian Barry Newstead as Chief Global Development Officer, and his frequent visits to India made it clear that the country was a Foundation priority. His first job was to get the

lay of the land. “Newstead focused on building relationships, leading from behind,” said Datta. “He wasn’t paying lip service to listening, he was seriously considering people’s suggestions.”

When he and other Foundation staff attended meetups in India, their presence gave the media something to write about and drew more participants to events. “Foundation visits attracted a lot of press, and that helped create more awareness,” said Arjuna Rao Chavala, chapter president and contributor to Telugu Wikipedia.

During one visit, Newstead, Datta and community volunteers held the first Mumbai meetup in a small coffee house. They expected 15 people, but 40 people showed

up. “I ended up buying 45 cappuccinos, and I wondered how I was going to explain it on my expense report,” said Newstead.

The newly formed chapter was wary of the Foundation’s increasing presence.

“When I first talked to them, they seemed nervous about the Foundation coming to India,” said Newstead. “They didn’t know what it meant, and neither did we. Our



brand precedes us in the region, and yet we’re still foreign, going in and organizing around a foreign aspiration. Add to this that at the same time as the India Chapter was getting approved and organized, the Foundation was swooping in and devouring their territory, usurping the attention.”

“We’re all working for the same goal, but I worry about centralization, and I think we’ll do

better if we work in a decentralized way,” said Anirudh Bhati, who helped start the chapter and currently serves on its executive committee.

As the two parties negotiated the terrain, the chapter agreed to put on a national conference as part of Wikipedia’s global 10th Anniversary festivities in January 2011.

Community Work Picks Up Steam

While the Foundation was getting to know India, Wikipedians around the country were busy on their own projects, including developing and distributing a variety of popular tools and offline products. One volunteer created software to publish CDs of Indic language Wikipedias, and another began distributing an offline version of English Wikipedia to more than 10,000 colleges and schools in and around the city of Pune.

In Tamil Nadu, volunteers worked with the state government to hold a Wikipedia article-writing contest that attracted more than 2,000 submissions and major media coverage. In Bangalore, three volunteers worked together to create and publish India’s first Wikimedia newsletter. More than 30 volunteers from around the country contributed content to the 35-page, data-packed publication.

In Kerala, volunteers from Malayalam Wikipedia published a CD containing

500 articles—one of just six such Wikipedia CDs in the world—and the local government included it on a resource CD that it distributed to 60,000 teachers. The collection included an article on Mata Hari, the exotic dancer and alleged WW I double agent, which provoked criticism from some quarters for being inappropriate for school-aged children. “The controversy attracted a lot of attention for Wikipedia, and this worked in Wikipedia’s favor,” said K. Anvar Sadath, Director of IT@school, the government project that published and distributed the resource CD to Kerala teachers.

When Jimmy Wales came to India again in October 2010, hundreds of people turned out to meet him in Mumbai, and more than 20 news stories appeared nation-wide. “Jimmy’s visit catalyzed the stabilization of both the Pune and Mumbai communities,” said Datta. “Before, there had been the coffee shop meetup, but, for Jimmy, 365 Wikipedians crawled out of the woodwork, and the mailing list swelled.”

By the end of the year, the number of cities holding meetups had increased, and some Indic language Wikipedias showed double-digit growth rates.

As 2011 approached, the Foundation and the chapter went back-and-forth about the national conference they had started to discuss back in August. It was on. It was off. It was on again. In December, the chapter said that it couldn’t deliver. “We said we’d do it, but we didn’t have the capacity,” said lawyer and chapter secretary Gautam John.

Even though the conference didn’t happen, Newstead headed to India in the New Year to celebrate Wikipedia’s 10th Anniversary at a few small gatherings. To his surprise he was greeted by a massive, nation-wide outburst of decentralized activity around the anniversary. Out of 400 “Wikipedia 10” celebrations around the world, 95 were in India. “Six or seven were known to us in advance,” said Newstead. “The rest came out of nowhere.”

Events from Dehli and Kolkata to Chennai and Kannur ranged from small cake-cutting ceremonies to a 12-hour marathon panel in Bangalore that 250 people attended, including a baby. In Pune, User:A and others put on a multi-part Wikipedia 10 extravaganza, including a Marathi Wikipedia workshop, a Wiki photo-thon, a children’s poster competition and a meetup party, complete with a blue birthday cake decorated with an image of the Wikipedia logo.

“I’ve worked in social movements all my life, and I’ve never seen passion like this,” said Bishakha Datta.

More than 40 anniversary-related news stories appeared around the country, generated through a combination of Indian media’s avid interest in all things Wikipedia and the press-savvy leadership of volunteer Tinu Cherian, who reads three newspapers a day and has a nose for a news hook.

The Chapter and the Community Tangle

Shortly before the Wikipedia 10 celebrations unfolded like a human wave across the subcontinent, the chapter became a legal registered entity in Bangalore, which meant it could open a bank account and begin to take in members and dues. In the preceding months, the wider Wikipedia community in India had begun to look at chapter activities with increasing scrutiny, and some community members were critical of how long the process took.

The chapter’s executive committee members push back on this criticism. “I don’t think we could have gotten it done any faster,” said Gautam John. “It took hours and hours to draft and redraft the legal documents, and we spent months running around like a bunch of glorified gophers. Over the 12 to 16 months we spent establishing the chapter, our primary government contact person changed three times. It’s an achievement that we now exist as a legal entity.”

Later in the same month, the seven-member committee changed officers, but it waited a few weeks before informing the broader community via an opaquely-worded message it posted to the Wikimedia India email list. Community members got upset. “Suddenly a group of people in Bangalore declared themselves to be representatives of the community,” said one Wikipedian. “Who do they think they are?”

To an outsider like me, the combative discourse on the email list was surprising, but Sunil Abraham, the executive director of CIS, put it in context for me. “Feuding and flaming is an integral part of free software culture,” he said. “You can’t imagine a mailing list without flaming.”

Wikipedians tell me that this tension between chapter and broader community is a characteristic of many countries, not just India. This is due at least in part to the fact that chapters form organically, by self-selecting volunteers who don’t actually

represent a constituency of Wikipedians. “The model hasn’t worked that well in many places, so in this regard, the India executive committee is hampered by the model,” said Newstead.

According to Datta, other factors add to the complexity of the dynamic as it plays out in India. “There are hierarchies operating among chapter, community and foundation, and internally within each of these entities,” she said. “Add to this that India is intrinsically hierarchical. If you bring in an official entity, unofficial people will inevitably feel that the official entities are more important and will come to perceive of themselves as lesser.”

Exchanges on the list settled down, but tensions would re-emerge later on.

The Foundation Steps Up Its Game

Shortly thereafter, the Foundation hired Hisham Mundol as Consultant for National Programs to jump-start new projects, marking a significant behavioral shift for the Foundation in India. Mundol, who hails from Kerala by way of Malta, Nigeria and Libya, has extensive corporate experience in marketing and brand management for Unilever and other multinationals. Before joining Wikimedia, he spent 18 months working in the public sector on an Indian government AIDS awareness campaign.

“Mundol is not a Wikipedian, not an open source guy,” said Newstead. “He’s a PR, information and marketing guy. He has the skills to do the job, he’s independent and doesn’t need a lot of outside support. The challenge will be in integrating into the community, and he has to translate his experience into our world.”



The Foundation made the hire with input from Datta and Prabhala, but without participation from the chapter or community. “We toyed with the idea of having community members on the panel, but we rejected it,” said Newstead.

“There were too many questions. How would we pick them? Who would get to travel? Who would have the requisite experience?”

Some Indians were skeptical of the Foundation’s decision to put paid people on the ground. “I was against hiring a consultant to run national programs, because I think

the money is better-spent empowering volunteers and the chapter,” said chapter executive committee member Anirudh Bhati. “It’s part of the economy of the open source movement. When paid employees are hired to do the work previously done by volunteers, it disrupts the ecosystem of volunteerism and promotes mistrust and suspicion.”

Mundol immediately went on a listening tour to get input and ideas from the community, and he visited the Foundation’s offices in San Francisco, where he and Newstead agreed that his top priority was to cultivate new contributors by creating a scalable outreach program. “The Foundation has limited resources,” said Mundol. “The question is, how do we make sure we have the biggest impact? We have to design programs so they have measurable, substantial impact, and we have to do them at some kind of scale, even in the pilot phase.”

The Foundation had recently piloted a program in public policy departments at 22 universities in the United States in which volunteers (called Campus Ambassadors) worked with professors and students to create high-quality Wikipedia articles in lieu of traditional writing assignments. Early results were positive. By the end of the second semester in spring 2011, 824 students had participated in the program, generating the equivalent of 5,605 pages of content.

The Foundation decided to adapt the program to India, and after doing some research and inviting public comment, it selected Pune as the pilot site. “There are more than 100 colleges and universities in Pune, and we’re going to carpet bomb the place in our effort to encourage and enable new editors,” said Mundol.

“Mundol hit the ground running,” said Newstead. “His planning phase was measured in weeks, not months. It probably made a shockingly fast impression in India, but I wanted people to see that when we pay staff, things happen. We’re not here to talk and send long emails on mailing lists, we’re here to get out there and catalyze community growth and impact.”

The Campus Ambassador Program, India Style

Seven hundred people, including many young professionals, applied for 22 volunteer Campus Ambassador (CA) positions, and ten higher-education institutions in Pune agreed to meet with Foundation staff to talk about the pilot. Four of these institutions immediately signed on. “Publishing on Wikipedia will add to our prestige and reputation and help our students get a research orientation,” said Dr. K.R. Joshi,

principal of Modern College of Engineering Pune. “Of course we want to participate.”

Mundol was careful not to sugarcoat the proposition. “This program will not make teachers’ lives easier,” he said. “We’re asking them to learn something new, and teachers and students will be challenged intellectually. It requires more work from everyone.”

The first CA training in early June 2011, which I witnessed, by all accounts broke all the rules of education delivery in India. “Most of the students here have a fixed mindset, which is ‘follow the leader, don’t deviate from the straight path,’” said

Prateek Saxena, an MBA student and a newly minted CA.



The Wikimedia training team, composed of a German and two North Americans, delivered an experience that was brash, engaging and hands-on, replete with role-plays, teach-backs and energizing physical games. Participants loved it, even if some of the American metaphors and turns of phrase didn’t translate across cultures. “It’s so refreshing to see everybody participating, and older people being casual,” said Pallavi Agarwal, a college student in computer science and one of two women at the training.



Throughout the two-day session, Mundol juggled multiple tasks, including trying to make photocopies in a monsoon-triggered blackout, giving an impromptu talk on the country’s

education system, and speaking at length by phone with a Delhi lawyer about setting up a legal entity in India for the Foundation. Tinu Cherian was also on hand to ensure that things ran smoothly for the five newspaper reporters who turned out to write stories about the training.

From any facilitator’s standpoint, the workshop was a smashing success: No one fell asleep, everyone came back for the second day, and participants organized a Facebook group to stay connected.

However, volunteers in the broader Wikipedia community had mixed reactions to the CA rollout. A few local, long-time Wikipedia volunteers were taken aback by the rapidity with which things unfolded and felt excluded from the planning process. “They’re not making good use of us,” said one Wikipedian. “We’re capable of contributing much more.”

“The process could have been more consultative, but now that the Foundation is doing this, I can focus on other things,” said Cherian, who has spearheaded



media relations and led wiki-workshops while moving his own Wikipedia editing to the back burner. Meanwhile, many volunteers in other cities such as Delhi and Bangalore are eager to bring the India Education Program to their communities.

There is no mistaking that the CA training introduced a new vibe to Wikipedia activities in Pune. It feels youthful, energetic and hip, intentionally designed to sell the Wikipedia enterprise effectively to urban college students who are actively participating in 21st century global culture. This new version of the Wikipedia brand will take some getting used to for the established vanguard in the area, which has a more traditional way of doing business.

For its part, the Foundation may have to adapt the U.S. model to India’s reality. For one thing, some universities have capacity and infrastructure to implement the “whole classroom” approach that worked well in the U.S., but others do not. “Some of our professors are not even on the Net yet, and some of our students are not ready for this,” said Radha Misra, professor and head of the Department of Communication Media for Children at SNDT Women’s University in Pune. “Many of our undergraduate students don’t even know how to open an email account, and we have one computer lab, with just 25 computers. We’ll probably be handpicking students and professors and matching them together to work on this project.”

The Foundation is establishing key quality measures that participants must meet in order to associate their program with the CA brand.

Necessity Breeds Collaboration

The second week I was in India, conflict between the chapter and the broader community erupted again on the email list. A few months earlier, volunteers from Mumbai and Pune had hatched a plan to host a national conference in Mumbai in November 2011, and they'd requested that the chapter support their efforts.

"For the past two years, there've been a lot of Wikipedia conversations going on in different cities, with many common threads, but there's never been a meeting for all of us in a single place," said Pradeep Mohandas, one of the Mumbai volunteers who participated in the 45-cappuccino meetup with Newstead and Datta back in September, 2010.

It took some weeks for the chapter to reply, and when it did, it wasn't with a "yes" or a "no." Instead, it proposed a framework to establish a set of procedures and guidelines for planning national conferences, including a national competition to determine which city should host it.

In the interim, the ad hoc volunteers in Mumbai and Pune had done extensive research on venues and costs, and they had invited Jimmy Wales to attend



the event. They had energy, vision and momentum, and they were taken aback by the chapter's response. Tempers flared, and behind-the-scenes conversations commenced—dozens of community members spent hours on phone calls, Internet chats and email.

"Wikipedia is all about freedom and crowd-sourcing," said Cherian. "When the chapter says, 'Here's a framework, you have to use this before we can have a conference,' of course there's going to be a reaction from the larger community."

Chapter president Chavala countered, "Some members of the community initiative misunderstood the delay in our responding and were critical of the chapter's stance, but the chapter had plans to organize a conference for quite some time and was working on procedures, which also took some time. How we handle this sets a precedent, and we need procedures in place."

Just when it looked like the chapter was going to refuse to adopt a more flexible stance, Wales contacted the Mumbai and Pune volunteers to accept the invitation, and the volunteers announced the news on the email list. Almost immediately, the chapter threw its support behind the conference.

Once again, Sunil Abraham of CIS put the conflict in context for me. “The crisis on the mailing list was ultimately a great thing,” he said. “There was conflict, dozens of offline conversations, private and public negotiation and airing of views and doubts, followed by a public commitment to work together for a shared purpose.”

Conference planning has moved ahead apace, with more than 40 volunteers—including two chapter leaders—participating in organizing the event.

On the Ground In Kerala, an Indic Wikipedia Grows

While the conference commotion was unfolding on the list, I was taking trains across Kerala, meeting volunteers from Malayalam Wikipedia, which is among the most vibrant and high quality of the Indic language projects. Malayalam Wikipedia has grown from 500 articles and two active contributors in 2005 to more than 20,000 articles and 250 active contributors in 2011. It is currently in third place in page depth—behind English and Bengali—of all the Wikipedias larger than 10,000 articles.

Shiju Alex, one of the shepherds of the project, chalks up its success to the strength of the community. “Our focus is on developing the community,” he said. “Build the community, and quality and quantity will follow.”

One hallmark of the Malayalam project is active support and participation from the Kerala state government, which has hosted wiki-workshops in almost every district, paid to produce a Malayalam Wikipedia FAQ booklet, and integrated a “school wiki” project that looks and acts just like Wikipedia into its innovative high school IT curriculum.

“We want our students to get the idea that knowledge creation is a collaborative endeavor,” said IT@schools director K. Anvar Sadath.

Another local success factor is a pre-existing and active free software movement that successfully lobbied the state to switch from proprietary software to an open source operating system. It also helps that Kerala has the highest literacy rate in the nation,

which locals attribute in part to two important 1960s Kerala phenomenon: The Popular Science Movement and The Library Movement. In the former, experts wrote and published science articles in Malayalam and promoted science literacy across the state. In the latter, every village opened a library where people routinely gathered to hear and discuss the news of the day.

Kerala also has a strong Communist Party that, according to free software activists I interviewed, predisposes Keralans toward the notion of collaborative content. “Wikipedia existed in our minds before it appeared on the Internet,” said Ashik Salahudeen, a software engineer in Thiruvananthapuram, the state capital.

Eighty-three people attended the fourth annual Malayalam Wikipedia meetup in Kannur, including children, seniors, housewives, university professors, government workers, NGO staff and local business people.



Organizers took advantage of the media attention that the meetup generated to release its latest offline project, the Malayalam Wikisource CD, which is the biggest digital archive of Malayalam literature ever released. It includes poetry, a Malayalam grammar, the language’s first novel, and key religious texts such as the Malayalam Bible, the Bhagavad-

Gita and the Quran, as well as the Communist Manifesto and the writings of famed Kerala social reformer Sre Narayana Guru. In the first week of its release, the web ISO image got more than 46,000 hits. “CD releases create a lot of buzz for us,” said Shiju Alex.

Another secret to Malayalam Wikipedia’s success is the fact that it has many active Wiki projects, including Wikiquotes, Wictionary and Wikisource. In one example, organizers ran a photo-thon in which volunteers shot and posted 2,155 new images of politicians, buildings, places and food to Wikimedia Commons—the Wikimedia image repository—in just 23 days.

Because of these multiple projects, the annual meetup attracted photographers, quote-lovers, dictionary aficionados and classical book fans, as well as traditional Wikipedia contributors. “Different people want to participate in different ways,” said

Alex. “We pay attention to what people want to work on, and we create projects around that.”

The meetup agenda was varied and fast-paced. At one point, the room erupted in applause when organizers gave an award to the youngest Malayalam contributor, a 7-year-old boy who uploaded 14 images of food items during the photo-thon. And when the principal of a local school for the blind talked about the barriers he faces in reading and contributing to Malayalam Wikipedia, participants were riveted, undeterred by the afternoon heat and sitting forward on their chairs while he demonstrated primitive, English-only, text-to-speech software.

True to form, a group of volunteers put their heads together in the corner as the meeting ended to start brainstorming a new Malayalam project to make Wikipedia more accessible to people with disabilities.

Back in the Big City, Heady Work

Back in cosmopolitan Bangalore, a subset of Wikipedia volunteers gravitate toward more critical and analytical considerations of the Wikipedia universe. At the monthly meetup at CIS, Achal Prabhala discussed his film *People Are Knowledge*, which tells stories about contemporary oral traditions in India and South Africa and advocates for a reinvention of Wikipedia to include non-text-based citations via audio files.



“We aren’t trying to fight western imperialism, here,” he said. “We like scholarly citations, and we want to use them whenever possible. We’re just trying to make space for alternative sourcing, so the world can participate in an equitable manner.”

CIS, which paid the legal and registration fees for the chapter and provides meeting space and a physical address for it, recently collaborated with two other international groups to assemble and release a critical studies reader. The publication includes essays, interviews and artworks that aim to widen debates on Wikipedia. Topics include computational culture, the politics of exclusion, and governance and authority.

The Road Ahead

For the India Community

The chapter is important to the Wikipedia movement in India because it is a legal membership entity that has lobbying and negotiating clout. It also has the ability to bank, manage and distribute finances. And there are some things a chapter can do as a legal entity that an informal group of volunteers simply can't, such as enter into contractual agreements for conference facilities and the like.

While tension between the chapter and the broader community is likely to continue in some form in India, as it has in other countries, the Wikipedia community on the sub-continent has an opportunity to begin to transform the chapter into a more representative body when open elections are held in September to fill three vacant seats on the executive committee.

In the months ahead, the community and chapter must also grapple with governance style. The broad Wikipedia phenomenon in India is decentralized, chaotic and emergent, yet the chapter's initial responses to volunteers' proposals



and requests have tended to be bureaucratic and procedure-oriented. Embedded in the apparent chaos are innovations that might get passed over if the chapter's structures and procedures are too rigid. However, the chapter is a formal entity that has to be accountable to the government and fulfill certain legal, fiduciary and financial responsibilities, and policies and procedures will help the chapter be accountable and transparent. Ideally, the

chapter will develop the capacity to be opportunistic and adaptive, so it can support promising community projects, while also establishing simple mechanisms that ensure accountability.

One underlying challenge has to do with Indian social norms. "India is a command and control kind of place that respects hierarchy and age," said Gautam John. "Flat organizations are not common. With Wikipedia, the community is flat, and the chapter is inherently hierarchical. It entails a body of members and an executive committee. That's just the way it is. But it doesn't have to be operationalized as a hierarchy."

Another important issue that Wikipedians in India need to consider in chapter/community dynamics is what will happen when serious financing enters the equation. “The chapter will control sums of money, and that will create a hierarchy,” said John. “Last year, individuals in India donated \$193,000 to Wikipedia. If half of that total lands in the chapter bank account before we make headway, there’s going to be mayhem. If the chapter is not representative of the community, if the community doesn’t trust the chapter, money like that coming in could tear the community apart.”

For the Foundation

On the ground, the Foundation will continue to roll out the India Education Program in Pune, and it will pay close attention to emerging opportunities in north and east India, where Wikipedia activity is brewing but still less developed than in the south. Multiple sources suggested that efforts to grow Wikipedia projects in the north could benefit from focused Foundation support, particularly when it comes to building Hindi Wikipedia.

Hindi is the first official language, and Hindi dialects are spoken by 41 percent of the population, and yet the Hindi project is currently losing active contributors. It has almost 100,000 articles, but a significant number of these are generated by Internet robots and are of variable quality. Hindi differs from the other Indic languages in that there is vast cultural diversity among Hindi speakers. Many people who say Hindi is their first language actually speak a different language in their homes.

“There is not the same language pride and chauvinism in Hindi, the way there is in culture-specific Indic languages,” said Mayur, a contributor to Hindi Wikipedia. He’d like to see the CA approach deployed in the service of building Hindi projects in the region around Delhi.

On a practical level, the Foundation’s Consultant for National Programs has been running the nascent India operation out of a suitcase and a spare bedroom, and he needs an office and a physical presence to signal seriousness and authority. In the next six months, top goals are to establish an office in New Delhi, the nation’s capital, and to hire four additional consultants to help with participation, Indic projects, communications and overall team support.

For the first two posted positions, Wikipedia volunteers are in the running. The benefits of this are obvious: Experienced volunteers have valuable expertise and

credibility that the Foundation is shrewd to want to leverage across the entire network. Furthermore, it's likely that high-achieving volunteers can dramatically increase their effectiveness and impact by working full time, without the distraction of a day job.

However, hiring people from the grassroots Wikipedia movement is not without risk. It could foment resentment and fuel rivalries by creating a hierarchy where before there wasn't one. It could also distort volunteer behavior—volunteers who were working for the love of it might get distracted by the lure of prestige and pay—and it could inadvertently concentrate power in a way that might be detrimental to the long-term sustainability of the work overall.

“I don't think the power will shift that much,” said Newstead. “Yes, they get access to resources, travel and international exposure, but it doesn't change how decisions are made about the content of the actual projects, which is done collectively. And fundamentally our resources are tiny when compared to the potential of the community. We will only succeed if our work supports the growth of community to take programs to the scale that is needed in a place like India.”

The character of the Foundation's engagement on the sub-continent has shifted over an 18-month period of time, and it will continue to do so. These shifts affect the Wikipedia ecosystem in India over all. Embedded in this phenomenon is a larger question that has bedeviled the international development and foundation sector the world over: What exactly is the appropriate role for an external foundation in such an effort—gardener or engineer?

Sunil Abraham comes down squarely on the side of gardener. “The Foundation's job is having meetings and growing and holding the consensus,” he said. “It should be creating situations in which trust is gained, and you do this through radical transparency and participation. The point of the Foundation's work is to build the community.”

The Foundation would say that its role is some of each—they are not mutually exclusive. “Our behavior is shifting as part of the natural evolution of our work there,” said Newstead. “We're not putting five consultants in place only to listen to and support existing volunteers. We want to catalyze something substantial, and the CA pilot in Pune is the first step in that process.”

“The Foundation brings financial and human resources, and it can bring speed and scale,” said Bishakha Datta. “Volunteers alone may have been able to pull off something like the Campus Ambassador Pilot, but it would have taken a lot longer.”

Finally, the Foundation must keep in mind that its intervention in India is finite. “What happens once the India programs office closes?” asked Gautam John. “Now there’s competition between the office and the chapter for community interest. Say the office wins that case, but then the office closes. There’ll be a vacuum.”

The Foundation must be thoughtful and deliberate about how it transitions out of India, ensuring that the community there is better off than it was when the Foundation arrived.

Finding and Growing New Contributors

Everyone agrees that the top priority is to cultivate new contributors. In north and east India—especially in Delhi, Kolkata and Odisha state—Wikipedia communities are energetically pursuing growth by holding meetups, workshops and other events. In 2011, Kolkata volunteers organized a Women’s Wiki Workshop and multiple volunteer gatherings. Bengali Wikipedians in both India and Bangladesh ran a photo-thon, and Bengali Wikipedia reached its 1-million-edit milestone. The



previously dormant Odia Wikipedia held three workshops, attracting close to 50 participants, and the project celebrated its 1,000th article.

People throughout the network of Wikipedians in India recognize the potential and logic of catalyzing activities in schools, colleges and universities, and experiments are underway in multiple places. Real-time lesson-sharing will move this work along quickly and increase

the probability that volunteer efforts will get results—a stronger community, new contributors, more articles and greater depth.

One obvious target population is women, who hesitate to participate in India as well as elsewhere. “In India, fewer girls than men graduate out of tenth standard, and even fewer finish seventh standard in the rural areas,” said Radha Misra, a professor at SNT Women’s University in Pune. “Of the women who finish higher ed, many don’t go on to become professionals. They do it to gain market value for marriage.

Add to this that women here are diffident about writing, especially when it comes to putting down something that will last forever.”

One strategy is to bring women in through the Indic language projects—there are currently more than 40 in various stages of development—where there is more room for new articles and which have a reputation for being friendlier than English Wikipedia. There are currently 40 Indic language Wikipedia projects in various stages of development. “I like the culture in Malayalam Wikipedia,” said Kiran Gopi, a software engineer in Thiruvananthapuram and a self-described Wikipedia addict. “It’s respectful and polite. Edit wars are rare.”

For its part, the CA pilot holds promise for attracting women contributors. “In our workshops with students in Pune, the women are the ones who are taking a lot of notes, really paying attention and trying to figure out how to attack the beast,” said Hisham Mundol.

Other ideas are to conduct workshops with women’s studies departments, art history classes and mass media tracks. One Wikipedian suggested that housewives whose children have left the nest are an untapped resource. “My mother is a housewife who knows the Internet, has email and uploads images,” said Suma Addoor, who does outreach and contributes to Kannada Wikipedia. “She has lots of free time, and she has useful knowledge on herbal medicine, Ayurveda and literature. She and her friends could easily be contributors. They just need hands-on experience and patient guidance.”

Conclusion

Community volunteers across the county, including the current chapter leadership, are all passionate about their Wikimedia projects, and there are plenty more people where they came from. For the next few months, all eyes are focused on pulling off the first national conference, which is an unprecedented opportunity to connect the community on a countrywide level and share knowledge across the entire network. “Meeting in real life can shift things dramatically,” Sunil Abraham said. “It can make it possible to make substantial progress in a short amount of time.”

Currently, the Foundation plans to invest in India projects through 2014, by which time, “Our hope is that the chapter is strong and well-managed and has become the primary support entity for the work in India,” said Newstead.

In the meantime, the Foundation is launching programs, and there's a vibrant, distributed network of Wikipedians in India that can develop projects and get things done. In such a huge and diverse society, there's certainly room for Wikipedia activities to appear in a variety of manifestations, ranging from the youth-oriented



CA pilot, to the folksy charm of some of the Indic Wikipedia projects, to the work of maverick individuals and small teams that are collaborating with museums, developing Indic language software solutions, and pioneering mobile Wikipedia applications for India's 800 million mobile users.

"We're all trying to achieve the same vision—more editors, more readers," said chapter committee member Arun Ramarathnam. "The task is to complement one another's work. There's so much to be done, we all just need to start projects and figure out ways to collaborate as we go."

"The community has come up with lots of solutions not implemented in other countries, such as the Malayalam Wikisource CD and other offline projects," said Bishakha Datta.

"Being successful in India is going to entail a combination of old things that the Foundation has done elsewhere and new things that emerge in India."

In the long term, everyone agrees that the key to sustainability is a vibrant community. "Growth is a natural outcome of good community organizing," Shiju Alex said. "Without the community, there is no Wikipedia."

How to Build a Vibrant Wikipedia Community

Outreach is a fundamentally different kind of activity than editing, and some people aren't sure which techniques and approaches are most effective. "I feel like Johnny Appleseed, sowing seeds up and down the country side, never knowing which one will work," said one outreach volunteer. Here's a list of best practices from India Wikipedians in India who've led successful outreach experiences.

- The most important thing to include is hands-on practice, both in typing in Indic languages and in editing "live" on Wikipedia. The online edit is what excites people to come back for more.
- Some people are "natural Wikipedians," but most people need a fair amount of follow-up and handholding.
- Identify promising volunteers to lead outreach activities, including workshops and meetups, and bring them along as quickly as possible, handing off responsibility as soon as they can handle it.
- Key outreach skills include team building, cooperation, taking new initiatives and running with them, organizing and leading meetups and workshops, raising consensus in groups and communicating with a team.
- You can't do effective outreach from a remote location. You must identify local people fluent in the local language and cultivate them as organizers.
- It takes more than one encounter to convert people into Wikipedians. One meetup or workshop creates buzz, but to cultivate contributors you need to get together more than once.
- Tune in to who is in your audience and what they want to learn. Adapt your program accordingly, on-the-fly.
- When someone says, "I want to do something," immediately give the person something to do.

- Ask people to write about things they are emotionally connected to.
- Contact the media in advance. Having a story come out in the press brings people to a workshop or meetup.
- Getting state government support helps attract media attention, and this brings more people to the project.
- Pay attention to people's interests and what they want to work on. Create projects around that. Photo-thons, Wikiquote, Wictionary, Wikinews and Wikisource have been big hits in a variety of Indic Wikipedia projects.
- Serve tasty food and make sure everybody has FUN.

[Drawn from conversations with Sundar BalaRaman, Hari Prasad Nadig, Shiju Alex, User:A, Subhashish Panigrahi, Mayur and Suma Addoor]



Tinu's Tips for Working With the Media

- Cultivate contacts at as many media organizations as possible, including newspapers, radio and television.
- Check in with them periodically.
- Cultivate an awareness of the kinds of stories that the media will want, and give them media-worthy stories.
- Reporters like to get a unique take on the story. Pitch stories different ways to different reporters.
- Respond to reporters in a timely manner. If they call when you're driving home, pull over and talk to them right away. Their deadline will not wait.
- The press is still new to Wikipedia, so you have to explain a lot, and they still get it wrong. Accept reporters' inevitable mistakes and keep the communication open.
- Keep a roster of volunteers who are ready and willing to talk to the press. Brief them on how to talk to the media. Shine the spotlight on as many different volunteers as possible.
- Many Wikipedians are media-shy. It can be difficult to get them in front of the camera. Even though they tend to be shy on the front end, they're invariably motivated and pleased by seeing themselves in the news.
- Pay attention to which Wikipedians will be best for which stories. Match your sources to the needs of the story.
- Subscribe to the email lists and look for newcomers. Pull them in and give them a chance to be in the limelight.

Imagine a world
in which every
single human being
can freely share
in the sum of all
knowledge. That is
our commitment.



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