

Spreading The Word

A passion for a language saw one man through numerous attempts to make it widely accessible, spanning generations of tech—from the typewriter to the Internet

Jyotsna Rege

When octogenarian Ratilal Chandaria looks back at all the time he spent on realising his project, www.gujaratilexicon.com, which is an online Gujarati lexicon, his pride is mixed with a hint of frustration. "It took me far longer than it should have," he says, referring to the fact that the lexicon is an effort of twenty-odd years.

How did someone who began work in the '80s think about building an online lexicon? Well, he didn't. Ratibhai started out with the hope of increasing the use of the Gujarati language in conjunction with the typewriter.

A Dream Is Born

Born and brought up in Africa, Ratibhai had studied Gujarati as a language in school. The onset of World War II brought him to India, and it was here that he learnt to type in Gujarati on a Remington Gujarati typewriter. Even as a

young boy, Ratilal took pride in his language, and wondered, "Would it be possible to employ technology to help proliferate the use of Gujarati?" He hoped of doing something constructive towards an as-yet-undefined goal.

As Ratibhai neared retirement, he channelled more and more time and energy towards his passion—the Gujarati language. He was in his fifties at this point, and wanted to create a tool through which people would be encouraged to use the language—even if they were living outside India. He spent two years trying to persuade companies to produce electrical typewriters with Gujarati keys.

Golfballs And Fonts

Then in the '60s came the IBM Golfball. This typewriter, instead of the typebar—a small metal arm inside a typewriter with characters at its end—had a pivoting "typeball" that could be changed to enable the use of different fonts in the same document. A Golfball for Devanagari had emerged, and

this gave Ratibhai hope. IBM, however, agreed to make a Gujarati Golfball only if they received an order for a defined number of typewriters, and this Ratibhai couldn't do. Since it was an independent venture, the high cost of tooling—creating independent fonts for the language and then making the keys—was a limiting factor as well.

By the '70s, computers had arrived, and were making headway in offices in the UK where Ratibhai was now based. His goal now was to create something that would enable typing in Gujarati at a computer. Since a working model of an IBM computer with software for the Devanagari script was being produced, Ratibhai contacted various companies to attempt the same in Gujarati. He also contacted companies that produced Linotype system machines, which were used by newspaper offices for printing, to see if they could produce Gujarati fonts for computers. As before, his attempts were fruitless.

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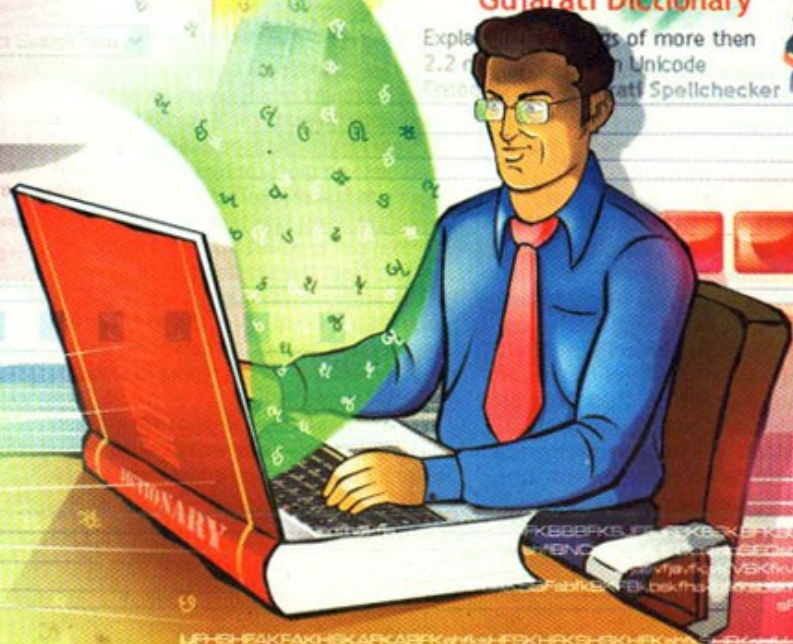


Illustration Chaitanya Surger

New Toys

Thus far, Ratibhai had never used a computer, and what was theory in his head became more concrete when his nephew returned from the US with an Apple Mac for him. He soon heard of someone in the US called Madhu Rye who had been designing fonts for several Indian languages. Ratibhai contacted Rye and was overjoyed to discover that Rye had developed a Gujarati font file. He procured from Rye the font file as well as a keyboard developed for typing in the font. Ratibhai could finally type in Gujarati at a computer, and eagerly experimented with his new acquisition.

Spelling Gone Awry

Ratibhai discovered that there were too many spelling errors as he typed. He realised that his rusty language skills were responsible for the errors, and to correct them, he required the aid of a dictionary. But unlike the MS Word of today, which has an inbuilt spell checker, there was no such thing for Ratibhai's keyboard. On top of that, innumerable errors occurred with joint letters (*matras*), a core feature of the scripts of all Indian languages. It did not take him long to realise that a spell checker was what was needed if typing at a computer in Gujarati had to be popularised.

Ratibhai had heard of work having been done on an Arabic spell checker, and figured that if work was being done in Arabic, something could be done for Gujarati too. After his initial attempts on the spell checker in Microsoft Word—this was in the '90s—he realised he would need to create an entirely new spell checker: when he tried to enter words into the dictionary of the spell checker from the font file, these appeared on the screen only in Roman characters and sometimes as junk characters. And so the quest continued.

Towards The Lexicon

Help finally came from India: a fax from a friend informed Ratibhai that one Prem Asang from Pune had been able to create a spell checker for Hindi. After a meeting, Prem convinced Ratibhai that if the Gujarati words could be keyed in to create a lexicon, the spell checker could be built. In his late seventies now, Ratibhai enthusiastically began

work on keying in the words. A magazine that was composing text matter in Gujarati on an Apple Mac agreed to share their database, which speeded up the keying-in process.

Once all the words had been keyed in began the second monumental task—that of correcting errors. With several more months of work, the database had been created. This done, the information was compiled using JavaScript to enable cross-platform support, and a desktop application was developed, which is available on CD today.

Still, Ratibhai was not at peace. The only people who could use what he had created were those he knew. Although his circle was large, he felt that all who could use and wanted to know the language should be able to use the fruits of his labour. The Internet had now replaced the excitement that the computer had created a decade ago, and Ratibhai invested time and money to create his Web site as it is today.

Culture Via Language

Why so much effort? Well, for one, Ratibhai discovered that Indians abroad still nurtured a love for their culture, and many professed interest in it. Retaining the use of their mother tongue was one of their interests. There were books aplenty, but there wasn't a medium that afforded prompt access to the language—imagine typing in Gujarati, but having to constantly refer to a dictionary!

Even within India, he discovered very little development in the language among the young.

He believes the process to be a kind of domino effect: computers are used with excitement and interest, and if people are encouraged to use Gujarati via typing, they will need a guide they can access quickly. Ratibhai therefore sees his online lexicon as a better medium to conduct spell checks and find synonyms or word meanings as compared to books. "A three-year-old cannot read, but he attempts to use a computer," he says.

The Site Today

The utility of www.gujaratilexicon.com is twofold. While it aids NRI Gujaratis with the language, there are users within India who struggle for a grip on English, and the site helps them as well. Many who live in their native state and gain employment there do not ever feel the need to communicate in English, but their employment might require them to know the language. Ratibhai's site gives such people quick access to a dictionary.

Manikbhai, a government employee from Baroda in Gujarat, recently wrote in to Ratibhai: "Although we use computers in our offices, English was still sometimes a hurdle. Today, with an online Gujarati dictionary, I can pick up the language by myself."

Ratilal Chandaria's efforts are unique when one considers his age and perseverance. It's not the first time an Indian language has been coded for use on a computer, and it's not the last. But while most work starts off with the technical specifications worked out, Ratilal started out only with a dream. ☐

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Gujaratilexicon.com

Ratilal Chandaria's Gujaratilexicon.com is, amongst other things, an online English-to-Gujarati and Gujarati-to-English dictionary. You can type in Gujarati on the Web page on most configurations without having to install anything. Conjunctions, naturally, are supported.

You can download Gujarati keyboard layouts from the site and install them. There are layouts for Windows 9x, ME, XP, and 2000, as well as for the Mac. Once you install a layout and some fonts, you can immediately begin typing in Gujarati in, say, MS Word!

The site has been designed keeping in mind Gujarati users as well as those learning the language. Under the English-

Gujarati section, for example, when you type in a word such as "heat," you'll get the pronunciation of the word in Gujarati, what part of speech it is, and numerous equivalent Gujarati words.

We must mention that the site seems to be under construction.

For example, the "Buy" link at the top: you'd expect to be able to buy the lexicon on CD, but you can't.

Some data the site links to hasn't been implemented in a user-friendly fashion. The site claims an "idioms and proverbs" feature, and there is indeed a database of idioms and proverbs. However, this feature doesn't work nearly as well as you'd expect it to.