GUJARATI DIGITAL DICTIONARY

BY

 RATILAL CHANDARIA

Born in Nairobi, Ratilal, eighty three years of age but young in spirit, is widely known as a king in the world of business. Many know him as a founder, promoter and a person who has nursed and developed many institutions of public interests, but how many of us know him as a lover of Gujarati language? More specifically, how many of us know him as a lexicographer of a different sort? Today, we are going to introduce him as a devoted dictionary maker. He has just completed Gujarati Digital Dictionary, the first of its kind, to suit the need of the present and future generation interested in Gujarati language.

There are many people who have earned wealth in plenty, but how many of them devote it in the interest of their motherland and specifically for the mother tongue? Gujarat is a land of philanthropists, all of us know about that, but they should also desirably canalized the flow of their benevolence towards development of mother tongue. Ratibhai is such an individual, who years ago embarked upon a project of Gujarati Digital Dictionaries, and completed it recently. Using the latest technology, he has digitalized Gujarati lexicon in various forms which include Gujarati-English, English-Gujarati, Gujarati-Gujarati dictionaries and also thesaurus and Gujarati spell checker. We are sure Gujarat, Gujaratis and anyone interested in Gujarati language and lexicography will remember him for ever for these works.

On the occasion of launching of this project for the lovers of Gujarati language, we present here glimpses of our interview with him. This project, his dream, he has been able to complete with the support of a group of dedicated enthusiasts, perhaps could have been difficult even for institutions to accomplish in this form.
Congratulations, Ratibhai for accomplishing the project which will fulfil the lexicographical and other language related needs of future as well as present generation of Gujaratis.

Ratibhai: Thanks, I have completed the project, but I took many years to achieve that. I have put lot of labour in it. However, now I feel happy that my goals are achieved and my ambitions and my dream are virtually realized. Now the material I have compiled is available on our website:

http://203.200.152.20:9080/GujTest/Dictionary.jsp and http://203.200.152.20:9080/GujTest/Dictionary.jsp. This material consists of the following: 1) Gujarati English 2) English to Gujarati 3) Gujarati to Gujarati dictionaries besides 4) Gujarati Antonyms & Idioms and most importantly 5) Gujarati Spell Checker. But, this is our tentative website. We will put the same material soon on our new website:

<http://www.gujaratilexicon.com>

Q. You said your ambitions and dreams are virtually realized. Why virtually and not really?

R.: Though we have taken enough care while collecting and classifying and digitalizing the data some errors are likely to remain, therefore I described it as virtually. Secondly, as you know these works are in digital format. Such format has a great advantage of being amenable to additions and alterations easily and inexpensively. In other words, digital projects are in a sense open projects which could be modified as required. This project is not exception to that. Thirdly, language is ever changing, therefore, any work pertaining to it, will also keep on changing. We know that Gujaratis, schools, libraries and universities all over the world will use these resources and will come forward with their suggestions. As we get them, we will first evaluate them and if we find them worth, we will add all such new material or modify the existing one. Therefore I say that though we have completed the work, we have not completed it. We will go on updating.
Q.: So your pilgrimage will not stop here, it will continue even after this.

R.: You are right, this is a pilgrimage for knowledge and such pilgrimage, as you know, never ends. However, let me make my point clearer, we will not wait until we get responses from our users, we will also keep on reviewing the project critically. If we find any error, we will fix it. Not only that, if we come across any new ideas, particularly about the format of works and technological innovations, we shall undertake appropriate measures.

Q.: That indeed is a matter of great joy. Your determination to keep on working on this project is also very significant. We understand your view that this pilgrimage is endless, but we are eager to know about how did you start this pilgrimage.

R.: Oh, for that we will have to go two decades back.

Q.: Almost a generation back. Isn’t it?

R.: Yes, you can say so. When I returned to Kenya in East Africa. I got engaged in my business where all communications were done in English, but my affection for Gujarati remained intact. How can I forget Gujarati? After all, it was the language which was deeply rooted in my heart. It had its cultural significance in my mind. So, I thought it would be possible to employ modern technology to type in Gujarati as we do it in English?

Q.: Gujarati typing? Did you learn Gujarati typing?

R.: Oh! yes. There is an interesting story behind this. I had my primary education in Kenya, where I learned some Gujarati as one of the subjects. Then the Second World War broke out, which compelled me to spend six years (1940 - 1946) in India. I bought an old Remington Gujarati type writer in those days, and started tick -tick, on my own. When war was over, I and improving it.
returned to Kenya and plunged into business, which flourished and got expanded to other parts of the world. Then in 1965, I settled in London. The next generation within the family had come of age and were getting engrossed into the business. By that time I had crossed sixty. Then my desire to write in Gujarati revived. I again resumed tick-ticking on a Gujarati type writer; but frankly speaking, I used to get tired.

Q.: In order to fulfil your love of typing, you had to let go in your youth?

R.: Yes, almost, but, by that time came electric - typewriters. So I started contacting manufacturers of typewriters. I was interested in converting the manual typewriter to an electric one. I went on exploring this for about two years, but all in vain. I took up the matter with IBM for Golf Ball, and also with Swedish and German firms for Daisy wheel. It is a long story, very long story, but in the end, it all came to nil.

Q.: You must have been greatly disappointed; did you feel like abandoning the project at any stage?

R.: I never abandon any project once I take in my hand. I always feel that if there is any problem, there will be its solution too. But, look, sometimes failure comes with a new lesson in how to succeed. That happened in this case also. Computers came on the stage and with that electronic typewriters became nearly outdated. With that new sun had risen on the horizon of this field. Computers came with excellent facilities for graphics, which was almost impossible in typewriters. In parallel to this, the letters of typewriters also became outdated. Computer industry devised aesthetically good fonts for many languages.

Q.: So your engine was back on the rail, right?

R.: Not so exactly, but the prospectus of it being on rail brightened. We got computers but without Gujarati fonts on them. So I started searching a company which could devise Gujarati fonts for me. I contacted Apple Macintosh, IBM, and some other companies too, and discussed with them
the possibility of devising Gujarati fonts. I also came to India, met with the experts of the Tata company, who have already devised Devanagari fonts. Unfortunately, they were not sure about the market of those fonts and I found them not much interested in devising Gujarati fonts.

At that time periodicals, newspapers and other print media in India were using Linotype System. They had already dies for Gujarati. So, I approached them, but they were not interested in undertaking designing Gujarati fonts. In the meantime, C.M.C., a government undertaking company, publicly demonstrated computers which can type in Gujarati and Devanagari. But, once again, the fate of their computers was also unclear.

Q.: So you came back to the same place from where you have started, right?

R.: Right. But by that time another development took place and that changed the direction of my project. My nephew Raj was doing his MBA in the USA; he finished his study and returned to London.

Q.: Why London?

R.: I was settled in London. As I said, my parents left India, our motherland and went to Kenya, which became our second motherland; then the circumstances forced us to leave Kenya and we came to London. In a sense, we left two motherlands and made the UK is our third motherland. But let me come back to the main question. We were talking about my nephew. He returned to London with an Apple Computers, which were very much in the market in those days. Interestingly, he taught me how to operate it. And, with some practice, I was able to do it fairly well. But again it was all in English. I wanted to have Gujarati fonts on it. In other words, I wanted to work on Gujarati, and in Gujarati. So once again I started searching a person who would devise Gujarati fonts for me.

After many unsuccessful attempts, I found a French lady, who was ready to do that. Finally she did it, but the fonts were incomplete. They were missing many joint letters, called clusters or conjuncts. I asked her to fix the fonts but she asked for a very heavy price which was absurdly high. I felt that she was interested more in exploiting the situation, so I gave up the idea of
Q.: You should have agreed to pay whatever she has asked for, which would have helped you finish your project earlier.

R.: It was not a question of money. In fact, it was a question of business ethics. We have already fixed the price once. Then she asked for more money, and the amount she asked for was also not reasonable. Interestingly, in the meantime, another turn came. I happened met with Gulabdas Broker. He told me that Madhu Ray, who was in America at that time, was also working on Gujarati fonts. In fact, he was creating Gujarati fonts independently. So, I contacted him to find that he has already devised the fonts! It was a great delight. I bought them from him and found them user friendly. I was comfortable with his keyboard mapping.

Q.: So your search for fonts was over now. But the question is: what lead you to work on dictionaries and spell checker?

R.: As I went along writing Gujarati on computer, I realized the problems of spelling errors. There were scores of errors on a single page! I thought others who are not well versed with Gujarati must be facing the same problem. And it dawned on me what a boon it would be to have a Gujarati spell checker! But once again, I faced the same eternal question - who would devise a spell checker? I myself cannot do it.

Q.: So again you resumed another journey, right?

R.: Yes. But this one was indeed a very long journey. I travelled a lot, wandered tirelessly and consulted many. But, I will be very brief on this. First, I tried Microsoft Spell Checker and I realized that Gujarati spell checker can be written. So, I took up the issue with Apple Macintosh and Microsoft, the both. I also published many articles in various periodicals and consulted some...
Q.: So you rushed to wherever you saw a ray of hope.

R.: Yes, that was the only way. Then we arranged to meet with the Macintosh in USA. I went there, but they flatly refused to discuss technical matter with a non expert like me I went on persisting, they went on resisting. Finally, we started our journey back. While I was on the way I had a flash. There must be some Gujaratis in their staff. Let me try to talk to him/her. We reversed the journey and went back to Cupertino. We found out a Gujarati name from the list and apprised the person about the situation and explained our purpose of visit. But, that also did not work. The person said, "Ratibhai, don't waste your time; no one from Apple will come forward to help you." Then we tried with other name. This time it was a woman. In the meantime, we also changed our method of representing the case. We told the woman that we have planned that project so as to help the children learning Gujarati abroad. In return, she promised us to arrange a meeting with a Macintosh expert who often sought her help on Hindi and Gujarati languages. After a few days, she scheduled a fifteen minutes meeting with an expert. Interestingly, it lasted for two and half hours. The expert was very much impressed by the keyboard, we had developed. I thought that this trip will give me something that I was looking for, but it turned out to be another failure. In the end, the expert suggested us some software and advised to work on the problem ourselves. Then we started a search for those software. We went to a store, which was incidentally owned by a Gujarati. We discussed our problem with him and he advised us not to buy such expensive software. Instead, he suggested another Gujarati gentleman, who was working on almost the same problem on which we were working, but he was unable to give us his address. He asked us to wait and we waited for five days, but that was in vain. Finally, we went to Toronto.
Q.: Why Toronto and not London?

R.: My permanent abode is at London, but on account of my business I happen to stay at various places like Toronto, Singapore, Nairobi, Bombay. So I was in Toronto at that time. Let me come back to the main question now. After a lapse of time, the Gujarati dealer gave me the address of that man who was working on Gujarati fonts. He was living in Boston. So, we went to Boston to meet with him. We met him but he also refused to do anything as he was unable to spare time nor the funds for our project. However, he said that spell checker can be written, and that was in a sense, a kind of hope for us.

Q.: So again you came back to Toronto, right?

R.: Yes, and from there we came to Mumbai. There our relative Kamlakant told me about two young men living in Pune who has devised Hindi spell checker. So I went to Pune and met them with Asang and his colleagues; and discussed the project also. Finally, we arrived at a conclusion that writing a Gujarati spell checker needs plenty of time. They were unable to spare so much time.

Q.: So how did you proceed then?

R.: As I said there was no standard keyboard for Gujarati. Even today I do not see much change in this situation. At that time India was conformable with the Linotype System, so nobody was ready to work on my keyboard. Ultimately I decided that I am the only one who can help me. So, I took the work in my hand. In the meantime, I have already transferred Gujarati words, which were relevant to the spell checker, into a digital form. I went on working on that. But, one day my computer developed a problem. Its motherboard got burnt. Later, I realized that it was quite overloaded with the data. Then I
installed a new motherboard and started the work once again from the beginning. But, thanks God that I then got Jayesh Patel and Harshad Patel. At that time they were working in a journal. They both agreed to work with me part time.

We first entered words from Pocket Dictionary of Gujarati published by Vidhyapith and then we entered words form its Regular Dictionary. Interestingly, my secretary and my drivers also participated in it. In order to speed up the work, we thought about assigning the work to someone who could compose the data on Apple Mackintosh. In the meantime, through the persuasion of Suresh Dalal and Harkishan Mehta, Madhu Kotak, the Editor of Chitralekha, extended his support. He made us available the old material of his magazine. In the mean time, Swami Asang of Pune successfully designed a method of transferring that material on my key board. But again the source exhausted, so we decided to add additional words from Bruhut Jodani Kosh.

I often think that if means can be devised to convert Gujarati fonts into transliterated Romanised Gujarati, future generation of Gujaratis abroad can read Gujarati.
London. That strained my resolve and my patience too. I had crossed eighth decade of my life. However, I was determined to see that the project gets through during my lifetime. Swami Asang, as I mentioned earlier is an expert in computer, advised us to convert all data in Java and then them into Unicode. The experts of my Trivandrum firm undertook this huge work and completed it wonderfully.

Q.: You had ups and downs and yet you persevered.

R.: Yes, you are right. But let me say more about the downs than the ups. At times I was out of breath. On such occasions many of my friends affectionately encouraged me. Not only that, they also gave me moral support and helped me in keeping up my spirit. Those friends include: Uttam Gajjar (Surat), Balvant Patel (Gandhinagar) and language and computer experts like Dr. Nishith Dhruv (Roha -- Maharashtra), Kumar Malde (Canada), Babu Suthar (USA), Kishor Raval (USA), Dr. Dayashankar Joshi (UK) Vipul Kalyani (UK). I have been fortunate to have support of them.

In addition, Swami Prem Asang (Pune), Mr. Ishwar Vasa (London), Dr. Kumarpal Desai (Ahmedabad), Jayesh Patel (Mumbai), Kumari Alaka Chheda (Mumbai), Kumari Bhavana (Mumbai), Manubhai Bhatt (Mumbai), Kumari Madhvi (Mumbai), Mrs. Anjali (Mumbai), Kumari Mehru Sidhava (London), Vipul Motivaras (Mumbai), Himanshu Mistry (Surat), Rohit (Mangalore) and of course, Revathy Shreedharan, who does not know even the first letter (K) of Gujarati alphabet and other experts of Trivandrum firm, also helped me a lot. They immersed themselves completely in this work with a true devotion and pushed the work to completion. I am really thankful to them.

Q.: Which sources did you rely upon to complete these works?
Well, I relied upon many resources but chief among them are (1) Pocket and Regular dictionaries of Gujarat Vidhyapith, (2) Bruhud Gujarati Jodani Kosh of Ke. Ka. Shastri, (3) Gujarati to English and English to Gujarati Dictionaries of Pandurang Ganesh Deshpande, (4) Narhari Bhatt's English to Gujarati Vinayan Kosh, (5) Phonetics and Morphemic Frequency of Gujarati Language of Prabodh Pandit (Deccan College) (6) Antonym Dictionary of Shri Shantilal Bhatt, and (7) Thesaurus of Ishwarlal Dave.

Had you during this period any experiences which you may call special?

I had various kinds of experiences, some sad, some happy. I will leave aside the sad ones and talk of happy ones. I have won friendship of some good individuals -- young men like Babu Suthar of U.S.A. and Dr. Nishith Dhruv of Roha, both learned and computer experts. I cherish the friendship of these young gentlemen. Likewise, I came into contact of group of learned and devoted individuals who have been advocating one e and one u for Gujarati spelling. Their proposal is genuine, logical and useful, therefore, I support it.

Do you feel that the projects that you have completed should have been undertaken by Govt. or Literacy Institutions?

Some of my friends think so. I also think that Govt. or literary institutions can deliver better goods and perhaps quickly too. But, my friend, work is his who does it. I felt like doing it and I did it. My only regret is that I had ample resources, zeal and devotion, but I lacked language-skill and computer-expertise; and therefore the work took years.

And what now?

Our only heartfelt desire is that the project contributes in the development of Gujarati language, and it serves the needs of Gujaratis here and
abroad. We can only assure that we are fully committed to continue our efforts to update and improve the project.

Q.: Where there is a will, there is a way. We are happy to learn about your labour of love. Congratulations and best wishes for a long, healthy life devoted to the maintenance and development of Gujarati language.

I am grateful to Balvant Patel (Gandhinagar), Uttam Gajjar (Surat), Dr Nishith Dhruv (Rohe-Raigadh), Babu Suthar (Philadelphia), Keshav Chandaria (Toronto) in formulating this questionnaire.

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