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India at your fingertips

Lekhika, a new software developed by an Israeli IT firm, creates a virtual keyboard with which you can type in any Indian language. Supported by C-DAC's scientists, this application package will help remove India's digital divide. *Surajit Dasgupta* describes the revolutionary software

All these years while trying to type in Hindi on the computer, it was such a pain remembering that the 'C' in your keyboard was 'ma', 'V' was 'na' and 'B' was 'wa', for example. Multi-linguists had been agonising over typesetting and feeding characters of other Indian languages as well. Not any more.

Lekhika, a software developed by the FTK Technologies of Israel in collaboration with C-DAC of India, uses a web camera, which you have to focus on the same old keyboard you have been using, to produce images on the PC monitor showing the placement of your fingers on the keys with Hindi-letter imprints so that the user does not have to recall the conversion table or keep one by his side while typing. A demo-version is available to enable typing in a total of 10 different Indian languages. "In another two years, we'll be able to cover some 14 to 15 (Indian) languages," said Rafi Palgi, General Manager of FTK's Indian subsidiary.

Lekhika types documents, excel sheets and chat messages with equal ease. A short training on Lekhika can let you type in the language of your choice. Lekhika will hit the market at a price of Rs 2,500 to Rs 3,000 next year.

This means that it's not a multi-linguist's delight alone. This will go a long way in bridging the digital divide. Quite unfairly, lack of knowledge of English often meant computer-illiteracy for millions of Indians who were not IT professionals. And in this era, computer-illiteracy is increasingly making people grope in the dark for information in sectors as vital as health and as essential as geography of a new place of work.

Lekhika, one may say, was crying to be created. It so happened that entrepreneur Harel Cohen, having observed the market's need for Indian languages software packages, established FTK, co-founding it with Giora Bar Sakai in 2005. That made his company the first to deliver unique and comprehensive Indian languages word processor.

FTK's own product, the suggestively named Lookeys, is already in the market, enabling creation of online documents in 11 Indian languages. While it's a good improvement on the Unicode fonts that this writer has been using for many years, Lekhika is a more indigenous product. While you need for Lookeys Windows 2000 (Service Pack 4) or Windows XP (SP1 or SP2), a chip of Intel Pentium 3 or higher, 256 MB RAM, 25 MB free hard disk space, 16-bit colour, 800x600 resolution or higher, Internet Explorer 6.0 and above, 8 MB (Onboard) or stronger Display Adapter and DirectX 9, Lekhika works on Windows, MAC, Solaris, Linux, etc. The package derives its features from ILinux, a Linux distribution with support for application software in Indian languages, developed by IIT, Kanpur.

Indian languages have phonetic similarity in alphabet. They have well-structured grammar, and are rich in ligatures. Unlike in the Roman and Arabic/ Persian (Naskh/ Nasta'liq) scripts, Indian languages do not add letters for vowel sounds; we use *matras* (vowel signs) instead.

Cohen, in course of his professional tours, came across Prof Ashok K Jhunjhunwala of IIT Madras, who threw at him the challenge to serve a population of 900 million people in India who do not know English. It has been plain unlucky of the 194,000,000 children between the ages six and 13 so far, who go to about 880,000 primary schools (91 per cent of all) that do not teach English, for which they had to stay computer-illiterate.

Vijendra N Shukla, Scientist 'F' and Head, Language Tech, Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (CDAC), helped in comprehensively revising Unicode for all Indic scripts, language design guides and colloquial sentences. Indian script font code standards were also developed, which will promote content creation activities and IT penetration in Indian languages.

Lekhika is, as such, a platform independent Word Processor with tools like dictionaries, translation, transliteration, spell-checker in local languages, desktop utilities like calendar, calculator, unit converters, etc, and ISCII (8-bit Indian Standard Code For Information Interchange) to Unicode converters.

What the software engineers must have had to work a lot on is how any line, selected portion of text or the whole of a document could be highlighted and then that portion's translation or transliteration obtained. They succeeded remarkably.



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This shows that Lekhika has multi-lingual document support; it preserves fonts, styles and languages and have a multiple document interface. The system will feel and look native so that the Indian user is not intimidated. When you give a print command, the font, style and language will be preserved. What generally happens is even when a PC supports an Indian language, the printer may not be able to interpret it properly and produce a hard copy of your document with strange characters interspersed with a hell lot of notes of interrogation like this: "??v#Æ fdjÆ?????.@??ys!\$???çkr%??;k?! &*\$%\$*^*?? {??????"

The "Help" option in the tool bar will also be in the particular language you are using. There will be an embedded dictionary spell checker for the regional languages. Utilities like calendar and calculator are bonus! Together with Sanshodhika (language-sensitive spell-checking), Shabdika (authenticated glossaries, text formatting, paragraph, font, style, etc) and Pariwartika (font conversion utility), it's a comprehensive package.

The screenshot shows a search interface with two main sections: 'SEARCH SITE' and 'ARCHIVES'. The 'SEARCH SITE' section has a search input field and a 'Go!' button. Below it are radio buttons for 'Search', 'Today', and 'Archives', with 'Archives' selected. The 'ARCHIVES' section has a date selector with 'Day', 'Month', and 'Year' dropdowns, and a 'Go!' button. A small advertisement for 'Firefox with Google Toolbar' is visible in the 'ARCHIVES' section.

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