

27 YEARS OF INTERNET IN INDIA

ONLY A **CITIZEN** CAN SAVE THE INTERNET FROM ITS **CONSUMER**

BY OSAMA MANZAR





After completing journalism in 1990, I ended up jobless for more than four years. My survival kit was erratic freelance assignments, and free food supply from the hostel dining halls of Jawaharlal Nehru University, courtesy my friend who was a student there, and who later became my life partner.

Somehow, in late 1994 and early 1995, I got a job offer from a fortnightly magazine called *Computerworld*. When I joined the magazine as a correspondent, I knew only two words related to computers — hardware and software. I had no background in computers or any branch of Information Technology. But journalism and its reporting processes are great teachers. My stint at *Computerworld* resulted in my interactions with scores of EDP and MIS Managers of several big companies, and also CEOs of software and IT companies like Microsoft, Infosys, Intel, Oracle, IBM, and so on. I was enjoying reporting on IT - both from the perspective of its usage at the backend in big companies, and also as application services by software companies.

I still remember the month of August in 1995, when the

whole country would be celebrating Independence Day on the 15th, many of us were waiting for the day when it was officially announced that the internet would be made available or open to Indians. No one had thought or imagined what the Internet would look like, and what a World Wide Web would bring to our desktop screens. For most the Internet was technology, for many, it was a communication platform, and eventually it evolved into the biggest media platform that changed human narratives forever.

Sitting in the office, our job was not only to report about the advent of the Internet in India, we were more excited to explore ourselves.

Considering that it is more than 27 years of Internet in India and in most parts of the world, we remember the archaic Internet with nostalgia: it was entirely dependent on the mostly prevalent copper line of the telephone network, one would dial a particular land line number provided by the sole Internet Service Provider (ISP) called VSNL (Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited. *VSNL was later sold by the government to Tata at a very nominal cost with huge assets*). The noise that the dialing process would create was music to the ears, but in reality it was one of the creepiest sounds anyone would desire to listen to, if given a choice. Yet, we won't mind dialing-in hundreds of times in a day, if the call or connectivity would drop because of the bad wireline of the telephone. [*You can hear the dial up internet connectivity sound here: <https://youtu.be/gSNAR6FRuO0>*]

My situation was unique; immediately after the 15th August, when the Internet bug bit me, I took out a loan from my father and bought a desktop. I used to live in



Gurgaon at that time, which was lonely, deserted, and people used to live far away from each other. I did not have a telephone line at my rented place in Sushant Lok Phase 1, and my mother-in-law used to reside about 5-6 kilometers away in Phase 1 of DLF Residential Area. I decided to park my desktop at my mother-in-law's place because she had a telephone line. For the current generation, the Gurgaon of that time in mid nineties was still under construction where all the spiralling vertical towers were either under plan or were under construction.

My obsession with the Internet was so deep that I used to spend more than 18 hours a day in front of the screen. My mother-in-law almost had a heart attack when she saw her telephone bill of over ₹5,000 in the first month because the Internet engaged the phone lines for almost round the clock. I used to put something or the other to be constantly downloaded from the internet and at a speed of 9.6kbps, nothing would download easily. If the call would drop, then you had to restart the download all over again. It is much later that the Internet started giving the feature of restarting downloads from where one had

dropped off. When the Pause and Resume came into the internet downloads, it looked like a huge luxury and freedom from being constantly on the keyboards.

My life as a print media IT journalist after the Internet came to India, changed forever. The Internet consumed me thoroughly — so much so that when I left *Computerworld* magazine in late 1997, my editor told me “you have outgrown the place”. My next destination was heading the newly created Internet division of *The Hindustan Times (HT)*.

I was alone in the entire Internet division of HT, and the task was cutout — to manage, recreate, enhance and popularise hindustantimes.com and ensure that all the content of the newspaper gets uploaded online before the midnight; what I learnt was that the entire online traffic to the HT's website was from the diaspora, and from within India, the online traffic was almost negligible. Interestingly, by the time, the actual newspaper would reach into the hands of the locals and Indians living in India, the email box of the Hindustan Times dot com would be full with the reactions, feedback, comments from the diaspora readers. Then, in late 1990s, most of the online feedback used to be given to the HT journalists in print. Very few of the journalists had the email or the habit of it.

This was the time when the Internet was gradually becoming the desired space for everyone. The Dotcom era was on the anvil, and website development was becoming the household desire of every one who could afford to learn it. Rediff.com as an independent news portal had made a mark, and samachar.com was becoming popular for those who wanted to see all



headlines of all the newspapers in one place. Yahoo.com was the destination for finding anything, anywhere in the world. One of the great experiences at HT was that everyday - one or the other journalist from HT - would come to me and my division to know how to get a personal email address. It was interesting that traditional journalists were not adapting to online media. There was a lot of reservation, fear, and skepticism, towards anything that used to be published online, and it was considered unfathomable by print media journalism. In this period, from 1997 to 1999, I expanded my wings all over the world, exploring the World Wide Web, the emerging internet culture, and grabbing the opportunity of also writing for foreign publications. But the one highlight that I can share was the coincidence with "Internet Economy". The family of IDG publications in the USA had launched a new weekly magazine called "*The*

Industry Standard,” which claimed to be reporting and covering the entire spectrum of the “internet economy”. I became their unofficial reporter from India and the space they would provide was to publish 200 words once in a month or so, but they used to pay a dollar for each word. That experience also gave me chances to write in many places like in Germany, in Singapore, in Malaysia and so on. Some of the publications I used to write were: MIS (Singapore), where I used to write about how big companies in India were adopting computerisation to automate their organisational work and supply chain. I wrote several case studies including that of TOI’s Management Information Systems, Hero Honda’s MIS, National Informatics Center, Maruti’s MIS, and so on.

However the highlight of my late 90s Internet experience was that I could convince a traditional organization such as HT to allocate about 20 lakh (2 million) rupees to develop and launch a new portal which could be based on generic and essential information for Indians rather than using HT’s printed content. We made a strategy to create a portal in the line of yahoo.com and called it digitalHT.com and take advantage of the mass following of HT to get eyeballs. We hired more than 30 people and launched the portal in 1999. Within a few weeks of launching we got an interest from Chase Capital and they ultimately invested about 9 million dollars to register a separate entity for digitalHT.com.

In a few months I got bitten by the dotcom bug and decided to start my own company; I partnered with a friend who was a techie and started a software and web development company, which ended up developing websites for a majority of the country’s media entities like Tehelka.com, Outlook group of magazines, Mid-

Easy Access for Small Businesses

Now that the Indian government has loosened ISP restrictions, the Net is set to reach the streets of the subcontinent. The plan to get it there is called "cyber dhaba," *dhaba* being the Hindi word for a poor man's roadside eating joint.

At IT World Comdex India '98 in early December, Mahanagar Telephone Nigam, a government-owned telephone service provider, announced its intention



to launch 20 cyber dhabas in Delhi and Mumbai.

Cyber dhabas are intended to be dirt-cheap versions of the plush cyber cafes that exist here only in luxury hotels. "It would be the cheapest option to explore the online world," says S.

Rajgopalan, the chairman and managing director of MTNL. "We expect small entrepreneurs to pick up the idea and [we] hope for a situation where Internet kiosks become as ubiquitous as telephone booths." — Osama Manzar, New Delhi

Day, Amar Ujala, Rashtriya Sahara, Dainik Bhaskar, DainikJagran, Prabhat Khabar and so on. We reached from zero revenue to 1.5 crore (15 million) rupees in 15 months between late 1999 and mid 2001. The name of our enterprise was 4CPlus.com.

I did not leave journalism behind, and as a personal passion, I launched INOMY (short for Internet Economy), a weekly email newsletter to appraise people about the developments of the Internet in India. As a part of Inomy, in 2001 with two friends Madanmohan Rao and Tufail Ahmad, we co-authored a book called "*Internet Economy of India*". We reviewed all the announcements of investments in the Internet domain during 2000 and 2001. Our data crunching found that India got \$22 billion new money invested in the Internet Economy. The book Internet Economy of India attracted everyone's attention and we became a reference point to anything and everything that would happen to the Internet.

My attention and approach was gradually shifting; I was not enjoying my entrepreneurship at 4Cplus -- the company which had become almost 3-4 years old in 2003 and had touched over 100 employees, and a million dollars in revenues. Even after the mishap of 9/11 the company got investment to grow further.

I felt like there was no purpose or meaning if I could

not contribute towards overcoming India's poverty and underdevelopment by leveraging the Internet. I was convinced that the only way to transform the country was by adopting internet and digital technologies on a massive scale. I thought of the Internet and digital technology as a potent tool for democracy, equality, and inclusion, and its adoption could overcome the evils of India's patriarchal, feudal, caste, and class based practices and traditions.

Along with my wife, (with not a penny in our pockets) from a room of our house, we started the Digital Empowerment Foundation, and gave it the tagline "empowering people at the edge of information". Our mission and vision and approach was clear, we wanted to digitally empower rural India so that they are not left behind, and can access the internet like anyone without being discriminated against, and have some platform, where they are not exploited and can avail opportunities like anyone else.

At a very early stage in 2003, we got associated with the World Summit Award which was established under the influence of the United Nations global movement announced by Kofi Annan, World Summit of the Information a Society. It was a call to the global community to adopt and create information-based society from the inclusion perspective. My exposure to WSA as a member of the jury and later also as a board member, brought me exposure to more than 150 countries as to what is best happening in each country. We institutionalized the Manthan Award for recognising digital innovation in India and South Asia under the affiliation of WSA gathered a tremendous amount of local and regional innovations; and a ready repository for all



to learn and replicate. In the last 17 years, under the influence of WSA, DEF has institutionalised 5 awards: The Manthan Awards, The mBillionth Award, Social Media for Empowerment Award, eNGO Challenge, and eNorth East Award - literally creating platforms to gather the best practices of digital empowerment from Mobile, Telecom, Social Media, Tech for Good, and across India, North East and all of South Asian countries. As of today, we have gathered more than 10,000 digital innovations under these awards.

We started humbly at DEF, but early exposure to huge ground experience and global knowledge made us understand the journey of the Internet in India in a very different way -- the journey that empowers to ask and care for unconnected, write policies that would help the masses digitally, and create models and pilots that could be replicated across states and nations.

For example, we were a part of the development plan of common service center (CSC), the flagship scheme of Ministry of Communication and IT's (MoCIT) program to provide Internet enabled kiosks and centers at village

level to provide government digital services to the people living at village level. The government now boasts of more than 300,000 CSCs, more than the number of panchayats in India.

We also developed the National Digital Literacy Mission (NDLM) along with MoCIT, Nasscom Foundation and Intel, which later became the integral plan of the Government India, and named DISHA. In fact, ministry of finance regularly started allocating budget for digital literacy to mass educate the Indian population across the country.

On the other hand Mobile phones and Cellular towers had started taking over the country; while the PC penetration in India is still not more than 3%, mobile became a desire of each and every household. As of today we are boasting of more than 650 million feature phones and more than 500 million smartphones. Our lives can be counted as who is not online, or is that?

Actually the scenario that keeps bothering me at DEF is why even after 27 years of the Internet, our country's Internet users are less than 40% and more than 75% of our women in rural India have no internet or mobile access. BharatNet which earlier started as NOFN (national optic fiber network) at the time of UPA2 government, promised to bring at least 100MBPS connection to each of the 250,000 village councils, which could further be used as a point of distribution to all other local institutions and even households.

Unfortunately, even after more than 12 years of its inception while it claims to have reached almost all Panchayats, it promises to be ready to use only at



100,000 Panchayat locations. But the ground reality through various spot checks showed the functionality of BharatNet not more than 20 percent locations, that too, there has not been any organized provision that the connectivity could be easily made available to all.

Instead, in the last 5 years Reliance's Jio network has penetrated heavily to be the only option for connectivity as far as smaller towns and rural areas are concerned. Lately, Jio's subscribers are more than 50 percent of all the subscribers across the country. Jio has made two things clear, one is that cost of connectivity should be rock bottom and highly affordable, but the second emphasis is on data connectivity. Hardly surprising for Reliance that after their petroleum business, they rightly consider data as a new oil and investing heavily into it.

Certainly, in the last 10 years the growth of the Internet in India could be defined through mushrooming Social Media and mobile phones as the most essential tools for everyone for everything.

However I would like to emphasize that nothing is more

critical than how the internet has grown from being the most freeing tool to becoming a necessity that is being used by the governments and corporations simultaneously, to use people as data.

While the governments use the Internet for surveillance and control, the corporations use people as no more than consumers and profile them to monetise their data. Social media on the other hand has become mass media, and is being used for creating new narratives, spreading hatred, and propagating misinformation and fake news.

Unfortunately, while Internet and smartphone penetrations are still less than 40%, the critical reach has already been reached, that even unconnected people get information and news, and their lives are irreversibly dependent on connectivity. For example, a rumour spread through WhatsApp message reaches those also who are unconnected and proven to have resulted in mass mobilisation, resulting in murder and lynching. On the other hand, an unconnected citizen in a village cannot access her ration and go hungry if her biometric authorisation is not done in real time through a PoS machine that must be connected through the internet.

After 27 years of the advent of Internet, whose face was World Wide Web, we have reach two major scenarios: one is that today Internet is known by using five major platforms - Google, Amazon, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp; and the socnd is that government has made it mandatory for every citizen to access and avail anything to everything through data connectivity, whether it is an entitlement, or right to health, or banking and finance, or right to education or right to food or



even access to market. Whether you are connected or not connected, you are a Digital Citizen and You have a Digital Identity.

I strongly feel that Internet has reached to a point of being questioned “whether it is a public good?” The survival of Internet is at stake, as it has become to be used by the powerful corporations and governments to use people as consumers and data; the only way Internet can be saved is by the people to treat themselves as citizens first and behave with the Internet not as a consumer but as a citizen.

Osama Manzar is founder & director of Digital Empowerment Foundation. He is Senior Ashoka Fellow. He has been instrumental to digitally empower more than 25 million people and to his credit, traveled to more than 10,000 villages. Manzar has co-authored more than 6 books including NetChakra – 15 Years of Internet in India. His latest book is COVID-19 - The New Normal: How to Survive a New World Order. He is available @ osamamanzar



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