Osama Manzar goes back to the late nineties and traces his old reported articles and posts that he had contributed to The Industry Standard, a weekly newsmagazine focusing on internet economy, and he compares the current scenario of the Internet and its India story.
Indian Internet in late 90s and contrast after a quarter century

Osama Manzar
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It was post mid nineties, somewhere around 1997 I had joined the Hindustan Times, one of north India’s biggest national daily newspapers, to run their Internet division. It was a division without any staff but the management had decided to form an Internet department to effectively mark its presence on the World Wide Web. I had earlier worked for more than two and a half years in ComputerWorld, a fortnightly magazine for MIS managers, and had a vast experience of reporting on Indian and global Internet trends and how Indian IT companies were doing business. However, it was my passion with the Internet that enabled me to get a new media job at the Hindustan Times. My job was to create hindustantimes dot com and ensure that the entire newspaper was on the website so that it could be accessed anytime, anywhere, by anyone. And so it happened, we used to upload the entire edition just before midnight, certainly much before the dawn when the physical copy would reach the doors of subscribers. Unsurprisingly, the entire Indian diaspora would read the Hindustan Times newspaper much before anyone in India. However, unlike Indian readers in India, the diaspora would not only read the newspaper online but would also send feedback, comments, opinions, suggestions, rants and raves in abundance.

Unfortunately, all the mails from the diaspora used to come in one mailbox. Most of the staff of HT including many journalists did not have email where we could forward the mails received in their name or to the report they had written. Gradually many journalists would come to our Internet division room and read those emails. We also started registering for
their individual emails. The world of the Internet, and emails was alien to the journalist fraternity as I experienced on the floors of HT. It was fun to train and help attain the curiosity of many of those journalists who wanted to explore the Internet and have their own emails and read hundreds of those letters to the editor which were received through the online edition of the Hindustan Times.

In the meantime, I used to continuously explore the global Internet trends and how the world is progressing with the Internet. Being a journalist and interested in ICT and Internet, I used to read a lot of newspapers and magazines coming from the USA, like Wired, Fast Company, NetworkWorld, InfoWorld, Red Herring, Business 2.0 and the tech sections of the regular WSJ, NYT, and so on. One of those curious nights, I bumped into a magazine freshly launched with an unassuming name – The Industry Standard. The magazine was a weekly and was fully focused on tracking the Internet economy, dot com boom, and how the internet was affecting business. I wrote an email to Jonathan Weber, the weekly magazine’s editor-in-chief and got a prompt reply inviting me to write occasional 200-word posts from India and committed to pay a dollar a word for the published posts.
Interestingly in the mid 1998, the total Internet subscribers in India was merely 105,000, even after the public commencement of Internet availability since August 15, 1995, a time period of almost 3 years. As per the report above, we had about 16 applicants for ISPs who wanted to provide Internet services to the Indians including entities like Fujitsu, Microsoft, and usual suspects like At&T and British Télécom. Compare those days with the current scenario when we have a claim of more than 1.10 billion mobile connections and just about 5 major ISP players, such as Reliance Jio, AirTel, Idea, BSNL and Vodafone.
Indian Internet in late 90s

A MIS manager at India's Western Railways in Mumbai may hold the key to unlocking the Internet to millions of Indian consumers. Harsh Kumar's "Shusha" is a keyboard layout as well as a True Type Font (TTF) that lets PC users read and write four of India's 18 vernacular languages. Kumar's software is free and runs on any platform as an extension to the font software within popular office-suite applications like Microsoft Office. "I call this layout 'Roman Indian' for Indian languages," says Kumar. The current version, Shusha 1.5, allows users to read and write in Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati and Gurmukhi. The next version of Shusha will include support for three other languages – Bengali, Assamese and Oriya.

Kumar started bringing Hindi to computers in 1995, as part of a widespread campaign to use "Raj Bhasha" (Hindi) for "the national language" as much as possible. At the time, he was professor of information technology at the Railway Staff College in Varodara. "Computerization efforts and their benefits are not going to be limited to the five percent of Indians who speak English – they're going to reach the masses, as well," says Kumar.

Others have noticed Kumar's efforts. India's National Association for Software and Service Companies and Manufacturers' Association for Information Technology have started a program called "Bharat Bhasha" (www.bharatbhasha.org) to address localization issues. Shusha is available on the site – Osmania Manzoor, New Delhi.
I thoroughly enjoyed writing about how the Internet was taking shape in India and the dollar payment was not hurting at all.

It is interesting that in the mid nineties, the international news could be as relevant as it was for India, the localisation of the Internet in Hindi and other Indian languages. I came to know about Harsh through a friend of mine Venkatesh Hariharan who was an editor with one of the IT magazines at that time. Harsh was working with Western Railway as their MIS manager and being a Techy was also fiddling with developing software to make the keyboard work for Indian languages. He called it “Shusha” - the prevalent keyboard layout as well as TTF (True Type Font) that enabled Indian Internet users to type, read and write in four Indian languages; Hindi, Marathi, Gurmukhi and Gujarati. With this news being published in an international magazine, Harsh Kumar’s effort got a huge attention, on which he was working since 1995 with a campaign called Raj Bhasha. Around the same time, as I had reported, Nasscom was also getting active with a programme around localization called Bharat Bhasha.

1998 was the year The Industry Standard started as a weekly print magazine, and became so popular by 2000 that it came to be known as “the Bible of Internet economy”. In the year 2000, The Industry Standard sold the highest number of advertisement pages than any other magazines in the USA.
Actually, my first contribution to The Industry Standard, as per my records, was in early June 1998, to be precise, in the issue of June 1, 1998. And the topic at that time was that “VSNL wanted to be an AOL.”
Indian Internet in late 90s

India's AOL? VSNL Talks E-Commerce

India's government-controlled Videsh Sanchar Nigam Ltd. has ambitious plans to expand its basic e-mail and ISP service into e-commerce and other consumer services, according to VSNL Chairman and Managing Director B.K. Syngal.

VSNL is the only commercial ISP in the country and has been offering services since August 1995, when the Internet became accessible to the public in India. So far the Department of Telecommunication (DoT) has received license applications from 16 prospective ISPs, such as AT&T, British Telecom, MCI, Motorola, CompuServe, Microsoft, Sprint and Fujitsu.

VSNL has slashed its tariffs in half, expanded its Internet presence from three to nine cities, and increased its subscription base to 105,000. And it has announced plans to invest $1.4 billion in the next five years.

However, the business community and Internet enthusiasts are unhappy with the way the Internet is growing here. Why? "There is not any service available on the Net for the local audience," says I.B. Saxena, an entrepreneur who sells to Delhites at bababazaar.com.

VSNL says it will get there. "We are soon going to be a complete ISP, like AOL. Electronic commerce is going to be a reality in two months," Syngal told The Standard.

Osama Manzar, New Delhi
Actually, my first contribution to The Industry Standard, as per my records, was in early June 1998, to be precise, in the issue of June 1, 1998. And the topic at that time was that “VSNL wanted to be an AOL.” America Online was a big and successful Internet Service Provider in the USA, and back home in India, Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited was the sole ISP and was unable to meet the growing demands of the enthusiastic Internet users including those who wanted to use the Internet as a business platform and for e-commerce. The then chairperson B.K Synghal was the man in demand, who is no more now, having contributed enormously to the growth of Internet in India.

Interestingly in the mid 1998, the total Internet subscribers in India was merely 105,000, even after the public commencement of Internet availability since August 15, 1995, a time period of almost 3 years. As per the report above, we had about 16 applicants for ISPs who wanted to provide Internet services to the Indians including entities like Fujitsu, Microsoft, and usual suspects like AT&T and British Telecom. Compare those days with the current scenario when we have a claim of more than 1.10 billion mobile connections and just about 5 major ISP players, such as Reliance Jio, AirTel, Idea, BSNL and Vodafone.
Hyderabad declared that it is building a whole new city by the name of Cyberabad and named it Hi-Tech City (Hyderabad Information Technology Engineering Consultancy City) and provided space for all big multinational tech companies like IBM, Microsoft, Oracle, Motorola, Citicorp, et al.
India Plans for 2010 AD

The government of India has drawn up information technology plans to take the country into the next century.
Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee says the government seeks to "make India a global IT power and one of the world's largest generators and exporters of software in the next 10 years."

India's Department of Electronics (www.deo.gov.in) has prepared a blueprint called India IT Vision 2010 and has formed a 16-member National IT Task Force (www.deo.gov.in/~duef/force.htm) to implement it.

Says M.G.K. Menon, the task force's cochairman: "We are soon going to end the monopoly of the Department of Telecommunication and Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited. The government will announce a clear-cut policy on Net services in three months. The private sector is going to play a greater role in enabling the country."

If the IT Action Plan is fully implemented, India will receive everything from a national IT infrastructure with a high-speed Internet backbone to IT Institutes, a software development fund, IT at the school level, cyber laws, electronic commerce and software localization.

- Osama Manzar
It is interesting to note that the above news report that I had posted talks about the big promises made by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the then prime minister of India. We must remember that around Y2K (Year 2000), India was a leading software services country and had made its mark globally despite any role from the government. However, the above report that was published in The Industry Standard clearly shows that the Government of India wanted to make its presence felt in the growing IT industry and Internet driven business. The national IT Task Force that the government promised to have formed. I was also one of the members. We must also appreciate that the Department of Electronics, then, did create several funds and through CDAC made a significant mark in localisation efforts. What is even more critical to note from the cover page of the news magazine and the other news that appeared on the page where my report had a post, that led by the USA, the global internet market was advancing at a rapid speed. They were already making large deals, the internet was having a bull run and merger and acquisitions were already taking place.

I must mention that while The Industry Standard magazine emerged as a great success story to tell the stories of the Internet economy, the news weekly did not survive beyond 2001. The dot-com bust bankrupted the magazine and its print edition lasted only till 2001. I still have several copies of the magazine that run into more than 200 pages.
We must remember that around Y2K (Year 2000), India was a leading software services country and had made its mark globally despite any role from the government.
Love Letters Straight From the Web

For more than 8 million Indian expatriates around the globe, it's never been easier or cheaper to make contact with home. The Online Postal Service (homeindia.com/post) is a perfect hybridization of e-mail and snail mail; it's designed for Indian expatriates who want to get in touch with their friends and relatives in India.

A letter from a foreign country requires about 15 to 20 days to reach its recipient in India, and telephone calls are extremely expensive. Using Home India’s OPS, a letter gets delivered within about five days by the Indian Postal service, free of charge. You just have to go to the site, fill in your message and the addressee, and click the Send button. Home India receives more than 1,000 message each day and has delivered 50,000 letters since its inauguration in February.

Home India is a service of Mumbai-based Multinet Infosys run by Sanjay Mehta and Haresh Tibrewala. Tibrewala and Mehta hope to recover the service’s expense from user contributions, advertising on the Web site and sponsorships for delivering the mail in India. Both saw the need for a better way to contact home when they were studying in California.

—Osama Manzor, New Delhi
So, in 1998, writing letters to your connections was still not common through emails. One of the innovations then was to provide an opportunity to the Indian diaspora to send their messages for their dear ones through a website which was further converted into print and sent through snail mail. Pretty much a hybrid solution, what we call today as phygital solution. Sanjay Mehta and Harish Tibrewala were known in India as the pioneers who understood the online world well and tried their best to offer several online solutions to the emerging masses.

Interestingly, Online Postal Service (OPS) provided by Home India was meant for the then 8 million diaspora population receiving more than 1000 letters every day and snail mailed more than 50,000 letters in early 1998, a quarter of a century back from now. While writing this déjà vu experience, I looked at what India Post is up to in the digital era and found these fascinating and yet quite not there kind of stats: India Post has more than 159,392 post offices spread across India with 808 head post offices, 24,282 Sub Post Offices, 134,303 Branch post offices, and 428,773 Letter Boxes. There are 223,523 Smartphones claimed to be available among 154,697 ICT-enabled Post Offices. According to a report, on an average each post office serves about 8605 people and if located in rural geographies then it would be serving about 6301 people on an average, and an area of 21 square kilometers. India Post also boasts a network of more than 1000 ATMs and being a bank also offers more than 253 government entitlement schemes through Direct Benefit Transfer to the tune of more than Rs. 10,000 crore (100,000 million). However,
as per the dashboard at India Post website: India Post mobile app has been downloaded by more than 10.6 million people; has a fleet of more than 135,000 door-step banking service providers, enabled digital transaction worth more than Rs. 26,000 crores (260,000 million), and reached out to 60 million customers.

Following is another update that one can read about how much digitalisation affected our Indian Postal services, especially because it is claimed to have a huge network across rural India.

*I still remember how mesmerized I was that a digital invention was making an effort to go to the remotest parts of India to make those population of our rural India taste the joy of accessing computers, who did not have the internet or who may never have had a chance to see a computer.*
INDIA’S NOT-YET DIGITAL POSTMEN

OSAMA MANZAR

RESPOND TO THIS COLUMN AT
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Last month I read an interesting article about India’s postmen. It talked about the changing duties of postmen and the importance of post offices. By the end of the article I was thinking of a scenario where our close to 2 lakh post offices are connected to the Internet. I was excited.

I was compelled to find out what’s happening in the villages where Digital Empowerment Foundation works. I immediately opened a WhatsApp group and asked some of our ground staff to interview their local postman on camera.

For those who are not aware, a post office is not just a space where mail is received and despatched, it is also a public institution that acts as a bank. It facilitates money orders, allows people to open post office savings accounts, and provides people with access to various life insurance and other government schemes.

Over the next couple of weeks, we received 22 videos from Assam, Meghalaya, Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Rajasthan. A few things were common across all post offices. The kind of mail received or despatched had changed. Earlier, people exchanged a lot of letters with their loved ones; many of them had to be written by the postmen themselves. “Today, everyone has a mobile phone; they simply call,” is what a number of Gramin Dak Sevaks said. “There was a time when we felt tired just drafting letters for people and delivering them every day. Today, I’m delivering no more than 20 to 30 letters in a week,” Basant Lal, a 33-year-old postman told our ground staff in Barabanki, Uttar Pradesh. Most mail today comprises either letters or documents from the government or from educational institutions. “Delivery of Aadhaar and PAN cards is most common today. Almost nobody writes personal letters anymore,” he added.

While administrative responsibilities of post offices have increased with the increasing number of schemes and services offered, mobile phones have made things a little easier.

Munni Bai Soni, the 56-year-old postmaster in Deshawadi, Madhya Pradesh, said, “Sometimes, when we don’t have enough mail to deliver in a village or if a parcel is too big, we will call the recipient to tell them that they can collect it from the post office.”

The postman in Kachha panchayat of Madhya Pradesh, Dilip Kumar, feels unproductive work has reduced with increasing penetration of mobile phones. “A lot of people come to us anymore to seek information about government or insurance schemes. Young boys and girls are tech savvy, and quickly look up the details online.”

What about them? Can they also look up information immediately on the Internet? No. Out of the 22 post offices we spoke to, only four had a functional Internet connection. Most others have been “promised Internet soon”, but it’s been a couple of years since the promise was made. Among the staff at the 22 post offices, only three had smartphones. Of the three, one had no data pack because there is no internet connectivity in his village.

Naryan Prasad, a postman stationed in Assam, covers a radius of about 40-45km. He no longer needs to go around every day delivering mail and then come back to the post office to do the paper work. The department has given him a 4G-enabled smartphone that is synced to his computer. “Whatever I feed on my phone application is transferred to my computer automatically. All my deliveries are recorded instantly,” he says.

A postman in Ranchi is particularly happy with the Internet. It has made it easy for him to access government information and updates in real time, send information to the district office or report to the Department of Posts. There is no need to manually log entries. However, the post office in Tehran, Uttarakhand, is yet to reap the benefits of the Internet. The postmaster there is yet to learn how to use a computer.

India has the largest postal network in the world with over 154,882 post offices, of which 89.86% are in rural areas. While all of them are supposed to have an Internet connection (and are digitized by the end of the year), internet connectivity is non-functional at hundreds and thousands of post offices. The government-operated institution employs over 6 lakh people, and offers a range of mail and monetary exchange facilities. With such a wide network—each post office is meant to serve an area of about 20 square kilometers—it would be ideal for the post offices to have access to broadband Internet connectivity and functional mobile/digital literacy to not just carry out traditional services offered at a post office but transform into digitally-enabled entitlements offices.

This way, every post office will act as a government centre for the last mile, providing citizens with information on various government schemes and entitlements, and enabling access to the same by allowing download of relevant application forms for schemes, assisting rural communities in filling up the forms and submitting the forms online on behalf of the beneficiaries.

So can all postmasters be trained in functional digital literacy? Can all post offices become hubs of digital services such as printing, scanning and copying? Since the post offices are the last-mile access for most villages, it will save villagers the money and time that they would otherwise expend to travel to the nearest block to access these services.

As I write this column on World Post Day (9 October), I wonder if by the next World Post Day we would have more to celebrate about our post offices than just new stamps.

Osama Manzar is founder-director of Digital Empowerment Foundation and chair of Manthan and mBillionth awards. He is member, advisory board, at Alliance for Affordable Internet and has co-authored NetChakra—15 Years of Internet in India and Internet Economy of India. He tweets @osamanamzar.
In 2017, when this column was written based on the information collected from the field, many of the 90% Indian post offices based out of rural India, and their post(wo)men had started using the Internet and smartphones as communication tools for posting, receiving and exchanging messages, simplifying their work and travels.

And then there was another time in late 1998. Bangalore, which later became Bengaluru, and is popularly known as Silicon Valley of India, then recognised as the leader of the Indian tech industry, got a challenge from Hyderabad.

So, in 1998, writing letters to your connections was still not common through emails. One of the innovations then was to provide an opportunity to the Indian diaspora to send their messages for their dear ones through a website which was further converted into print and sent through snail mail.
Welcome to the Latest Techno-town

India’s newest high-tech city is, well, Hi-Tec City. Actually, Hi-Tec City is the name of the building, a huge round office complex currently under construction; the city is Hyderabad, the southern cosmopolis that calls itself Cyberabad and is challenging Bangalore as the center of the Indian technology industry. Hi-Tec City (www.cyberabad.com/info/ourcity/hi tec), which stands for Hyderabad Information Technology Engineering Consultancy City, has already leased space to Microsoft, IBM, Oracle, Baan, VSNL, D.E. Shaw, Boeing, Motorola, Citicorp and Satyam.

Besides lots of network piping and other amenities, the building offers its own miniature power plant. Hi-Tec City is, in the words of a promotional Web site (www.stph. net/hitec/index. html), “a techno township built like a computer: user friendly, upgradable.”

The state’s chief minister, Chandra Babu Naidu, a big supporter of tech industry development, is the force behind Hi-Tec City. “As we approach the next millennium, technology will determine the pace and content of our development. Information technology, therefore, is our mantra to leapfrog,” he says. —Osama Manzar, New Delhi
Hyderabad declared that it is building a whole new city by the name of Cyberabad and named it Hi-Tech City (Hyderabad Information Technology Engineering Consultancy City) and provided space for all big multinational tech companies like IBM, Microsoft, Oracle, Motorola, Citicorp, et al. We also know, much later many more companies joined to make Hyderabad as their main tech center, such as Facebook, Google, and so on. Almost 25 years down the line, Hyderabad is a different world which can be seen as the tricity of old Hyderabad, and then its new avatar of metropolis, and also its third identity of Cyberabad. The other cities which have gone through the tech or metamorphosis are Chennai, Mumbai, Noida, Gurugram, and Pune.

Next is a great example of tele-health happening in the late nineties.

*The whole effort was tried on a PSTN (Public Switched Telephone Network) line using ISDN (Integrated Services Digital Network) standards so that visuals, videos and audio could be shared. Sounds like a great idea and huge effort to do tele-health in the late nineties considering the whole connectivity infrastructure at that time was still dependent on PSTN lines as far as the customer side of connectivity is concerned.*
Going to Canada for a Second Opinion

The Web has enabled two doctors – one in India, the other in Canada – to exchange critical surgical information using standards-based computers, wireless connections and existing ISDN telephone lines.

Dr. K.R. Balakrishnan, head of cardio-thoracic and vascular surgery at Sri Ramachandra Medical College in Chennai, India, and Dr. Peter Einstein of Children’s Heart Project International at the Toronto Sick Children’s Hospital in Ontario have found the Net to be a great way to get a second opinion when you’re in a crunch.
Here are some posts that clearly give an idea of e-health or tele-health examples from the late 90s, tried and tested in India. It is interesting that the post I sent to The Industry Standard that got published in the issue of September 11, 1998 was about an effort that enabled a hospital in Chennai in India to connect with a hospital in Canada to share information and consultation over a surgical operation and get a second opinion. The whole effort was tried on a PSTN (Public Switched Telephone Network) line using ISDN (Integrated Services Digital Network) standards so that visuals, videos and audio could be shared. Sounds like a great idea and huge effort to do tele-health in the late nineties considering the whole connectivity infrastructure at that time was still dependent on PSTN lines as far as the customer side of connectivity is concerned. Let me do a little tech explanation that the ISDN line is nothing but a modem that uses or gets integrated into the telephone or PSTN line and sends and receives digital data. An ISDN line is not a DSL line. Considering that in the late nineties tech folks were trying tele-health in a restricted environment of bandwidth and digital infrastructure; however, even after 25 years of a long gap, tele-health is still not common. Only after Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a little push and demand for online doctors consultancy from remote areas. It is ironic that in the above less-than-200-word post from India, the doctor from Shri Ramachandra Medical College in Chennai clearly said that the ISDN line makes a lot of sense for remote areas and villages in rural parts including small towns for expert medical advice. Alas, that is still not common, however, it is believed that the bandwidth with 3G and 4G connections are hardly a problem.
Actually we should have said communication. But in the beginning of the advent of the Internet, we always treated every new service as technological innovation.
Indian Internet in late 90s

Rural India on $19.95 a Month

Technology can put you in touch with human suffering without taking you out of your air-conditioned cocoon. Now thanks to the Net, New Delhi-based Dakshinyan is pushing the limit of remote access with a program that promotes intercultural solidarity and an understanding of the myths and realities of Third World poverty.

Through its Development Education Program, the Indian nongovernmental organization gives outsiders an opportunity to come in close contact with rural India. Director Sidharth Sanjay has put information about the program at www.linkindia.com/dax; volunteers can fill in a form online. Once they arrive in India, they’ll pay about $5 a day to cover costs. The Web site has made it easier for volunteers to get information about the program.

Terrestrial correspondence was cutting deep into Dakshinayan’s pockets, so the Net has turned out to be manna from heaven. The ease of e-mail has quadrupled the number of volunteers in just one year.

Sanjay has asked IBM to provide information kiosks at the village level. This would let local people generate content, so the rest of the world can know how this half lives.

— Osama Manzar, New Delhi
Actually we should have said communication. But in the beginning of the advent of the Internet, we always treated every new service as technological innovation. As you can see, there was this social or non-governmental organisation called Dakshinayan from Delhi who created a website to get anyone interested to know rural India, to apply and pay to experience the geographies, culture, food, language and people of rural India. For Dakshinayan, the motto was to bring in maximum number of people for the cultural exchange to expose rural India, and because of the availability of a web page, the interested people’s number increased four times, and so was Dakshinayan’s income, which they had fixed about USD20 for a month or USD5 per day. It is interesting to note that in 1998, the dollar to Indian rupee exchange rate was less than 40 rupees per dollar; however, after about 25 years, the exchange for a dollar is Rs. 83, more than double. In this post that got published in the weekly The Industry Standard in the week of October 5, 1998, my reason for filing this news was because the effort was linking rural India with mainstream economy and people. In the news, Dakshinayan is quoted saying that “they approached IBM to establish rural internet kiosks to generate local content for global interest, which is one of the reasons Digital Empowerment Foundation was established.”
It is interesting to note that in 1998, the dollar to Indian rupee exchange rate was less than 40 rupees per dollar; however, after about 25 years, the exchange for a dollar is Rs. 83, more than double.
Indian Internet in late 90s

Net Access Meets the Subcontinent

For the last two months, India’s one-and-only ISP, Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited (www.vsnl.net.in), has been turning away customers looking for new Internet accounts. According to VSNL sources, the ISP doesn’t have enough telephone lines to meet the subcontinent’s explosive demand for online services. Today VSNL has one phone line for every 15 customers. Complaints are mounting about the difficulty of logging on, let alone staying on for more than 15 minutes. At Internet World in Delhi this August, even former Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao criticized VSNL’s Internet services. Some observers blame the government-owned telco Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Limited, which they say has failed to provide phone lines for VSNL in a timely fashion. VSNL has applied for a separate exchange dedicated to the Internet, but MTNL has yet to act. The government announced last year that ISPs would be privatized. The citizens still wait. ~Osama Manzar, New Delhi
Let’s go back to late 1998, this is news from October. There was only one ISP (Internet Service Provider) and that too owned by the government, and Internet was possible only through a telephone line – the physical carrier of the world of data. Imagine a world where one telephone line had more than 15 Internet subscribers, and no one could last more than 15 minutes online because of low bandwidth, high demand, and erratic stability – perhaps because most of the telephone lines were copper lines. People were in queue and demanding the Internet and there was no one to serve them. Even the then prime minister criticized the situation. Internet was not opened up, connectivity was yet to be liberalised. 27 years down the line, Internet has been liberalized, with the PM WANI, it is so open that anyone can buy Internet and any one can sell Internet, even a tea shop or an individual. Besides, technologically, we do not need a telephone line to carry the Internet or data. Life has moved from a copper line, to optic fiber to WiFi and lately reaching to a situation of “can i have a right to disconnect?”

However, the first one to take the Internet to wider areas was the government entity itself – the MTNL (Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Limited). They announced the opening of “Cyber Dhabas”. Which also means that the Internet was made to be available in a public space and for ordinary people.
Easy Access for Small Businesses

ow 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 chaba,” a Hindi word for a poor man’s roadside eating joint.

At IIIT World Comexa India ’98 in early December, Mahanagar Telephone Nigam, a government-owned telephone service provider, announced its intention to launch 20 cyber chabas in Delhi and Mumbai. Cyber chabas 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

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By early 1999, with the mounting pressure from the aspiring Internet users, the Indian government loosened the restrictions on being the sole ISP. However, the first one to take the Internet to wider areas was the government entity itself - the MTNL (Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Limited). They announced the opening of “Cyber Dhabas”. Which also means that the Internet was made to be available in a public space and for ordinary people. We all know the journey of the Internet - it started with being available to telephone line users, to expanding the same to the public in a few places and create a trend of kiosks using the spread of Internet, and then, even cyber dhaba or cyber cafe became quite a trend, at least in smaller cities and towns. Gradually, Internet provision became competitive, hundreds of ISPs joined the bandwagon and started offering Internet like peanuts. The whole meaning of public access points started changing and all kinds of cafés, hotels, and restaurants started becoming free to access the Internet.

Yet rural India continued to be a huge challenge for even big ISPs to spread and expand. Because the cost of infrastructure for the internet in rural and remote areas could not promise enough volumes. One can read the logic of ARPU to understand how telcos calculate their justification for where they should provide internet profitably.

Interestingly, for the claimed connected communities in India, that is for more than 700 million internet users, the issue is always whether their internet is meaningful or not: can they
download everything comfortably; can they do transactions; can they watch videos; can they consume streaming content; can they do video conferencing; can they do online banking and e-commerce?

On the other hand for the rest of 600 million Indians, either they do not have internet or they have meaningless internet. This population suffers complete unconnectedness. In the meanwhile, the story and importance of ISP as an internet service provider was totally democratized in late 2020, when the Prime Minister of India announced PM-WANI. In essence the PM-WANI enabled the quashing of the licensing regime of ISP, and also liberalized the Internet to be bought and sold by anyone.

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However, in India, it seems, whatever Kerala does today, India does 25 years later. As per my report from mid-1999, Kerala already planned to connect all Panchayat through Internet, something that DoT planned under BharatNet and not accomplished even after 27 years of the advent of Internet in India.
Here Comes the Smart State

Kerala, India’s only fully literate state, plans to become the subcontinent’s first “intelligent” state within 1,000 days.

It plans to provide connectivity to all 991 village panchayats (administrative levels). Videoconferencing will soon be in place between many state and local districts. Also ahead is the task of monitoring 50,000 projects involving $3.5 billion. State Secretary Amitabh Kant says, “These projects are being implemented by local bodies comprising 14,000 elected representatives, over 50,000 employees and 100,000 resource persons.”

Kerala has begun to place Internet kiosks in villages, and has signed a preliminary agreement with World Tel to set up Internet community centers. This year, the Net may be introduced in 150 schools, while computers will reach 750 high schools and 500 primary schools. The Kerala State Electronics Development Corp. is even planning a “PC for Every Home,” hoping to achieve a penetration rate of 10 PCs per 1,000 people by 2001. That would equal one in every home only if each home had 100 people, but hey, it’s progress.

— Osama Manzar, New Delhi
In most of the global development and progress, India is no less than 25-50 years behind. However, in India, it seems, whatever Kerala does today, India does 25 years later. As per my report from mid-1999, Kerala already planned to connect all Panchayat through Internet, something that DoT planned under BharatNet and not accomplished even after 27 years of the advent of Internet in India. It is astonishing that Kerala wanted to involve all its Panchayat and its elected members in 1999 to get connected, linking the last person in the village. It also wanted to allocate and plan enough budget to have personal computers in each household, and Internet kiosks in all Kerala villages including primary and government schools to have computer labs. Kerala is known for its visionary approach to development, and even legislating something that would take them to the next level. Kerala, is the only state in India where “Access to Internet is a basic right, says Kerala High Court.”

In April 1999, it was big news and a service that a hospital launched and offered connecting patients to her relatives and friends through video and messaging. One of the first to adopt an internet and digital communication tool in the health sector here was Wockhardt Hospital and Heart Institute in Bangalore.
Indian Internet in late 90s

Watch Your Relatives Write

It’s bad enough to be stuck in a hospital bed. But now your relatives can see how much dignity you’ve lost without even having to visit.

This innovation comes courtesy of the staff of Wockhardt Hospital and Heart Institute in Bangalore, India. The hospital has recently started a free service in which hospital workers fit a Web camera onto a laptop to capture video of patients. The hospital’s IT personnel then compress the files and upload them to the hospital’s site (www.whi.com).

The site also provides updated medical reports. Family members can check the status of a relative recovering from surgery and then write get-well messages or e-cards to the patient. Judging by the number of applicants, the service is just what the doctor ordered. Since launching April 26, the hospital has received more than 70,000 entries.

– Osmania Manzur, New Delhi
In April 1999, it was big news and a service that a hospital launched and offered connecting patients to her relatives and friends through video and messaging. One of the first to adopt an internet and digital communication tool in the health sector here was Wockhardt Hospital and Heart Institute in Bangalore. Most of the uploading of the video of the patient and receiving feedback and relatives messages were received through their website at WHHI.com, not really a real time service but certainly internet and web enabled service. When I was reporting about this news to The Industry Standard, there was an immediate acceptance by the magazine sitting in the USA, that such digital development was worth a news that the digital world would be interested in knowing. After 27 years, I have no idea if this kind of service is even required or asked for, considering that mobile based connectivity and mobile based photo and video capturing is so insanely common that we know everything about our patients in any hospital in India.

However, what is more interesting is why the video enabled services like real time video conferencing, or video based doctors consultations are not made available across our villages, and unreachable geographies where most of the public health centers are dysfunctional and no doctors want to visit remote locations to provide health services. At the end of the day, technology is not about its own innovativeness but how the planners and policy makers use them to benefit their subjects.

As it can be noted from the covers of the magazine that
globally, and especially in the United States, the trend of Internet was already captured by the imagination of financial services, online trading, and the race of major sectors getting online, such as travel agencies, financial services sector, telecom services into portalization, and annexing several other online services, online customer services and management, IPO launches of many dot-com companies, expansion of several companies in general and retail outlets to the internet, or read web, meteoric rise of jobs for software developers for online shopping. And interestingly, 27 years back, there was already an introduction of bot usage in online shopping. Of course, today, after more than two and a half decades later, bots and the role of bots and their menacing use is common across social media.

Intel was always a leader in making efforts to make digital literacy as common as possible. I remember, from my interaction with Intel in 2012, when I asked them what’s their interest in making digital literacy taking to masses, and they replied saying that “we need our children to be future job ready and in general people to be ready to use digital devices – which will in turn make their company benefit by employing them or by selling them devices.”
Indian Internet in late 90s

Indian Internet in late 90s

Cyber Bus to the Himalayas

Intel India has dispatched a Cyber Bus to 60 Himalayan villages. In collaboration with the National Science Centre in New Delhi, Intel’s bus, which contains six multimedia computers, will provide hands-on training for about 400 students in every village. Says Atul Vijayar, the director of Intel South Asia, "Project Vidyut, the country’s first computer-awareness program, seeks to make learning fun." Vidyut in Hindi means education.

Inside the Cyber Bus, children can learn about Indian culture and history, basic science, the solar system, the importance of water, the problems of deforestation and so forth. The commentaries are in English, but Intel feels that since many of the titles cover well-known Indian stories, village children will have little trouble understanding them.

According to Debanjali Ghosh, the education officer of Intel India, “It is very difficult to teach children subjects like health, hygiene, nutrition and history. Our objective is to make these subjects interesting so that the students can enjoy learning and can retain easily whatever they have learned.” Intel is working on local language software to make Project Vidyut more easily accessible.

— Osama Manzar, New Delhi
While America was exploring how to take entertainment online in the late nineties, a customized bus with computers traveling to Himalayan region for making computer and digital awareness was news as far as India was concerned. Intel was always a leader in making efforts to make digital literacy as common as possible. I remember, from my interaction with Intel in 2012, when I asked them what’s their interest in making digital literacy taking to masses, and they replied saying that “we need our children to be future job ready and in general people to be ready to use digital devices - which will in turn make their company benefit by employing them or by selling them devices.”

I still remember how mesmerized I was that a digital invention was making an effort to go to the remotest parts of India to make those population of our rural India taste the joy of accessing computers, who did not have the internet or who may never have had a chance to see a computer. We must note that Internet penetration in 1999 in India was still a meager 0.3% of its population – that was just about 3.1 million. Even today, after 28 years of the Internet in India, Himalayan regions are mostly unconnected, specially the remote locations like Ladakh.

Intel, who actually conceived this idea of sending a special vehicle called Cyber Bus with multimedia computers installed in the bus consisting of amazing content that would be accessible without internet, gradually also played a proactive and critical role in conceiving National Digital Literacy Mission for India. We at Digital Empowerment Foundation also got involved
with Intel and Nasscom to work with the Ministry of Communication and Informational Technology to have NDLM adopted by the government to have national level implementation of mass adoption of digital literacy. This was in 2012.

Gradually, in 1999 while i was writing for The Industry Standard posting small news from India, I also ended up developing digitalHT.com, on the lines of yahoo.com, a national portal for India under the aegis of the Hindustan Times where I was working and my daily job was to ensure that hindustan-times.com is functional, updated, healthy and responsive to its readers online. DigitalHT.com immediately got the attention of investors who were looking for an opportunity to play big in dotcom books, and Chase Capital approached HT, and invested around 9 million dollars in the proposed new entity for 49 percent stake. Hindustan Times went for the deal and started looking for a new CEO for the new entity, and I left Hindustan Times to try a new startup with a techie partner and founded 4CPlus.com, the company that would provide CMS and web solutions to the publishing industry.

Further story in the next time soon...
About the Author & this publication

Osama Manzar is a senior Ashoka Fellow, a British Chevening Scholar, India Visitors Leadership Program Fellow of US State Department, and co-founded Digital Empowerment Foundation in 2002 which has digitally empowered more than 30 million people in 20 years. He started as a career journalist in IT magazines, has written extensively on digital development, including more than 500 pieces as a columnist in LiveMint for 10 years. He also has to his credit to have travelled to more than 10,000 villages.

In this narrative Osama Manzar brings out how the Internet was taking shape in India during the 90s, through his earlier writings for the weekly newsmagazine, The Industry Standard of Silicon Valley, and co-relating to the current times of Internet, India and global integration.