THE CONTRIBUTION OF WIKIPEDIA TO GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract: Wikipedia, the free internet resource, created in 2001, has rapidly grown into one of the largest reference websites that attracts nearly 440 million visitors monthly. Its open system, where anyone, the world over, can contribute to or edit its existing content has been both praised and critiqued. Much has been said about its free dissemination of information and about its role in student related course and research work. However, its role in globalization has neither been examined nor appreciated. This paper will focus on examining how the Wikipedia is contributing to the processes of globalization by making available to the world, knowledge of cultures, philosophies, literatures, art and architecture of those parts of the world that may or may not find adequate representation in other encyclopaedias. Additionally, its role in promoting cultural and linguistic diversity, through its multi-lingual set-up, will also be examined with special reference to India.

Jimmy Wales, the founder of Wikipedia, says that he “got funny looks” when he first floated the idea that volunteers from across the world could come together and create a free pool of knowledge that could be shared by users across the world. He contemplated an internet resource that would have no particular agenda, no advertisements, would be ever growing and expanding and would “bring the sum of human knowledge to every single person on the planet, free, in their own language” (as cited in Adams, 2007). With this vision in mind, in 2001 he created Wikipedia. This free internet resource has rapidly grown into one of the largest reference websites that attracts nearly 440 million unique visitors a month - fifth most in the world (Trotta, 2011). “It already has a range 20 times greater than the entire 17 volumes of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, and it is growing at a rate of 1,700 articles a day. At peak times the site has around 15,000 hits every second” (Adams, 2007). A number of points need to be noted in the vision statement of the man who created this resource and because of which Wikipedia is serving as a great resource in aiding the processes of globalization. First, its open system, where anyone, the world over, can contribute to, or edit its existing content, is what makes it unique and truly global in nature. Second, the fact that it does not make distinctions of any kind towards its contributors based on race, colour, gender, ethnicity, education or national identity makes it truly inclusive. Third, the fact that information about any part of the world - its history, geography, flora, fauna, literature, people, philosophy, language, culture, art, craft, architecture etc. can be included, can help break the hegemony of the developed world over what or who is to be considered important or unimportant. Fourth, its ever-expanding knowledge base is in tune with the evolving human knowledge, the world over.

However, for a proper and correct usage of Wikipedia it is important to understand its biases. Any reference work is to some extent biased. The American encyclopaedia would be more American centric in giving information about its own people, places, culture etc. and the Britannica would concentrate more on British or European matters. Wikipedia does not have that kind of a bias as it gets contributions from around the world but its biases are those of its individual contributors. The important thing is to be aware of the bias. However, “the fact that wiki articles are continually edited and improved leads to creating a knowledge base of quality information over time, and in general this results in an upward trend of quality and a growing consensus over a fair balanced representation of information” (“Wikipedia: Researching with Wikipedia,” n. d.). Over time, unauthenticated statements tend to get expunged by more knowledgeable editors who give appropriate citations. Wikipedia does not claim itself to be a research resource but it is a great resource for providing basic information not easily available elsewhere and also a great resource to take anyone forward on their research or other interests as it provides links to other resources, books and journal articles on the subject.

Many people find it a drawback that Wikipedia is not written by experts. In my view, that is its greatest strength, as its democratic setup provides space to any individual to include what he/she
considers important. The added advantage is that these contributors puts forth the expositions in simple language which makes it easy for the layman to comprehend complicated philosophies, concepts and ideas: “Content stays close to the user because it is written or translated by the very people who consume the content” (Patrick in Trotta, 2011). Wikipedia pioneered the idea of hyperlinking keywords throughout its articles to whatever Wikipedia page exists on the topic of that keyword. This is a great user-friendly concept that assists the common reader to immediately navigate to the keyword and understand better the original article. On the role of collaboration, Wikipedia philosophy is to let people do good and in support of his argument Jimmy Wales says that “we don’t put people in cages in restaurants because they will be using knives” (Wales, n.d.). The role of Wikipedia in disseminating knowledge about the world is particularly important when seen in relation to world history. Colonialism created a picture of the non-western world as uncivilised, irrational, undisciplined, and inferior. In his study Orientalism (1978), Edward Said states that the construction of the orient in Western culture is “based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between ‘the Orient’ and . . . ‘the Occident’” (p. 2). This results in stereotyping of the Oriental (or “Others”), reinforces prejudice against non-western cultures and allows the West to achieve a “positional superiority” (p. 7). He also states that “Eastern sects, philosophies, and wisdoms” have been “domesticated for local European use” (p. 4). Thus, in spite of the end of colonial rule, the idea of the superiority of western world which calls itself developed and negates the other as underdeveloped on the basis of its own set of values, without debating whether these are good or bad, still prevails and is difficult to get rid of. Influenced by western thinking peoples of the so-called “Orient” are losing touch with their own cultural heritage, as they think it is “inferior”. Consequently, the rich cultural heritage of the non-western world is in danger of extinction. In this context, Wikipedia’s role assumes great importance. Since Wikipedia contributors and editors come from “all around the world, the relative lack of non-Western topics found in many Western publications is significantly less noticeable on Wikipedia” (“Wikipedia: Researching with Wikipedia,” n.d.). Through Wikipedia articles from across the globe, knowledge about eastern philosophy, philosophers, traditions, folklore, languages, ancient and sacred books is available, free of cost, not only to indigenous peoples but also to the western world, which can enrich itself through acquiring greater knowledge about different cultures prevailing in the world and rethink its notions about these cultures. The UN symposium on “Linguistic Rights in the World: the Current Situation” Geneva 2008 linked human rights to linguistic rights and asserted that “the human right to equality must . . . include the right to linguistic equality” and that the “right to freedom includes the right to linguistic freedom.” The UN Symposium 2008 also emphasised the need to promote and develop minority languages and make them the medium of instruction to prevent loss of languages and cultures and to maintain linguistic diversity. The loss of a language, even a local dialect, means the extinction of a whole culture – its knowledge, ways of thinking and understanding. Loss of languages entails loss of traditional knowledge that can be helpful to humankind (see Nettle & Romaine 2000; Crystal 2000, 2004; Maffi 2001). Now, if an encyclopaedia is available only in English, its accessibility becomes limited to an English knowing audience, the topics selected and views expressed are generally also of those who know English. Wikipedia by being made available in a number of languages has increased true participation globally and is encouraging and providing opportunities to writers and readers to acquire and disseminate knowledge in their own mother tongue. Thus, it is contributing, in a big way, to increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in the world. The home page of Wikipedia is dominated by language links; the languages that support the largest number of articles are most prominent. “Wikipedia uses unicode as the default web page encoding so that all languages may be displayed in their native script - essential to improving usability.”(Yunker, 2006) Wikipedia at present is available in more than 280 languages and bars no language for inclusion in its set-up. The Wikipedia currently contains more than 100,000 articles each in English, German and French; more than 100,000 articles in Italian, Polish Spanish, Japanese, Russian, Dutch, Portuguese, Swedish, Chinese, Catalan, Norwegian, Ukrainian, Finnish, Vietnamese, Czech, Hungarian, Turkish, Indonesian, Korean, Romanian, Persian, Danish, Arabic, Esperanto, Serbian, Lithuanian, Slovak, Malay, Hebrew, Volapük, Bulgarian, Slovenian, Waray-Waray, Basque; more than 10,000+ articles in Croatian, Hindi, Estonian, Galician, Simple English, Newar / Nepal Bhasa, Thai, Norwegian, Azerbaijani, Greek, Aromanian, Latin, Haitian, Tagalog, Georgian, Telugu,
Macedonian, Cebuano, Neapolitan, Serbo-Croatian, Piedmontese, Breton, Belarusian, Latvian, Marathi, Javanese, Luxembourgish, Tamil, Albanian, Welsh, Icelandic, Bosnian, Belarusian, Occitan, Aragonese, Bishnupriya, Manipuri, Bengali, Ido, Swahili, Kazakh, Lombard, West Frisian, Gujarati, Malayalam, Afrikaans, Low Saxon, Urdu, Sicilian, Quechua, Malagasy, Kurdish, Cantonese, Sundanese, Asturian, Nepali, Armenian, Yoruba, Samogitian, Western Panjabi, Irish, Chuvash, Walloon, Kannada, Amharic; more than 1,000+ articles in Alemannic, Tajik, Venetian, Tarantino, Yiddish, Maori and another 100 languages; 100+ articles in 60 languages; 10+ articles in 6 languages and 1+ articles in 5 languages (List of Wikipedias, 2011). Another important feature of the Wikipedia is the Wikipedia Translation service. Not merely can people contribute to Wikipedia in their own language but also translate articles from other languages and also request translations. The aim of Wikipedia is to make available the maximum number of articles in as many languages as possible, especially small languages. Each week, starting on Monday, a stub or the first paragraph of an important article is chosen to be translated into as many languages as possible. There is also a proposed list of articles all languages should have.

In an interview, Brad Patrick, the interim executive director and general counsel for Wikipedia answered some questions on how Wikipedia works and where it is headed. Speaking about the non-English Wikipedias he states that these are hybrids consisting of original and translated content, depending on the people’s interests. It is for this reason that different degrees of content are available in different language encyclopaedias. Giving the example of the polish Wikipedia, he states that it “features a great deal of original content because of a group of dedicated contributors” (Patrick, 2006). Presently roughly 60% of the Wikipedia traffic is directed toward English-language content, but the good news is that as other language encyclopaedias are generating more content, this figure is falling. Wikipedia is making a tremendous contribution to the preservation of intangible heritage by promoting linguistic diversity. Its founder Jimmy Wales on a visit to India said, “Statistics show that only 5% to 10% of India’s literate are able to use English effectively. So there is a huge body of people for whom their mother tongue is the only way for them to learn and expand their horizons. The same thing is happening all around the world. In the UK, Welsh is endangered because everyone there speaks English. So the Welsh Wikipedia is a place where people write joyfully in their mother tongue. I think this is wonderful (Wales, 2011).”

The year 2011 is an important year for Wikipedia as it marks its 10th anniversary and as a part of its anniversary celebrations Wikipedia is organizing 316 events across 104 countries and 60 of these events are planned for India (Trotta, 2011). In mid-January this year the India chapter of Wikimedia (www.wikimedia.in), the non-profit organization behind Wikipedia, was launched. This is also Wikimedia’s first overseas office. India is presently the fourth-largest country in terms of Internet users with about 80 million users, its user base is projected to touch 150 million in the next five years, and by 2013, it will have the third largest internet user base — preceded only by China and the US. India also has a very vibrant Wiki community. At present, Wikipedia is the fourth most popular website in India with over 20 functional Indic Wikipedias and 20 more in incubation. Srikanth, an active Wikipedia user states that the focus in 2011 “will be to increase content in Indian languages,” and “extend our reach to Tier 2 and 3 cities” as most users at present are concentrated in the metros,”(Raj, 2011).1 Wikipedia volunteer groups work religiously to promote information in Indian languages for Wikipedia readers. Wikipedia is available in all the official languages of India in the country barring Dongri. The various Indian languages in which Wikipedia volunteers are actively working are Tamil, Marathi, Telugu etc. Currently, Wikipedia in Marathi has more than 28,000 articles; the Tamil Wikipedia, set up in 2003, features more than 25,000 articles and gets more than 80,000 hits every day; the Malayalam Wikipedia features about 10,000 articles. Barry Newstead, the Wikimedia Foundation Chief Global Development Officer says “the aim of the Foundation is to focus on more local content in top 10 languages” of India. (Press Trust of India, 2010).

Wikipedia is making its presence felt across the length and breadth of India in the local languages. Many traditional games of Kerala are dying due to the craze for games like cricket and football. The Malayalam Wikipedia editor and technical writer Shiju Alex, along with other editors has undertaken

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the formidable task of “documenting the unique games endemic to various villages across the state. While one volunteer writes down the rules, another travels to the respective village for pictures. Fifty games have been documented on the site so far” (Raj, 2011). For documenting games that are no longer played, the volunteers “depend on oral descriptions from village seniors” (Raj, 2011). This documentation and its availability to the world is indeed a noteworthy contribution to preserving world heritage by Wikipedia. Preservation of intangible heritage is directly linked to language. Music, dance, songs, poetry, stories and oral traditions of a particular language remain alive only as long as there are speakers of the language and in case some languages are dying, there is a need to revive the language as also to preserve its intangible cultural traditions. Wikipedia is contributing even in this direction. Kundan Amitabh, living in Navi Mumbai spends about two hours every day updating the page he set up six months ago to preserve the rich oral history of the Angika dialect of Bihar. “He regularly transcribes poetry and folk tales from this Bihari dialect in Devnagari script, to be saved on en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angika_literature” (Raj, 2011). Amitabh believes that in the digital generation age if Angika is to survive, it must have a Web presence. Amitabh’s Angika project presently has three other active editors, including one each from Australia and Nepal. Thus the Angika project has brought speakers from around the world together on one platform. However, Amitabh is not satisfied with just documenting the rich literary heritage but wishes to go a step further and he next plans to tour schools in Jharkhand where students still study in Angika and teach the youngsters to access the information he has uploaded so that they can keep the knowledge and traditions alive. Wikipedia has sub-sites in 20 Indian languages, including Tulu, Kutchi, Bhojpuri, Sindhi. There is also a wiki sub site in Pali, a language that has no native speakers left, but whose rich body of literature can be accessed through this site. These examples are just a small sample of the ways in which Wikipedia is helping preserve ancient knowledge and languages that are threatened. Many such projects can be and are being taken up by Wikipedians, not only in India but in other parts of the world as well. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (2000, pp.291-365) discusses at length Linguistic genocide. She believes that languages are not dying a natural death, but are being deliberately killed, as a result of educational policies, neglect of education in the mother tongue and forced learning of dominant language/languages. She says that educational language rights are not merely vital but the most important linguistic human rights for the maintenance of linguistic and cultural diversity on our planet and the development of languages. And across India “a 10-year old online encyclopedia is changing the way Indians process, access and store information. And the movement is being led not just by techies and academics but by students, professionals and homemakers across the rural-urban divide” (Raj, 2011). Wikipedia is a great hit with vernacular-medium government schools in India because the major setback for vernacular-medium schools is lack of availability of educational resources and learning material in their own language but Wikipedia is assisting in bridging this gap and promoting mother-tongue education. Recently in Kerala, India, a wiki CD, the first in a non-Latin script containing 500 articles in Malayalam was given to 60,000 teachers across the state as reference material as the schools are well-equipped with computers but have poor internet connectivity. Then in June 2010, to encourage local language content, the Tamil Nadu government organized an essay-writing contest where college students were asked to write articles for the Tamil Wikipedia sub-site. Selected 1,200 entries are currently being uploaded. Additionally, the Tamil Nadu government’s generous act of “donating a CD, its own online glossary of 1.5 lakh Tamil words to the Tamil Wiki medians has resulted in placing the Tamil Wiktionary among the world’s top ten, in terms of number of words” (Raj, 2011).

Wikipedia, the Red Cross of knowledge and learning, has indeed made possible through its portal, the idea of a true democracy of knowledge that is free, all inclusive, non discriminatory, multi-lingual and multi-cultural. Wales is not sure how big Wikipedia can become, and in response to a question whether he worried and felt that he had created a monster he laughed wildly and said that “if so it is quite a benign one - a big friendly giant” (Adams, 2007). Who would not agree with him?

NOTES
I am indebted to Radhika Raj’s article “Behind the Scenes at Wikipedia.in” in *The Hindustan Times* 13 Feb, 2011 about the work being done in the various Indian Languages Encyclopedias.

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