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Experts chart future of Indian fonts

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Your mother tongue has a brighter future. More than three dozen members of the Indic Computing Consortium (ICC) converged at Bangalore this weekend for a hands-on workshop on how to design, develop, and deploy Indian language fonts and technologies on computers. India's leading font designers and typography experts, software specialists, and language encoding gurus delved deeper into the intricate art and complex technology of Indian font design and standards.

Ironically, hundreds of people and organisations have been working independently since a decade and a half, and have thus created several conflicting standards and incompatible technologies, according to U.B. Pavanaja, a leading Indian font and language technologist. "This has created an identity crisis and an almost catastrophic situation for Indian language fonts", says G. Karunakar, project manager of IndLinux and an active ICC member.

The problem even spills into the Indic diaspora, as eminent speakers such as Mustafa Jabbar from Bangladesh shared how Bangla fonts and keyboard standards are following a chequered path due to the lack of an overall standard.

Apprehensive about foreign companies such as Microsoft owning fonts and underlying technologies to Indian languages, Nagarjuna G. from the Homi Bhabha Centre for Science Education and his team of volunteers are creating and even demonstrated an alternative, free, and freedom-based Devnagri font. M. Arun is developing a Malayalam-based operating system, that runs on a distribution of GnuLinux called Knoppix.

But the real issue is exciting Indian designers developers to create and develop thousands of fonts and technologies for India. According to Vijay Pratap Singh Aditya from Ekgaon Technologies, moving into regional language development is both the immediate goal and the ultimate challenge. Says Aditya, "India has 18 officially recognised languages, and more than 1,000 languages. Every year a language in the world dies. The onslaught of sweeping computer technology could further accelerate the demise of Indian languages. We are harnessing the same technologies to safeguard and revitalise Indian languages through regional workshops held across India. ICC will conduct training programmes and technology demos at these workshops. We need and invite volunteers to further take up these workshops."