

Transcript: “Low-tech meets AI: Scaling information access for the Blind in India”

Pathways to Zero Barriers Episode 4, Season 3

Introduction

Prashant Ranjan Verma (00:00)

The risk of digital divide is really real and people who will not be able to participate will be really left behind in this digital world. So we need to create or promote services like Shravan to ensure that people without digital literacy or without resources can also benefit from this digital world.

Judith Hermetter (00:23)

Welcome to Pathways to Zero Barriers. In some parts of the world, access to information must remain entirely low-tech for the user. In today's episode, we'll be looking into how behind the scenes, high-tech innovations are powering accessible tools. That's how blind and low-vision communities across India reach a world of information simply by placing a regular phone call.

Tom Butcher (00:57)

Hello, my name is Tom Butcher with the Zero Project, and it's a delight to be able to welcome you to our third season of Pathways to Zero Barriers Podcasts. This season, we'll be focusing on assistive technology innovation around the world. I'm very happy to be here today with Prashant Ranjan Verma. Prashant is an accessibility specialist, innovator, and disability inclusion professional with over twenty-five years of experience in assistive technology and digital accessibility. And in addition, amongst other things, he's general secretary of India's National Association for the Blind. Prashant, welcome. Great to have you with us. How are you doing?

Prashant Ranjan Verma (01:47)

Yeah, thank you very much, Tom. I'm doing fine. Thanks for this inviting me, giving this opportunity.

Tom Butcher (01:52)

Prashant, before we dive into our conversation, perhaps you could tell us a little bit more about yourself, how you got to what you're doing and where you are now. I know that saying that you're a professional for 25 years and general secretary of NAB is just a tiny bit of what you're doing. So if you could tell us a little bit more about yourself, and then after that, I'll go straight into the first question for you. So far away, how did you get to where you are?

Prashant Ranjan Verma (02:24)

Actually, should not have been where I am actually at all. This is just this happened, you can say accidentally.

Till 19 years of age, I had good eyesight and I was studying for chartered accountancy. If everything would have been the way the way we had planned, I would have been a chartered accountant and doing something else totally. But then suddenly, one day due to a very rare and very serious kind of a fungal infection, and I had difficulty in seeing. And despite good treatment, treatment in best hospitals, I lost complete eyesight in one eye and in the other eye, I now have about 20 % eyesight. So that time was obviously very difficult for me and my family. And unfortunately, due to lack of awareness among us, everybody around me, we thought that if I cannot read any printed, material with my eyes, I cannot do anything. I cannot continue my education. I won't be able to do any work. That kind of, unfortunately, thinking we had and nobody around us, the doctors or anybody guided us that there are some other ways to read, write, do something. So I stayed in home actually for six years doing nothing, just wondering. Yeah, just wondering what to do and parents all the time worried what will happen to me after them and so on. So very valuable, important time in my life when I should have studied further and got settled. So that I almost wasted.

Then accidentally I landed at this NGO, National Association for the Blind. Actually, what happened was that as four or five years passed by, I then started thinking that there must be more people in my condition in the world and somebody must be doing something for them. So, I made some queries here and there over phone and something like that. And then finally, I pushed my parents to come with me to this NGO. When we came to that NGO, then everything changed immediately. So, we saw that the blind children are like students, they are getting in classes, they are happy. Even a blind person is the director of the school. And they gave me confidence, they gave me very good counselling that they suggested I learn the use of screen readers so that I can regain my reading, writing ability. And then they said, you can do everything. So I did that.

I'd worked hard at it. I really liked it so much so that considering my dedication, my passion for it, I got a job in the same organization as a trainer, as a teacher. So since then, I have remained in this field.

I saw that technology changed my life. So I really wanted to give others the benefit of this technology. So I have remained in this field. And fortunately, I got many, more opportunities, particularly at international level. So I started working as trainer for the International Daisy Consortium. And I have been visiting more than 50 countries, providing training to produce books in accessible formats to different NGOs, libraries, publishers, and then focusing also on accessibility of digital information and so on. So this is my journey in short.

Tom Butcher (06:13)

So this is this is what got you to where you are now.

Prashant Ranjan Verma (06:17)

And yes.

Tom Butcher (06:18)

Okay, so Shravan. Tell us about it. Tell us also about what's so innovative about it and what problem it solves and how. Because you haven't mentioned it yet, but maybe it's rather like a jack in a box. You're keeping the surprise.

Prashant Ranjan Verma (06:39)

Yes, so the Shravan is an AI powered telephone based digital library. So it's free to use for anyone in India. People just need to dial a phone number as if they are making a regular phone call. They don't need internet. They don't need a smartphone, any kind of phone, a landline phone, a in the future that keypad phone that people earlier had.

So from any kind of phone, people just need to make a phone call. And then Shravan opens the world of information for them. People can choose, select, and listen to books of different types. They can listen to news. They can get important information which is relevant to them many more. Lots of things people can access. So we are trying to make it easy for people to access information. They need not be, you can say, digitally literate as such. And it's OK if they cannot afford internet connection or buy a smartphone or a computer. Still, they will be able to get benefits of the latest advancement in the technology digital information will be open to them through Shravan.

Tom Butcher (08:10)

That's great. A couple of questions on Shravan then. First is how do you let people know that Shravan is out there?

Prashant Ranjan Verma (08:19)

It's being maintained by our NGO, National Association for the Blind. We have some channels like we have WhatsApp groups where thousands of visually impaired persons are members. So we regularly inform them. We put out posts in different social media. So we have been able to reach a good number of persons with disabilities.

But that is, we want to reach out to more. There is a very large population which can benefit from this. So I was very happy to join your podcast also because again, this will help in spreading information further. And we are trying to do whatever we can and we will actually be seeking help in this direction also to increase adoption of Shravan.

Tom Butcher (09:08)

Great. Yeah, because thinking about your story, it was six years without the knowledge that screen readers existed. So for you and the the users of Shravan, reducing that period or having no delay at all is of such importance for people's lives.

Prashant Ranjan Verma (09:32)

Yes, very much. Actually, the screen readers were invented like some something like 30, 40 years ago. Even in India, computer training for the blind started in the late 90s. I started using in the year 2000. But even now today, in 2026, when we start our computer training, when we get candidates, when we talk to them, we get to know that before coming to us, they were not aware of this.

And last, whatever age they have, they have not used it. They are not benefited from it. So one reason is lack of awareness. The other reason is lack of resources. So people from very weak economic conditions, they cannot afford to buy a computer or a smartphone. And some training is required to use a computer or a smartphone, particularly for a person with vision impairment.

And those training facilities are very few and far in between. So because of various factors, so they are not reading books, they are not in education. So through Shravan, we are trying to bridge the gap, it easy for them, take books and information to their doorstep, in their hands.

Tom Butcher (10:50)

Great, thanks so much. And then thinking about India, is Shravan available from Kerala through to Arunachal Pradesh?

Prashant Ranjan Verma (11:02)

Yes, Actually, one good thing that has happened in India and that is one of the reasons why I was able to finally launch Shravan. I actually wanted to launch Shravan many years ago. But then there was a situation where people had to pay quite a lot for telephone calls. From one state to another state, was even higher charge. Now, last many years, in India, the telecom situation is such that people have to pay monthly subscription and then all calls are free. No matter you make 100 phone calls, no matter you spend one hour on the phone call, it does not increase your monthly bill.

So, Shravan is taking advantage of that, based on this. Now, from any part of India, like from south of India to east of India, for everyone, is just the same phone call with no extra charge. No matter if they listen to the book for half an hour or one hour or listen every day, it doesn't matter. So, that's big thing, the benefit we have.

Tom Butcher (12:14)

That's great. Yes, because I can remember as a small boy my father going absolutely mad with us making long distance calls and kind of coming in and tapping his foot, you know, you are spending too much money. And it was incredibly expensive.

Prashant Ranjan Verma (12:34)

It is.

Tom Butcher (12:35)

And I'm so old that I actually remember having to ring the operator. To ask him to place a long distance call. But you know, those days are long gone. So, I mean, that landscape has changed. Let's look at the landscape for this type of innovation.

What would you say the current market and landscape was for what you're doing? Do you have peers? Do you have competitors? Are there people arriving on the scene newly? Do people just drop out because they find it too difficult to make a go of their innovations? What does it look like out there?

Prashant Ranjan Verma (13:25)

Yes, so actually all my work, international work through Daisy Consortium and in India, it is based on the fact that only a very small percentage of the published information is available in formats that people with print disabilities can access. So in some countries we say that maybe maximum 5 % of all the books and newspapers and magazines are in Braille or audio or some digital format which a person with disability can access. that situation still remains. And then these small 5 % books which are in accessible format, to access them, again people have to use certain assistive technology, certain specific platforms. Like in India, I'm also part of the Sugamya Pustakalaya, an online library through which people can access books, again throughout the country in digital formats. But people need to have a computer or a smartphone with an app and a screen reader, of course, if they are blind to use any book.

The International Bookshare also operates in India, again provides lots of books. But the medium is that people need to have internet connection, some assistive technology, and some digital device. So what we have just started, like Shravan, there is no other service of that type in India at this time. People try a little bit like you can say, you can call a number or a service and listen to something, maybe a podcast, but a book with navigation which allows you to navigate to next chapter, previous chapter, pause, resume, those kinds of all those facilities are not there. So Shravan is only one of its kind at this time here.

Tom Butcher (15:37)

Great. and that that kind of brings up a question, which is if you have a fragmented market out there, are you and this goes into our next question about trends, developments, and challenges. but before we go into that, a kind of precursive question is are you seeing different services providing different information? And access to different books and different information. I.e., you could have Shravan, which might have access to books A, B, C, and K, but another service might only have access to books Z, P, R, and Q. And therefore, if you're someone using these services, you're going to have to hop from one to the other in the same way also for news services. You know, someone can have Bloomberg, but they might not subscribe to the Financial Times. Are you seeing a kind of disintegration of the market like that as time goes on?

Prashant Ranjan Verma (16:50)

Well, is a reality in many parts of the world for sure and India also. Only in recent times, it has changed a little bit. So in India, actually, the focus is on education first, because that's the most important content that everybody wants, all the textbooks, school level and university level textbooks. And India, each state has its own set of textbooks and so many languages. So yes, so institutions, different institutions, different NGOs, they have converted books of their region in some accessible format and they are distributing locally, that kind of thing is still happening. To some extent, books have got aggregated in the online Sugamya Pustakalaya quite a lot of it now, thankfully. If people access it, then they can get those books. And in Shravan, a subset of what is there in Sugamya Pustakalaya, the same books, we have it. The trend, or at least from our side, we are trying to do some consolidation that all information is gathered, put at one place, and it's accessible through different modes. if somebody has a mobile app, they can access the same books. Through Shravan again, they can access the same books. Through a web browser also, they can access those books. If there is a Braille press, can get those books, print out in Braille, and distribute. So that is how we are trying to proceed, actually, here.

Tom Butcher (18:33)

Great. can you just explain to our listeners what Sugamya Pustakalaya actually is?

Prashant Ranjan Verma (18:40)

Yes. Sugamya Pustakalaya is an online library. Different accessible book producers in India, which are mostly institutions working for the blind, they can become members of Sugamya Pustakalaya and upload whatever books they have created in accessible formats. Accessible, I mean, books in international DAISY digital format or EPUB format or Braille BRF format more than 50, 60 institutions are uploading and all of them is getting added up in the Sugamya Pustakalaya catalog. Now, any person with print disability in India who have a certificate that they are print disabled can become members of Sugamya Pustakalaya. They get a login and password and they can download those books and read on their device, computer, smartphone.

Some ebook players also there now, hardware players. that is Sugamya Pustakalaya and Shravan. We are associated with both. So gradually we are trying to add the same content in Shravan. Our ultimate goal is to connect both databases. For that we need some technical developments. Then you will no need to kind of any duplication of books.

Tom Butcher (20:07)

Great, thanks so much. Now India is a country of many different languages. what languages is Shravan using at the moment?

Prashant Ranjan Verma (20:20)

So the interface, is an interactive voice response. So when people call from the other side, some voice prompts come, like for example, to listen to education books press one, to listen to news press five, those kinds of those instructions currently people can have either in English or Hindi. The actual textbooks and news - those are available in three languages for now, English, Hindi and Gujarati. Yeah, for now these three and yeah, we want to add more languages of course.

Tom Butcher (21:01)

Great, I'll come back to that later on. So at last, current trends, developments, and particularly challenges. Let's address challenges first. What have you found to be some of the biggest challenges? And since you're involved in developing Shravan further, what do you envisage to be challenges that you're going to have to face in the future?

Prashant Ranjan Verma (21:30)

So in countries like India and many other Asian and African countries, unfortunately, persons with disabilities are not in a position to pay for the different services. So for developing Shravan for maintaining whatever expenses are involved, we are having to seek some grants from different agencies. which is like...difficult to get on a sustainable basis. So that is one big challenge we have, that we want to add more features, add more content.

But for that, we need money, and we cannot really take it from users. cannot make it have a subscription and hope that people will be able to pay for the services they get. So this is one big challenge. This is probably the only major big challenge.

Otherwise, technical capacity, people who can do the coding, the programming, those are the things we fortunately have.

And the second thing is we need to spread information about the availability of Shravan to all states and going down to villages. The senior citizen community, for that again, I mean, like we need to find some ways. We cannot run ads as such on television or anything. We have to get connected with more institutions. We have to increase visibility on digital platforms. So these are the two primary channels.

Tom Butcher (23:14)

Great. And then looking at kind of current trends, we've talked about peer groups, competitors. What has been the trend? Or it maybe there aren't any, but if the kind of way that this market is moving, would you say that the developments are in the right direction? Or are you seeing things that you think, no, we're gonna have to avoid that?

Prashant Ranjan Verma (23:41)

So actually the emergence of AI, artificial intelligence has disrupted lots of things... In general, I think it is a blessing for a person with disabilities and the various AI services, because as you know, it can describe anything to a blind person, AI can immediately read out a printed page. For that matter, people can just have an app, AI enabled app. And they can sit in a library, can just browse the books and it will lead out to them. Those kinds of things have become possible. So in the space of books and libraries and reading, now the trend is to have integrated AI with these services also, so that people can maybe easily find what content they want.

Maybe they can get a summary or description of the book or the content. They can use AI to generate some content for them, analyze the text, so those kinds of things. So that is why we included AI in Shravan also. And that is what we are looking to improve further. As an example, people can just use voice search and speak to the system and say that I want to book or information on this subject. They need not know the name of the author or the exact book title. Still they can, and the AI will search the database and they can provide information. Those are the trends we think the people need these services. And I think we can make it possible, I think now.

Tom Butcher (25:30)

Right. From looking at this world from the outside, it seems to be the case that there is a major movement from standalone audiobooks to comprehensive on demand accessible information platforms. How does Shravan embrace and reflect this type of transition?

Prashant Ranjan Verma (25:59)

Yes, very good. Yes, very good question. So for decades, many other institutions like us have been making human-narrated audio books because everybody's feedback was that the text-to-speech voice, the voice generated by the computer are not human-like. There's no emotion. It's difficult to understand. But now the text-to-speech voices have become so good I mean, it's not just human-like, it's difficult to differentiate what is AI generated and what is an actual human being's voice. The benefit it provides is that, so

for recording an audio book, need like if somebody's several weeks' time, volunteers' time to sit in the studio and record, but whereas the AI can do it in minutes. So we are using this power, this technology to provide summary of daily news, current affairs, twice daily. people can call Shravan and choose to listen to news and they will listen to a kind of a news bulletin, text to speech voice, very human-like text to speech voice. The news which is recent, which AI has just picked up from reputed identified websites and portals and converted to audio and they can listen to it. So next time they call, they will maybe listen to an updated portal, a news bulletin. So yeah, so we are trying to take advantage of these developments in Shravana as well.

Tom Butcher (27:49)

Right. And then I'd like to go back to challenges. Two of the challenges I see immediately are content availability and multilingual accessibility. We've talked about multilingual and we've talked about a little bit about content availability. But what about things like ensuring quality and accessibility, scaling, and then the whole issue of technology integration. Can you speak to any one of or all of those, Prashant?

Prashant Ranjan Verma (28:32)

Yes, of course. So, you know, like all my professional life, we have been talking about this, that people have often made information accessible for people with visual impairments and print disabilities. But the reading experience of people with print disabilities has been as if they are reading the book on a roll of toilet paper.

Tom Butcher (28:56)

Ha that's a horrible image.

Prashant Ranjan Verma (28:59)

We actually show an image, that kind of image in our presentation. So why? Because people who can see, they generally look at table of contents, then they choose the topic they want to read, they check the page number, they can quickly go to that page and start reading. They can stop, they can take notes.

So it's like a very taken for granted, simple, easy reading experience. But for people with print disabilities, mostly it has been you press the play button, listen, listen, if you are searching for some chapter, press the forward button and wait. And maybe you will reach at a point after the chapter has started. So then press rewind. So sometimes you will have to spend more time navigating, searching, than actually spend on reading. For

that, thankfully, there are some international standards now like Daisy and EPUB, which make it easy to navigate within the content.

So the content, however, needs to be created, structured, and should be compliant to these standards. The standards which have been internationally adopted agreed that they are most accessible for people with disabilities. So in Shravan, we are uploading only content in daisy format which has navigation points like chapters, pages.

So one of our challenges is that if we are able to find, say, content available in some MP3 files, then we need to convert it to this accessible format. Some effort is required.

And we are gradually thinking that now that the text-to-speech has become so good, maybe we will use a text-to-speech voice to record more and more new content. We are thinking of doing that. We need to develop some technology, not technology, but just some infrastructure, some developments in the back end for that. So these are some of the things that we think we will do.

Tom Butcher (31:13)

Great. Thank you so much. Let's go back to AI. You've talked about AI, and you know, one particular instance is being able to generate kind of daily news summaries however often you want to generate them during the day. Looking at things from where you are, those are things that are happening at the moment. What kind of problems would you like to see AI solve in the future? And what kind of problems have you flagged to try to address with AI?

Prashant Ranjan Verma (31:58)

Yeah, so after the emergence of AI in a big way, now many new products and services have come up for persons with disabilities, particularly the visually impaired, blind, disabled as well. Like now we have smart glasses, having camera and AI. So the idea is that a blind person will be always aware of their surroundings. They can ask the AI to take an image of what is in front of them and describe to them. Even there is a not just possibility, some of the devices are having live AI, like they are analyzing the video feed all the time and continuously providing descriptions. Well, these things are very promising. The way they are at this time is not yet perfect.

Like there are lots of you can say mistakes. There are lots of challenges in terms of language costs. Some of them are very expensive. Some of them are working certain languages only. There are lots of privacy type issues in certain situations. It's not allowed.

It's heavily dependent on internet connectivity. So even if you have a weak connection then it doesn't work. So there are lots of challenges to be solved.

But yeah, I mean, like I'm overall like very positive about AI for persons with disabilities and in terms of digital accessibility also. So AI is being sometime positioned as something that it will solve everything. Like you need not make your website or app compliant to standards. AI will just give you the content or read it out.

So that's also not correct. That's not what people with disabilities want. So some corrections are also required in those assumptions.

Tom Butcher (34:10)

Right. So some of the implications are, and some we've talked about is speed, the way that you can convert new information, there's scale, but there's one aspect where I think is a general trend we're seeing in so many different spheres. In the work that you do, how does AI help with personalization and I think associated with that is also discoverability. Can you can you speak to that for a bit, please, Prashant?

Prashant Ranjan Verma (34:51)

Yes, as an example in Shravan, we have actually just added one service which probably we did not talk to as yet, which is like there is a, if you press a certain number on the keypad, then you start talking to our AI chatbot. And you can talk to the chatbot and ask any question related to maybe services for people with disabilities, governmental schemes, or career guidance, those kinds of things. Now the AI has all the information at the back end and tries to personalize the information for you. They will even ask you questions.

And then accordingly, you try and answer your queries. So that way, we try to kind of make use of customization, personalization, that user should be able to, in only to just browse for information, they can just ask and get specific customized discoverability, think you are trying to mean probably how these services will be discovered maybe. There I doubt if there is much that AI can do actually. So these services will spread only mainly through word of mouth and some references, recommendations. yeah, that's what I think.

Tom Butcher (36:27)

Before we move on from AI, because I would like to have a look at the work that you're doing internationally. In so many fields, one of the greatest challenges that we I think

constantly have to bear in mind is that AI is a tool. AI is an enabler rather than a replacement in the world in which you're operating, it's not a replacement for accessibility expertise and you know human quality control. How do we keep that front and center as we move forward so that there isn't too great a dependency built up on AI?

Prashant Ranjan Verma (37:22)

Yeah, so because I also work as a digital accessibility expert, often test websites, apps for accessibility and suggest remediation steps. Many, many services are coming up. They say that, OK, just install this AI plugin on the website. And no need to test any further. User can come to the website and they will get alternative ways to access the website. But users say that this is forcing them to change their ways, methods of using the internet, the computer. It forces them to use some other screen reader, the screen reader given by the plugin or the magnification options provided by the plugin instead of their tools. So they struggle, they don't like it. But the disability community actually needs to raise their voice and bring this to the attention of, you can say, the authorities, all the standard-making agencies that formation needs to be structured, images need to have descriptions, videos need to have captions generation by the AI in the runtime. Things need to be checked. And this is also because there is also a complaint that AI has a bias towards this. Yeah, because it is based on data and information, which has some bias already. So the same thing comes up. In fact, some people are creating apps using the coding, they're getting it done through AI. Now those apps and those websites also tend to have barriers, digital barriers or accessibility issues.

Tom Butcher (39:27)

Yeah. And we at the Zero Project have a really interesting initiative called the Equitable AI Alliance. It's an initiative that helps raise awareness about these issues, about AI not just being a useful tool, but also coming with risk. There's one question I wanted to ask to go back to something you said right at the very beginning. So you've traveled to over 50 countries. That's that's quite an achievement.

One, how are you taking Shravan international? that's one question. Then the second question is: how do you go about finding appropriate partners internationally?

Because I think people will be really interested, because so many people want to take their what they're doing internationally.

Prashant Ranjan Verma (40:30)

Yes, of course. So I'm very fortunate that through Daisy Consortium and some United Nations projects, I had been getting, I got the chance to travel to these countries in the last 20 years. In the initial few years, I was mostly training people to create digital audio books, ebooks. Last few years on accessible websites, apps. Now, based on my experience on studying the requirements, the unmet needs, I have developed Shravan recently. I see a need for in many countries like African countries, Asian countries.

To whomsoever I'm able to speak to, I tell them about it, I demo it. So they like it. then now, and one thing that I have done from my side is that I'm offering the Shravan software, you can say kind of free of charge, that I'm happy to work with people in any other country, any institution to set it up there. They of course need some resources for the digital infrastructure, connecting it to telephone systems, hosting the content on some cloud. So some expenses are definitely there, but I'm trying to make it easy, at least cost-wise. But I need, you can say, support and some mentoring. I'm very happy that I think I will get a chance to present in the Zero Project Conference as well. And I'm also looking for more such international opportunities to tell more about this.

Tom Butcher (42:19)

Great, thank you so much. Well, we're drawing towards the end of our time. So what I like to do is try to sum up just some of what we've talked about. And I think there are there are three points which have come through to me. The first is that in the, and I think we can call it the AI boom and the continuing digital era, we must ensure that those people who lack resources, connectivity, or access to technology are not left behind. So that that's an absolute essential.

The second one, looking at what Shravan does and hopes to do, I think we can say that innovation should not only create new possibilities, which is what you are doing, but also to make those possibilities easier and more affordable, which is what we've been talking about, for people who face barriers, really barriers of all kinds to participating in the digital world.

And then thirdly, I think that I noted down here that to me, Shravan demonstrates just how one way of using emerging technologies such as AI, creatively and inclusively to bring benefits of the I think you can go so far as to say the digital revolution to everyone regardless of resources, technology, access, and indeed, what you've demonstration

sorry, demonstrated, is geographical boundaries. Would you say that those were good summaries of what we've talked about and where you are and where you're going?

Prashant Ranjan Verma (44:37)

Yeah, very much so. Very, very good summary, correct summary. The risk of digital divide is really real and people who will not be able to participate will be really left behind in this digital world. So we need to create or promote services like Shravan to ensure that people without digital literacy or without resources can also benefit from this digital world.

Tom Butcher (45:10)

Shravan has some unique characteristics, and I think those are really important in the way that it addresses the digital divide. Can you can you speak to us about that and just how you are different and how you are really bridging that gap, that divide?

Prashant Ranjan Verma (45:37)

Yes, you know like almost on a daily basis, I meet people, I come across people of different age groups. I will give you just some examples. So maybe like a young person in some Indian village. Now that person says that that person has weak eyesight and they belong to a poor family. They cannot buy any computer as such. And therefore, they don't have any access to any books, their school textbooks, information. And if, suppose, we provide them a computer or a smartphone, they need training to use it. The assistive technologies like TalkBack on the Android phone and a narrator, they work with English and they have a learning curve. So very difficult for them to kind of come to find a solution of accessing textbooks. Similarly, now a senior citizen who gradually due to age is losing eyesight is not able to read newspapers and fiction novels, books. And having some dexterity problem also not able to use the smartphone, the touchscreen the way it's required or an iPad. So for all these people, now at least we try to create this solution where they can pick up just a regular keypad phone, is like in India, you can even get it at \$10 kind of price, very, very reasonable. And people have those kinds of phones, that's the minimum that everybody has.

Or the senior cities and maybe even a landline phone where the buttons are very tactile and it's easy to operate at least. So they can now just dial a number and choose some options by pressing some keys on the telephone and they can listen to what they want. They can stop anytime they want. Next time they call again, the system asks if they want

to resume, listening to what they chose or they want to select something else. So that way we are trying to make it very easy.

And we are providing not just books, but information that is relevant for people with disabilities, important announcements by the government, by different NGOs, and lots of materials which are helpful for their self-development, like some community radio, podcasts, career guidance, all kinds of things, so that they can participate in this world include themselves in this digital world, they can pursue education or employment through this.

Tom Butcher (48:37)

So Shravan actually has enormously broad appeal, right the way across a wide spectrum of needs. Prashant, is there anything that I have missed out or that you'd like to add? I'm going to come back though. I'm not going to let you off the hook because I'm going to ask you for a call to action, but before I hit the call to action, Is there anything that I've missed out? Any questions that you think I should have asked you, or that you'd like to tell us anyway?

Prashant Ranjan Verma (49:14)

Not really. think we covered most of it. Just that I want our listeners to be aware and think they are aware that the population of people with print disabilities is very huge all over the world. And particularly in developing countries, the level of literacy, employment, actually is exactly very dismal. So through initiatives like Shravan, are trying to do something in that. So that's why I'm very passionate and very, very keen on supporting and developing it further.

Tom Butcher (49:55)

Your passion certainly comes through. And w if people are passionate, needless to say, well I think a call to action is predicated on passion. So Prashant, what's your call to action to listeners out there, and in fact everybody.

Prashant Ranjan Verma (50:14)

Yes, so the right to information should not be a privilege of only those who can afford internet access, computers and smartphones. have to remember that everybody needs the right to information, access to information. And Shravan has proved that a model can be created which is scalable and replicable.

I urge people to consider launching services similar to Shravan in their regions. And on my side, I'm happy to talk to anybody who wants to do it. I would like to work with them and kind of help them implement it.

Tom Butcher (51:02)

Great, thank you so much. And I've got one last question. It's a question that I sometimes ask people, and it gonna come out of, as they say here, left field. Where would you like to be in five years with Shravan?

Prashant Ranjan Verma (51:19)

Okay, so ideally in India, maybe with connectivity to Sugamya Pustakalaya, having like hundreds, thousands of books, more languages, and at least having lost in maybe at least two, three different countries. So that is where I would like to be.

Tom Butcher (51:43)

Prashant, thank you once again for joining us and for sharing with us not only your experiences, which are considerable, but also so much of your wisdom. We really, really appreciate it. And I look forward to seeing you in many different countries in five years' time.

Prashant Ranjan Verma (52:04)

Thank you. was a pleasure talking to you. Thank you.

Tom Butcher (52:06)

Well, the pleasure was absolutely mine. Thank you. And listeners, please look out for our next episode.

Judith Hermetter (52:17)

Thanks for listening to Pathways to Zero Barriers. If you're interested in responsible AI, join the conversation in our Disability Inclusive AI LinkedIn group. You'll find resources, insights, and a global community shaping accessible technology.