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Some Patterns of Information Presentation, Organization, and Indexing for Communication Across Cultures and Faiths

Abstract: Converging digital technologies and networks, especially the Internet offer considerable scope for individuals and organizations to be authors and publishers with the possibility of getting global response to one's ideas. But there are also several impediments to overcome - existence of a multiplicity of languages, cultural bias, misinterpretation of concepts, non-existence and/or non-acceptance of ideas of one group by people of other cultures and faiths. This paper examines the types of indexes, glossary of terms, organization and presentation of text in different languages/scripts, transliteration of selected text, commentaries, help to correct pronunciation, listing of common errors in rendering text, song, etc. by beginners and people of different cultures and language groups, etc. as means and approaches to mitigate the difficulties of communication across cultures, faiths, and linguistic boundaries. Such provision in typical examples of information resources in the spiritual field - an Internet site, and two CD multimedia - is discussed.

1. Impact of Information Technologies

The converging digital technologies make it possible for almost seamless access to vast volumes of information, in a variety of media, on a global scale. The Internet offers the potential for almost anyone to be an author and publisher and to get one's ideas disseminated nationally and internationally, with the possibility of global response. Hence, organizations of all types and even individuals are taking advantage of this potential. On the positive side, it facilitates cross-cultural communication fostering better understanding among peoples across national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. Fostering such exchange of ideas is important for the development of all fields of human endeavour and, perhaps, most crucial, in the religious, spiritual and cultural fields. Since conflicts arise in the minds of people, due to misinterpretation and misunderstanding of ideas and practices of one's own and more importantly other people's philosophies, religious tenets, beliefs and cultures, advantage can be taken of global communication facilities offered by digital technologies. There are several efforts in this regard. But there are also several apparent impediments to overcome - existence of a multiplicity of languages, cultural bias, misinterpretation of concepts, non-existence and/or non-acceptance of ideas and practices of one culture or faith in other cultures and faiths, and so on. Provision of different types of indexes, glossary of terms, organization and presentation of text in different languages/scripts, transliteration of select text, commentaries, help to correct pronunciation, listing out common errors in rendering text, song, etc. by beginners and people of different cultures, language groups, links to other websites and literature sources are among the strategies and approaches to mitigate the problems of communication across cultures, faiths and linguistic boundaries.
2. Scope of the Paper

This paper discusses the devices mentioned in section 1 in typical examples of information resources in the spiritual field - an Internet site, and two CD-ROM multimedia sources. The provisions and devices in these sources are intended to contribute to a correct and contextual interpretation of ideas and practices across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

3. Examples


The contents of this Internet site (maintained by Debb Platt) relate essentially to mysticism (the nature of reality, the individual's struggle to attain a clear vision of reality, and the accompanying transformation of consciousness. The "site explores the mystical traditions of six religions" (Judaism, Christianity, Islam/Sufism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism) by comparing and contrasting quotations drawn from their respective literature.

The site consists of hundreds of linked web pages. Starting with a specific concept in one religion for which definition and comments are provided, one can click on specialized terms for further information from another religion to read about equivalent and related concepts in that religion. Definitions are provided for the basic concepts in a hyperlinked Glossary database. One can focus either on one religion or one mystic and then navigate across using the hypertext links. Links to selected source materials are provided, facilitating, among other things, comparative study of concepts of mysticism in the six religions.

The quotations are organized by topic. The group headings and subheadings of the topics and their arrangement appear to parallel the 'individual's approach to attain a clear vision of Reality and the stages of transformation accompanying that vision'.

- **There's reality beyond the material world:**
  - Which is uncreated
  - It pervades everything
  - but remains beyond the reach of human knowledge and understanding

- **You approach that reality by:**
  - Distinguishing ego from true self
  - Understanding the nature of desire
  - Becoming unattached
  - Forgetting about preferences
  - Not working for personal gain
  - Letting go of thoughts
  - Redirecting your attention
  - Being devoted
  - Being humble
  - Invoking that reality
  - Surrendering

- **That reality approaches you through**
  - Grace
  - The teacher

- **You're transformed so that you embody that reality by:**
  - Dying and being reborn
- Seeing the light
- Experiencing union
- Experiencing freedom

+Home Page +Mystics, theologians and scriptures +Glossary +Links to other sites
+What's new?

Each of the topic headings in italics can be clicked on to call the related extract for each of six religions. Examples are given below. Note the links to Glossary, Home Page, Other sites, etc.

Clicking on ‘Which is uncreated’ calls up

**Jewish: Ashlag: Uncreated**

(Quotations from Yehuda Ashlag)

Yehudas L. Ashlag:

... all names and appellations discussed in the wisdom of the Kabbalah concern only the Light extended from the Creator’s substance and not the substance itself, for truly speaking, we have neither word nor thought of expression by which to speak of His substance.

(p. 56)

... with one “Thought” of the Creator all existence was emanated and created, the upperworlds in conjunction with the lower worlds, including the evolutionary processes of development which creation will constantly undergo until all functions reach their final completion - the Millennium...

(p. 37)

**Christian: Cyril: Uncreated**

(Quotations from Cyril of Alexandria)

The divine transcendence

... the difference between Creator and created is incomparable

(Cyril of Alexandria: Select Letters”, p.103, quoting Cyril’s “On the Creed” 10)

(God is) incorporeal, immaterial, impalpable, beyond quantity and circumscription, beyond form and figure

(The Image of God in Man according to Cyril of Alexandria, p.22, quoting “Responsiones ad Teberium” 14)

And more quotations for and from each of six religions. Some of the citations are hyper-linked to the source materials listings and/or brief biography of the author or details about cited source. Example:

Ashlag, Yehuda L. *A Study of the Ten Luminous Emanations from Rabbi Isaac Luria*. Trans. Levi L.


The opening page of this multimedia CD (Swami Vivekananda, 2000) presents the following menu (one icon for each): Benediction, Life, Research and Thinkers, Call to Humanity, Works, Gallery, For children, Centres, and About us. The contents of each of these sections is detailed below.
The background Indian classical / devotional music creates a spiritual atmosphere. Generally, where applicable, in all screens, there are buttons for sound (voice or music), to link to glossary, for searching by index, for printing; to move up and down, next / previous page, contents, and display Sanskrit content with transliteration (in English). Text and pictures can be zoomed.

**Benediction:** About Swami Vivekananda, narration (voice) by Swami Ranganathananda (13th President of the Ramakrishna Mission), with text on screen; also pictures of Vivekananda and Ranganathananda.

**Life, Research and Thinkers:** Picture of shelved volumes - Life, 2v., Research, 6v., Thinkers, 1v. (See Works below).

**Works:** Pictures of nine shelved volumes. Click to open any of the volumes and in each case the contents page is displayed. A particular content heading may be clicked to open the corresponding page. Highlighted terms can be clicked to link to the Glossary for meaning.

**Call to Humanity:** Extracts from Vivekananda’s works and discourses organized under the following headings: Faith and Strength; Powers of the Mind; Man the Maker of his Destiny; Education and Society; Serve Man as God; Religion and Ethics; Glory of India; Other Exortations. Each heading can be clicked to open corresponding quotation. Click icon to get citation of source.

**For Children:** Selected ‘stories’ from the Works suitable for children, arranged under 30 clickable headings.

**Quiz:** Test questions categorized as: True or false; Objective (questions); Match the Words; Match the Pictures. Enrich your Knowledge-- Select a quiz category by clicking the heading. The last heading leads to an index to Vivekananda’s Life and Works.

**Gallery:** Some 275 pictures relating to Swami Vivekananda, and persons, places and other entities associated with him. Clicking on a particular picture displays an explanatory message with voice reading.

**About Us:** Brief notes about Advaita Ashramas located in different countries, with pictures, and online link to websites, if any.

**Centres:** World map with location of Ramakrishna Mission marked. Clicking on a marker displays address, note on activities, services offered, etc. at the Centre.

This CD targets children as well as scholars, laypersons interested in Advaita Philosophy. The thematic presentation, access to the contents of Vivekananda’s multi-volumed set, and the children’s stories along with a quiz are the significant features of this CD.

### 3.3 Saint Tyagaraja: A Multimedia Presentation (2001)

This multimedia CD (Saint Tyagaraja, 2001) presents a unique portrayal of 108 Tyagaraja devotional songs (kritis). The product is a joint effort of scholars of Carnatic music, musicians and information professionals. It attempts to especially foster understanding and appreciation of the kritis across linguistic borders within India. In addition, the presentation also promotes interest in Carnatic music for international audiences. The CD has several features that foster communication across linguistic boundaries in India and to some extent even internationally.

The 108 kritis included in the product represent different themes, ragas (melodic matrices or patterns), talas (rhythm or beats) and art models used by Tyagaraja. Thirty-five of the kritis are rendered in instruments - the veena, violin, and flute. It includes commentaries, meaning and text of the kritis that aid in understanding the meaning.
The opening screen has icons for:

- Help
- Searching database by title, theme, ragam, talam (beat), and other fields

Browse kritis database
- Record by record
- See lyrical content
- See summary
- See commentary
- See text of kritis

Index to kritis
- See list of titles
- Sort index by Raga
- Sort index by Tala
- Select kriti to view
- Listen to music
- Listen to commentary

Index to deities
- See kritis on deities
- Select kriti to view

Open Internet browser
- Browse articles
- Link to websites
- Print text of kritis

The music menu options include:
- Select and play kriti (vocal)
- Select and play kriti (instrumental)
- Play title music
- Stop title music
- Continuous play
- Favourites

Index to all lyrical content word
Or index to common errors in articulation of content words
See meaning of words
Select kriti by content word

Slide show on quantitative analysis
See distribution of kritis by ragas and other tables
Slide show on Tyagaraja
- Early life
- Adult and middle life
- Works
- Tyagaraja literature
- Premonition and final end
- Tyagaraja Aradhana
- Festivals

Database Searching: The databases can be searched by title, theme, ragam, talam and other fields, such as, keyword, deity, vocalist and lyrical content. Every composition is provided with a special commentary, lyrical text, summary, notes, and the text in four languages / script: English / Roman (default), and the Indian languages, Telugu, Tamil, and Devanagiri. Further help is provided through a linked glossary accessible from the summary, lyrical content special commentary, and notes sections of the CD.

The Lyrical Content section shows a table of all Telugu lyrical content words/phrases and their meanings in English.

The Summary section provides a gist of the contents. Since many of Tygaraja’s compositions draw from the events in the Indian epic, Ramayana, and other Hindu scriptures, the less known stories alluded to, are presented in detail. This is particularly helpful to those unfamiliar with Indian culture, and also for Indians and people of Indian origin who may wish to gain more knowledge of the cultural heritage conveyed through the epics and scriptures.

The Index to Common Errors in Rendering of Content Words: This section presents an alphabetical listing of words / phrases from Telugu lyrics along with its meaning in English. It provides guidance on where the word should be split and how it should be pronounced while the song is musically rendered. A list of such common
errors along with how it aught to be sung is also demonstrated\(^2\). This is of invaluable assistance to non-Telugu speaking singers and users. Besides the language barrier, some Carnatic music lovers may tend to pay more attention to the technicalities of music rather than to the lyrics.

**Commentary:** This section allows the users to view the text in four languages while music / commentary is played or heard.

**Special commentary** - presents information that fosters music appreciation, such as, the impact of raga, basic music technicalities, etc. Users can choose to play just the music, or music with commentary, or just plain commentary. For example, search by the theme ‘gratitude’ retrieves the kriti ‘Dasarathe ni momu.’ The special commentary provides insight into the deployment of the raga, the use of swaras and their effect, thereby promoting music appreciation. Though the technical terminology used in the commentary could prove as a barrier to lay-users in music, the glossary of terms can be accessed for meaning of these terms\(^3\).

**The Index to Kritis** allows users to sort the database by the kriti title, raga and tala. Thus for instance, by selecting a particular raga, Todi, all the kritis set to Todi can be retrieved.

**Quantitative Analysis of Saint Tyagaraja’s Compositions:** A slide show presents a quantitative analysis of his 688 compositions by raga groups. This feature of the CD is especially of interest to Carnatic music scholars.

**Information on Tyagaraja:** The biographical sketch of the saint is provided by means of a Power-Point presentation titled *Saint Tyagaraja’s life and works*. In addition, the feature, *Tyagaraja on the Internet* provides links to specially commissioned articles, text of kritis, index to web sites and select bibliography on Tyagaraja. These are very educative to both national and international audiences.

4. **Concluding Remarks**

A variety of devices and methods of presentation of information - text, image, and sound (voice narration and singing) - are used to facilitate contextual interpretation of concepts, and cross-cultural communication. The presentation and devices used also vary with the intended target audience or users. The resources usually give explanation of specialized concepts and definition of terms in the text itself or with the aid of a hyperlinked glossary. Hypertext links and / or cross references to the sources of information used in preparing the databases are given. These also direct the user to other information sources.

**Notes:**

1. We were to include another multimedia CD (OM Information Service) and a printed source (Srimad Bhagavatam, 18v) as examples, but these have been omitted in this paper due to space restriction.

2. Example: When the phrase *Chinta thirchchutu enta modira* is selected, a brief commentary indicating that *Chintathirchutakenta* being a single word, should not be split as *Chintatirchchuta enta*. This is further illustrated by singing (musical rendition of) that line from the composition. This is of invaluable assistance to non-Telugu speaking singers and users. Besides the language barrier, some Carnatic music lovers may tend to pay more attention to the technicalities of music rather than to the lyrics.

3. The special commentary to the kriti “Dasarathe ni momu” reads as, “The kriti commences with adhara sadja, introduces both the depth in the raga and the impact of the lyrics. In combination with the predominant note, the panchamam, the fact is conveyed how, even without the use of the other dominant swaras, the raga todi can be portrayed effectively. The
two svaras sadja and panchamam play the major role. The svaras in the scale of the raga are all shuddha svaras exactly opposite to that of Kalyani. Even within the scale, one should note that the jivasvaras, gandhara has a slightly higher frequency in the arohana than in the avarohana. The song is set in the right pace, neither too slow nor too fast.”

References