

Leadership Talk with Mr. Abhishek Suryawanshi

Date: April 7th, 2020

Time: 11 AM

Speakers:

- **Dr. Abhay Jere, the CIO of MHRD Innovation Cell, Govt. of India**
- **Mr. Abhishek Suryawanshi, Director, Wikipedia SWASTHA**

Brief description of the discussion:

The discussion began with the Chief Innovation Officer of Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) Innovation Cell, Government of India, **Dr. Abhay Jere**, introducing the viewers to the sixth speaker of the Leadership Talk series, **Mr. Abhishek Suryawanshi**. He intimidated the viewers with his position as the director of India Operations, at Wikipedia. He let the viewers know about him meeting Mr. Abhishek once, when he was in his second year of studies, in the Pharmacy course.

Mr. Abhishek briefly spoke on his role at Wikipedia, and also voiced what unites Wikipedia volunteers across the globe: the drive to provide everyone, irrespective of their place of birth, financial status etc., knowledge, totally free of cost. The volunteers speak different languages, and belong to different parts of the globe but, the one thing that unites all of them is “the desire to share knowledge.”

When asked about his role as the director of Wikipedia’s **SWASTHA initiative**, he humbly regarded himself as “a mere soldier” in the volunteer society of Wikipedia, whose sole job is to see to the fact that the 70,000+ Wikipedia volunteers, at any given point of time, are provided the financial and non-financial help so that information is accessible to all. He explained why it is necessary to have a devoted page on health, since Wikipedia receives 10 times the traffic websites of CDC and WHO receive, amidst the global COVID-19 crisis.

When enquired about him being an employee at Wikipedia, he made it clear that volunteers- who edit – never receive any kind of payment. Individuals who host workshops, raise funds or partner with Wikipedia, may only receive payments. Answering a question asking about Wikipedia’s global footprint, he apprised the viewers of Wikipedia having the fifth largest readership on internet. Wikimedia Foundation does not have more than 500 employees, though, which is in stark contrast to companies like Google and Facebook, which have more than 10,000 employees, at any given point of time.

When asked, how Wikipedia ensures authenticity, despite being open-source, Mr. Abhishek touched upon three points: Notability, whether a topic needs a separate article and, how third-party references ensure credibility of articles. The credibility, again, depends on the notability.

Dr. Abhay then brought a popular complaint many Wikipedia readers have- reverting back right corrections, to which Mr. Abhishek replied, all articles aren’t editable. For instance, the article on COVID-19 is “locked”, which means only editors who have a standing in the volunteer community

can edit these. He even explained why the Wikipedia logo has an incomplete globe, since it signifies every single Wikipedia article is a “work in progress”, and that explains the editability.

Dr. Abhay requested Mr. Abhishek to share with viewers, his incredulous but true journey. Mr. Abhishek narrated to the viewers his “bed-ridden” and homeschooled childhood, spent in a small village in Borkha, Solapur district (Maharashtra), how his family helped him recover from severe asthma, how he joined a “normal school” and then, became a part of NCSC. That, in his opinion, changed his life.

There, he came up with a Suction Method of irrigation, which ultimately led him to meet the President of NCSC and, the honourable President of India, Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, at IIT Guwahati, in December 2004. He even recalled meeting Dr. Sahasrabudhe there and recalled how people like him and Dr. Abhay leave no stone unturned in advancing young, innovative minds.

After this, he was able to become a part of the Government of India sponsored educational series called “Hum honge Kamyab”, earning the distinction of being the only one from Maharashtra to make it to the show. Being a Marathi speaker couldn’t stop him from achieving this feat. He credited having access to opportunities as the differentiator.

Dr. Abhay questioned next, how he went on to join Wikipedia from that position? In reply, he elucidated, he couldn’t get the fellowship of TED, since he was under-aged. He spoke about his association with Gates Foundation thereon. He had hosted 60+ TEDx events, even before reaching the age of 18. This held him in good stead to host the 10th anniversary celebrations of Gates Foundation at Pune and, quite astonishingly, his webcast had more attendees, compared to that of the headquarter at US.

The 10th anniversary of Wikipedia was the next major event in his life. They were opening their first physical office in India and hence, he was asked to become a Campus Ambassador, which he gladly accepted. His attempts to take TEDx to the slum communities had augured well, with respect to his selection.

He was in favour of Wikipedia adopting an approach to accommodate the regional languages of India. The absence of local flavour, he said, had been evident till then, since the Wikipedia article on Nashik Kumbh Mela was entirely written by foreigners. Moreover, popular and historical sites like Pataleshwar Caves(in Pune) didn’t have articles devoted to them.

Hence, he, along with fellow Pune volunteers, took the initiative of filling this void. They would go to such popular sites on weekdays, “have fun, create memories and write articles” on these places, which would then become a part of Wikipedia’s ocean of knowledge. Such was their approach that even his co-volunteers from Sudan asked him to come over and enlighten them with their approach.

Dr. Abhay then enquired, what is the approximate number of volunteer-editors Wikipedia currently have in India? “5 to 50”, was his answer. In addition to this, he highlighted the necessity of having historical information on Google and Wikipedia, since, in 25-30 years, “if it’s not on internet, it doesn’t exist” will be the reality.

Dr. Abhay then expressed another popular query. He wanted to know whether Wikipedia uses Artificial Intelligence, and if yes, then to what degree is it used. To this, Mr. Abhishek replied, most of the work is done by human volunteers. According to him, machines aren't advanced enough to handle tasks like article-writing, as of now. He talked about the usage of bots though, which act as a check against plagiarism.

On a concluding note, Dr. Abhay asked Mr. Abhishek to leave a message for the Indian youth, primarily those who are studying engineering and other technology-related courses. To this, he said, all the young minds need is an access to opportunities and information. They need to be proactive in this regard. Also, working on soft skills is of prime importance. Reaching out to people for explaining your idea and the reason behind your passion is of prime importance. People like Dr. Abhay Jere and **Dr. Sahasrabudhe** will support you in your pursuit of bringing a change.

MHRD MIC AICTE INSTITUTION'S INNOVATION COUNCIL (Ministry of Skill Development)

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Promotional poster, released by Dr. Abhay Jere



Mr. Abhishek on left, and Dr. Abhay Jere on right, during discussion