

Technology: Living Blind Made Easy

The advent of the digital space and technology has transformed the way I live. Activities I grew up depending on others for help today have become pretty simple for me on my various devices. Technology has widened the scope of possibilities. It has opened up opportunities. It has also made me independent and, on several counts, a resource for friends and family. The laptop, smartphone and screen reading software have given life a new meaning and direction.

I begin my day with the Amazon Echo listening to podcasts like “The Intelligence from the Economist”, “The Tennis Podcast”, news from the BBC and NDTV and so on. Within the hour, I am abreast with what is going on in the world.

As a visually impaired youngster growing up, I had very limited access to books. I had to depend on others to pursue my passion for reading. When I joined college and later on, as an advertising professional, I realised that I was at a huge disadvantage due to my lack of reading. But with the internet, platforms like Audible, Kindle and Apple Books and interesting reading apps like Voice Dream, I have started reading at least a book a week. I never imagined I would ever be able to read the novels my friends talked about. Though I have access to the titles only now, it is definitely better late than never!

My passion for sport was similar to my reading habit too. I had to wait for my mother or brother to become free to read the sports pages of the newspaper. The radio did give me some coverage but it was very limited compared to the newspaper dailies. Again today, with the proliferation of various mobile apps, one is able to keep abreast of sporting action literally in real time.

Coming to financial independence, I bank with HDFC and ICICI. Since 2014, I have not had the need to visit my banks. Whether it is paying people, settling bills, checking balance, setting up or renewing an FD or receiving money; everything can now be easily done from the comfort of one’s home on the bank’s mobile app or using net banking on one’s laptop. There is no sighted assistance required to manage cheque books, write pay in slips, fill forms and so on. It is all quite incredible for someone who has grown up in the ‘60s and ‘70s.

There are other incredible advances too! The other day, I sent my car for its routine servicing. My driver called to say that the car wash person would not accept a cheque. I asked if the person had Google Pay. All I needed to know was his mobile number. A couple of swipes on my phone and the car wash guy received his money. Digital wallets like Google Pay and PayTM are fast making the need for recognising and carrying real money in person quite unnecessary. Fortunately at present these wallets are accessible and easily used by visually impaired persons like me.

Another mind blowing app I use is “Be My Eyes”. This is an interesting innovation fueled by the power of volunteers. Lakhs of volunteers have registered with this app. The moment a blind person activates the app, a volunteer comes online. You can point the phone’s camera on whatever you need help with and the seeing volunteer helps out. This help can range from identifying currency during a transaction, reading the label on a shampoo bottle on a store rack, calling out information from a visiting card, reading sign boards out loud or matching one’s clothes. I use this app all the time. Microsoft’s “Seeing AI” is another

app that uses artificial intelligence to recognise currency, colours and read short text from a page or a visiting card. Quite handy indeed.

These days, apps come in handy everywhere! A few months ago, I was travelling from the airport to my residence in a cab. Usually, I chat up the driver to check if we are following the correct route. On this occasion, the driver was a man of few words and did not respond to my chatter. I had to turn to technology. Yes, the Lazarillo App came to my aid. The app tells you exactly where you are at any point. It identifies prominent landmarks in the vicinity. I also use the Google GPS very often. This is particularly critical when I am travelling in a new city. It is amazing how it identifies landmarks and distances, and audio guides one to one's destination.

Technology has also dramatically altered the way in which I experience the entertainment space. I am an avid watcher of films and documentaries on OTT platforms. Recently I was watching the series Sacred Games which has long stretches void of dialogues. Such silent stretches often leave me wondering what is going on. But now Audio Description (AD) tells you what exactly is the action on the screen. I have realised that storytelling on television and film is more often than not audio-visual. If you cannot see, very often you miss out. Likewise tools like OK Google and Siri have made accessing music extremely simple. All you need to say is "Siri, play 'Neele neele ambar par' by Kishore Kumar" and the song starts playing! The same OK Google and Siri can get you any kind of information. All I need to say is "Siri, what is the latest results from the French Open" and promptly Siri speaks out the latest goings on in the tournament.

There are several apps and technology platforms that have opened up the world to blind people like me. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter have opened up possibilities of networking and engaging with anyone you want from across the world. I guess life can only get better as newer technologies emerge!

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