

Using IT as a tool to overcome blindness (SPECIAL)

By Sumeet Chatterjee, Indo-Asian News Service

Mumbai, Feb 14 (IANS) From a distance Charudatta Jhadav looks like one of the many busy writing software codes for overseas clients. But Jhadav stands out for one reason: he is blind.

At the plush IT facility of GTL Ltd., one of India's leading mid-size tech firms, Jhadav, 36, does not look at his computer monitor while working. His fingers are flying on the keyboard, following the voice instructions coming out of the machine.

Jhadav lost his sight when he was just 13. But his disability has not held him back from realising his dream of using IT as a tool for earning a living as well as overcoming the hurdles associated with blindness.

Today, he develops software that will not only make computers more disabled-friendly but help access IT-enabled services like Internet and computer games easily.

"When I lost my eyesight while I was still in school, all my dreams and ambitions came crashing down in front of me. I thought it was the end of life for me," Jhadav told IANS.

"Today I feel much more confident and I want other physically disabled people to realise that IT is truly a bridge that can link the visual and non-visual environment," he added.

Though the computing industry has made strides in developing software to aid the blind, programmes available are still few and far between.

Jhadav became interested in computers while working as a receptionist with a public sector bank, and took classes in computer programming. Currently, he is pursuing masters in computer application through a distant learning course.

"I got the employment offer from GTL six months back after I completed all the formalities that are applicable to general candidates. No concession was made in my case just because I can't see," says he.

"And since the day one I joined here, I have been trying to spread the power of IT to reach all the people like me."

Jhadav, who lives with his wife and a seven-year-old daughter, is trying to develop a cheaper screen reading software, a tool that will

read out for the visually impaired whatever is typed or appears on the computer screen.

An avid chess player who has represented India, Jadhav also wants to develop a "talking software" that will help blind people play games on their computers.

Eventually, he hopes that other blind users will also be able to use the software to handle such projects as designing or surfing web sites without any assistance from others.

Some of his works have already been recognised by global IT giants like Microsoft and IBM. Jadhav, along with his employer GTL, is lobbying for introduction of IT as a subject in blind schools in the country.

"In the last six months of my stint with GTL, I have worked successfully on a project to optimise the search engine of the company's website. This has given me great confidence.

"Now my aim is to develop devices that will enable visually impaired people to work alongside their sighted co-workers. These will help them pursue other hobbies like playing computer games, creating animations and surfing the Internet."

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