

## Voices that bring mobile phones alive for the blind

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Three Bengaluru-based volunteers for the blind have lent their voice to a software called Hear2Read that would read out text content on a smartphone screen to the visually challenged in their regional languages.

The initiative, which would make low-end smartphones fully accessible to the blind for the first time, has been co-ordinated by a retired entrepreneur in the US who collected the voices to make the speech software.

“I have been a volunteer for the blind for several years and I know the difficulties they face without a proper regional language software to access content like news or maps,” said Sundari, co-ordinator of training at Mitra Jyothi, one of the first to answer the call to lend her voice.

The Tamil software to which Sundari had lent her voice was released on Tuesday, while Kannada and Telugu software have crossed the critical stages to become

fully available in the next few months, Suresh Bazaj, the entrepreneur who coordinated with Carnegie Mellon University and a group of volunteers to develop the Indian language software, told Deccan Herald.

“There has been price disparity in terms of text-to-speech availability for the blind among Android phones,” he said. “The blind can afford low-end phones, but support to read content in regional languages is close to nothing. So, we thought it would help thousands of blind persons in India if it is provided free.”

Getting dedicated volunteers to capture all the words and phonetic nuances of a language is critical to the projects since the software needs to render each word and syllable flawlessly in voice. This is where the volunteers have made a difference. “I was very hesitant at first because of its scale,” said Sharada, who lent her voice to the Kannada version of Hear2Read.

“The idea that blind persons reading Kannada text on mobile will do with my voice was both exciting and terrifying.”

“I wanted to forget that my voice will go into a software and reach thousands of blind people and focus on giving a perfect output,” said Kalpana, whose voice is used for the Telugu software. People can freely download the software at <https://play.google.com/apps/testing/org.hear2read.Tamil> This is a beta version so users must sign in with Gmail ID to install it on their phones.

# Hear<sup>2</sup>Read<sup>®</sup>