Wonder device for blind

Speech synthesiser give hope to the blind, says Preeti Singh

UNTIL late 1993, computer was the domain of the sighted alone in our country. Then late last year, with the introduction of the speech synthesiser this magic machine became accessable to the visually impaired.

As you know the computer has a moniter which gives all the information to the user. This information on the screen can only be seen. So, even if a visually impaired person managed to learn to operate a computer, it was not of any use, as there was no way to know what was been done. But now with the speech synthesiser, we can use the computer like any sighted person.

The speech synthesiser is a device which can be interfaced to any computer. Once this is done, this device speaks out what is keyed in. The software that is responsible for the speech output is called, CAB, "Computer assistance of the blind". The good news for Indians is that CAB is manufactured in Bangalore. Soon it is going to be freely available in the market.

Now let me tell you more about the way CAB works. The CAB speaks out the alphabet, number or punctutation that you key in. With the various commands made available in this software, it is possible to read character by character, word by word or the complete line on which the cursor is positioned. One can go into the reading mode and go into the menus and get the CAB to read them, word by word or line by line. CAB also can read the complete document if you so desire. So, once some material is on the hard disk or on the floppy, a visually impaired person can read it independantly. Braille has been the only script by which a visually impaired person can do written work. Although Braille is extremely useful, it is not possible to communicate with the sighted using this script. This problem can totally be eliminated once CAB is put into use. Both sighted and the sightless can work on the same machine without difficulty.

This writer was one of the first few, in Delhi to have learnt computers with the help of the CAB. This training changed my whole life. In a couple of months, I was well versed with Word Star and DBase.It was as if a whole new world had been thrown open to me. I could write independently, I could read and reread my works many times as I wished and all on my own. I soon discovered that this self-reliance in being able to read what I was writing gave me all that was needed to be a writer.

Today I am working for a company called "GRANNY'S" I am heading the marketing operations here. At present as the speech synthesiser is not available in the market, I do not have access to my computer in this office. Once I am able to own one here, which will be soon, work involving reading and writing will become a lot easier. I will have no difficulty in feeding in all the information regarding sale and stocks. Also, when I need to locate an address or a phone number, all I will have to do will be use my CAB and I will get the required data. This will make me independent to a large extent.

At present the National Association for the Blind, Delhi, has a computer training programme for the blind. They have been conducting this programme for some time now. The students are first introduced to the computer and CAB. There after they are taken through a six-week course in Word Star. Dbase and Lotus are also taught. I hope that CAB is going to help more and more sightless people to be able to use computers.