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US salutes use of Bollywood songs as literacy tool

Chidanand Rajghatta, TNN | Nov 8, 2013, 04:30 AM IST

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WASHINGTON: Badmouthed for promoting tawdry kitsch and tell moves, Bollywood's song-and-dance routines — most recently endorsed by first lady Michelle Obama during the White House Diwali celebrations this week - has been recognized as a tool for learning by the US Library of Congress.

PlanetRead, an Indian non-profit born from IIM Ahmedabad, has been named winner of the Library of Congress' first international literacy award announced this week for its pioneering work in teaching millions to of semi-literate people to read using same language subtitling (SLS) for Indian movie songs. The award, which carries prize money of \$ 50,000, supports organizations working to alleviate problems of illiteracy and aliteracy (a lack of interest in

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reading) both in the United States and worldwide.

The storied Library of Congress, repository of arguably world's largest knowledge base, described PlanetRead's SLS work in India is an innovative program that reinforces literacy skills, primarily through subtitles for popular musical television programming, based on solid research. "It is

simple to implement and easy to replicate, reaching 200 million low-literacy TV viewers in India. SLS is notable as a highly motivational approach for getting low-literacy adults to read, particularly where access to books is difficult," the citation read.

The program has been around for a long time, said Brij Kothari, founder of PlanetRead and IIM faculty member, who came to Washington DC to receive the award on Monday. Work on same language subtitling began in the 1990s, when research showed that a seamless mix of reading through entertainment was very effective in advancing literacy. Studies demonstrated that 3 to 5 years of exposure to SLS can enable a person with basic familiarity with the alphabet, to become functionally literate.

Even limited Same Language Subtitling (SLS) exposure (max one hr/ week over 5 years), reduced illiteracy by half and doubled the number of "good readers." Before SLS exposure only 34% of study subjects could read a newspaper. After SLS 70% could read a newspaper (as compared to a control group not exposed to SLS which only increased to 42% over the same time period)

However, it wasn't till middle of the last decade that private television channels took the cue from Doordarshan (whose then DG and later chief election commissioner SY Qureshi signed on to the findings) and joined the program, convinced that it would not affect their bottomline. With funding from Google, PlanetRead now does SLS in ten languages on DD and other channels.

Kothari's one regret: Indian moviedom itself has not signed on to it despite recent films such as Taare Zameen Par, which dealt with the issue of dyslexia. "If we had a Amitabh Bachchan or Aamir Khan look at this program, it would make an even great difference," the PlanetRead

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