

Eradicating illiteracy, karaoke style



Dr. Brij Kothari

The number of illiterates in India today is a shame. True, the task is daunting. But then, when the problem is big and resources limited, innovation is the only way. Dr. Brij Kothari, professor at IIM Ahmedabad has come up with the revolutionary "Same Language Sub-titling" (SLS) of Bollywood ζ lm songs on TV, for mass literacy in India.

It works this way: A Gujarati illiterate starts watching *Chitrageet*, a Gujarati television program of ζ lm songs, which has sub-titles at the bottom of the screen. Since he knew many of the songs, he could anticipate the next word. When it appeared he would read it unconsciously and sing along, karaoke style. Soon he found he was able to recognize words in the bazaar, and before long, he was reading headlines in the newspaper.

It's clear that when lyrics are sub-titled on ζ lm songs, and words appear in sync with the actor's voice, the viewer makes a sub-conscious link of the spoken to the written word. Literacy, thus, takes a sudden leap for early and struggling readers. For the past ζ ve years, every Sunday morning, 15 crore persons are reported to have watched *Chitrahaar* and *Rangoli* with subtitles.

An AC Nielsen study, conducted in 2002 and 2007 to assess the impact of sub-titling, showed that only 25% school children could read a simple paragraph in Hindi after ζ ve years of schooling. However, this jumped to 56% if they were also

exposed to subtitling for 30 minutes a week on *Rangoli*. Equally dramatic results were found among adults.

Writer Gurucharan Das estimates that it costs a pittance (one paise per person per week) compared to the rewards of giving lifelong reading practice to 15 crore early literate persons every week. In his column in *The Times of India* recently, he wonders **why subtitling, which raises the ratings of the programs by 10-15%, private channels have not jumped into this game, including children's cartoon channels.**

The SLS project has received awards from the Tech Museum of Innovation (San Jose), Development Marketplace (World Bank, Washington D.C.), the Institute for Social Inventions (London), and Manthan (New Delhi).

Dr. Kothari, along with P G Vijaya Sherry Chand and Michael Norton have written a book titled *Reading Beyond the Alphabet: Innovations in Lifelong Literacy* to further their innovation. The book focuses on "lifelong literacy", that is retention and improvement of basic reading, writing and numerical skills throughout the lifespan. The authors believe that "the National Literacy movement has successfully generated scores of "literate" people with neo - or semi-literacy skills, but has not been able to adequately address the persistent problems of low skill levels."

The authors are united in accepting that literacy is much more than just the 'three Rs'. They have emphasized the relationship between literacy and personal and social empowerment, and that literacy forges links between skill development and people's everyday lives.

Tatas, RIL, top 2008 Innovator list

For the ζ rst time, the Tatas and the Reliance Industries Limited have found a place in the global top 25 best innovator list of *BusinessWeek*. The 2008 list, done jointly with Boston Consulting Group, has a few surprises but the usual names are still ζ rmly entrenched. The top ten are Apple, Google, Toyota, GE, Microsoft, Tata, Nintendo, P&G, Sony and Nokia in that order.

In the list of world's 25 most innovative companies, Tata group was ranked the sixth position, while Reliance Industries got in at the 19th spot. Interestingly, the Tata group, at sixth position, is ranked higher than companies like Nintendo, Procter & Gamble, Sony, Nokia, Amazon.com, IBM, Blackberry-maker Research in Motion, BMW, Hewlett-Packard, Honda Motor, Walt Disney and General Motors. Besides, Reliance Industries has also beaten global giants like Boeing, Goldman Sachs, 3M, Wal-Mart, Target and fast-growing social networking website Facebook.

While the announcement of the paradigm-busting \$ 2,500 'Nano' car for the masses" made a huge difference, what

supplemented it is the business model that went with it. The world's cheapest car is thanks partly to a distribution model that sells the auto in kits to entrepreneurs who assemble them for buyers.

RIL's reason for its ranking is less spectacular but is nevertheless important. Mukesh Ambani's big push into the retail is known to have got him the recognition.

As usual the survey is weighted towards US companies. The only European entries in the top 30 are Nokia, BMW, Virgin and Audi. Unlike the earlier survey, this year's World's Most Innovative Companies added three ζ nancial measures to the mix to determine the rankings. For this year's list, votes cast in the proprietary BusinessWeek-BCG survey received 80% of the overall weighting, stock returns were weighted 10%, while three-year revenue and margin growth each got 5%.

