

## Same Language Subtitling For A Billion Readers

*"In a fast-changing world, the fact that SLS is still relevant after a quarter-century, says something about its intrinsic value."*

By Prof. Brij Kothari



"Once you learn to read, you will be forever free." These words attributed to Frederick Douglass, an African-American slave who learned to read and went on to become THE intellectual giant in the movement to abolish slavery, still echo powerfully even 125 years after his passing. Douglass' stature in human progress can hardly be reduced to a skill. Yet, his words affirm the foundational value that good reading ability bestows on a person's arc of life in terms of quality of education, information access, socio-economic well-being, and empowerment.

If reading is akin to freedom, how many people in India can read sufficiently well? Although India's literacy rate is 78 per cent (NSS 2018), the quality of literacy is wanting. An estimated 60 per cent of "literate" cannot read simple texts, much less a newspaper. The problem begins in primary school. For nearly two decades, Pratham's Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER) has found that around half the rural children in Class 5 cannot read a Class 2 level text.

In India's population of 1.25 billion above the age of 7, an estimated 600 million officially "literate" people are weak readers who need a lifelong path to reading practice and progress. Additionally, there are 250 million illiterate people who may grow to become weak readers in the future. Is there a viable strategy to give daily and lifelong reading practice to one billion Indians, in their language? Yes, and it is surprisingly simple.

Same Language Subtitling (SLS) is the concept of adding subtitles on existing TV entertainment, in the "same" language as the audio. What you hear is what you read – Hindi subtitles on Hindi films, Tamil subtitles on Tamil films and so on in every Indian language. SLS is already a reality on all English TV content, but not yet in any Indian language.

Eye-tracking studies have demonstrated that SLS gives automatic reading practice to weak-reading viewers. The evidence from pilot studies of SLS on TV in eight Indian languages – Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, Kannada & Panjabi – is strong. Regular SLS exposure results in steadily improving reading skills among all viewers: children in and out of school, youth, and adults. A billion viewers in India watch four hours of TV every day and will do so lifelong. Reading practice from SLS is therefore massively scalable, cost-effective, and sustainable.

Globally, SLS for mass reading literacy was first conceived in India, in 1996. In 2019, after 2+ decades of evidence-based policy-making, SLS became a part of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting's (MIB) Accessibility Standards, under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. Half the entertainment content on TV, in every language, state, and channel, is mandated to carry SLS by 2025. The big challenge now is implementation.

First, policymakers will need to appreciate that SLS is proven and can deliver daily reading practice to one billion Indians. Even a pandemic that shut down schools for 300 million children, could hardly have stopped them from improving their reading skills. Quite the opposite – people are watching much more TV under lockdown. Ironically, the SLS work in India recently sparked Turn On The Subtitles (TOTS), a vibrant campaign for children's reading in the UK. Their PM, Boris Johnson supported SLS in parliament. A number of celebrities like Stephen Fry have chimed in. SLS is going places in the UK.

Second, Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms in India should be required to add SLS on all the Indian language content they host because it is good for reading literacy, Indian language learning, and media access. It is worth recollecting why SLS originally became the norm on all English content on OTT.

The US first implemented Closed-Captioning (CC) on TV in 1980. But extending CC to streaming required a watershed legal battle: National Association of the Deaf (NAD) versus Netflix, 2011. Netflix lost and had to offer captions on all its content in the US and that became a global feature on all English content. Should India mandate SLS on Indian language content on OTT, it will support Indian language reading, learning, and media access opportunities for viewers in India and globally.

Third, academia (where SLS was born and researched), the government (which can frame and implement SLS policy), and the entertainment industry (the lead implementer) need to join forces if we are to deliver reading to a billion viewers. Scaling SLS is relatively straightforward. Aligning intent is not.

Globally, India's SLS initiative for reading is the first of its kind that has progressed from innovation (1996) to policy (2019) in 23 years. In a fast-changing world, the fact that SLS is still relevant after a quarter-century, says something about its intrinsic value. That SLS is not a standard feature yet on the small screen, is a commentary on the glacial pace at which our systems engage with and adopt social innovations. An Atmanirbhar Bharat surely expects our systems to value and implement our own innovations before other countries do.

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