

# Spreading KNOWLEDGE

**Mumbai-based PlanetRead has been working to reach out to illiterates across the country and help them learn reading through the medium of film songs and music videos.**

## HUNED CONTRACTOR

**P**lanetRead is a Mumbai-based non-profit organisation, which has won the US Library of Congress Literacy Award for its innovative programme to promote literacy skills, primarily through subtitles of popular Bollywood film songs-based television programmes.

According to the PlanetRead website, SLS for literacy was first conceived and researched in 1996 at the Indian Institute of Management by Dr Brij Kothari and his team. Kothari is an Ashoka Fellow and the president of PlanetRead. He is also the CEO of BookBox Inc., a for profit social venture producing children's animated stories in more than 25 languages.

He co-founded PlanetRead.org and BookBox.com as a Reuters Digital Vision Fellow at Stanford University. Kothari grew up in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Puducherry and went on to get a Masters in Physics at IIT Kanpur, a second Masters in Development Communication and a Ph D in Education from Cornell University. His doctoral research was on the conservation of local knowledge in Andean Ecuador.



Dr Brij Kothari



He shares his experiences with **Business for all. Excerpts:**

**Could you explain how PlanetRead functions?**

Our innovation is deceptively simple. It is the idea of subtitling audio-visual content in the same language as the audio. Every word is highlighted in perfect timing with the audio, causing a 'what you hear is what you read' effect. At PlanetRead, we subtitle the lyrics of existing film songs and music videos on television in the language they are sung in. Hindi songs subtitled in Hindi, Tamil songs in Tamil and so on in every one of India's official languages. The concept is: Bollywood film songs marry karaoke to produce mass literacy.

**Our approach to literacy in India provides automatic and regular reading practice to over 150 million early-literates – those with weak reading skills – and aims to motivate nearly 270 million illiterate people to learn to read.**

Regular exposure to SLS in primary grades has been found to more than double the rate of functional

literacy achievement and halve the rate of complete illiteracy. SLS exposure was also found to raise the rate of newspaper reading among weak-reading youth, from 34 per cent to 70 per cent. Our approach to literacy in India provides automatic and regular reading practice to over 150 million early-literates – those with weak reading skills – and aims to motivate nearly 270 million illiterate people to learn to read. We have found that PlanetRead benefits women in particular as they represent a large segment of the early literates and make up a large proportion of the audience for Bollywood videos.

**How did this project come about?**

It actually took root in 1996 when



Dr. James Billington, Librarian of Congress, Dr. Brij Kothari, Founder, PlanetRead and Dr. John Cole, Director, Center for the Book at LOC.



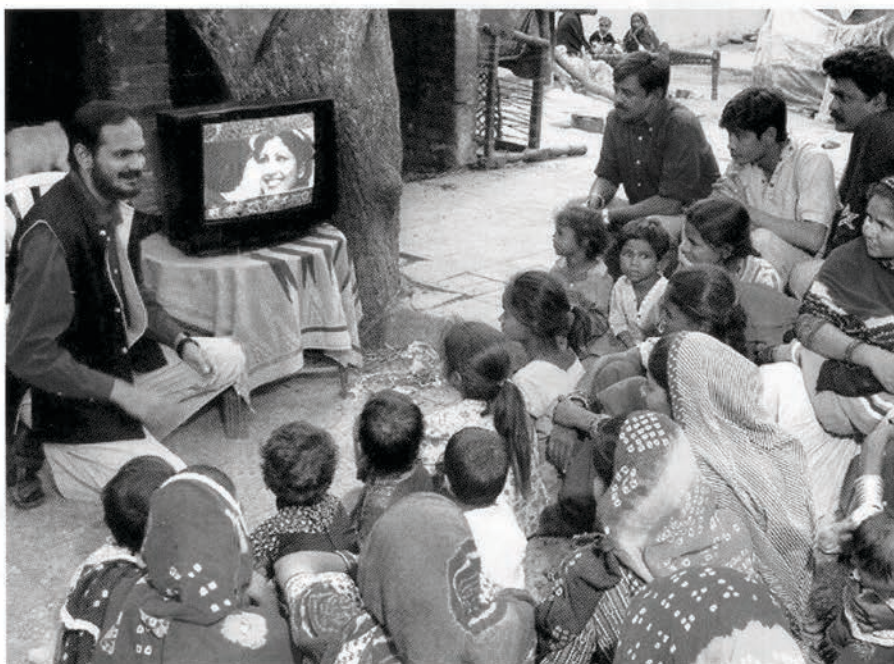
I was a doctoral student at Cornell University trying to learn Spanish. I was watching a film by Spanish director Pedro Almodovar with some friends.

The dialogue was in Spanish and the subtitles were in English. As a Spanish language learner, I wished the subtitles were also in Spanish so as to catch the words better.

It occurred to me then that this could be a powerful reading tool in India. I remember suggesting the idea to my friends, concluding that if Bollywood used SLS titles in its music videos a lot more people would learn to read. SLS was first implemented on a national programme of Hindi film songs in September 2002 and continues to date. Between 2002 and 2012, it has been implemented on a weekly programme in eight languages - Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, Kannada and Punjabi - covering most of the country with reading opportunities.

### Is it an uphill task?

Eradication of illiteracy from a nation that is set to become the most populated in the world in another 10 years is by no means an easy task. Even though the Indian government is doing its best, it is left to socially motivated organisations, devoted to the cause of making India 100 per cent literate, such as PlanetRead, to come up with new solutions. The challenge of creating a learning society is a formidable one, more so for a nation of one billion people. In 2011, 36.5 per cent of fifth grade students in Maharashtra could not read a second-grade level text. In 2012, the figure was 45 per cent. We at PlanetRead are hoping that a scale-up of SLS in Maharashtra will reach 9.2 million children aged from 6 to 14 years.



Brij Kothari interacting with viewers of Same Language Subtitling in Gulbai Tekra Slum, Ahmedabad.

### What assures you that you are on the right path?

Since 1997, several impact studies, including eye tracking experiments, have resulted in this proven approach to reading skill improvement on a mass scale. Independent surveys conducted by AC Nielson's ORG Centre for Social Research found that SLS is preferred by 90 per cent viewers and that it accelerates reading skill improvement among adults and children both in and out of school.

About three to five years of exposure to SLS enables a person with basic familiarity with the alphabet to become functionally literate. Doordarshan has seen a 15 per cent ratings' increase on programmes with SLS.

### What is the BookBox project about?

BookBox Inc. is a social, for profit enterprise. It is a web-based jukebox of digital books in over 24 languages,

including 10 Indian languages, from around the world. At the heart of its strategy is the proven approach of SLS. BookBox grew out of a business plan competition at Stanford University, which, incidentally, we won. Considering the fact that there are about 6 lakh villages and 20 official languages in the Indian subcontinent, making quality print material is a demanding and daunting task. Since parent to child reading is not very popular either, we believe that BookBox can bridge the gap with SLS-integrated e-books. Our stories are available for preview and download on the internet and also on CDs, VCDs and DVDs.

Contact Details: PlanetRead, Maruti Bhavan, Plot No. 268, Sector 31A, Swami Pranavanandji Marg, Vashi, Navi Mumbai - 400 7003. Tel.: 022-32516401.

Website: [www.planetread.org](http://www.planetread.org)

■ ([feedback@businessforall.in](mailto:feedback@businessforall.in))