

Literacy in India

A bolly good read

India tries a cheap and cheerful way of teaching people to read

Apr 25th 2015 | From the print edition

MILLIONS of Indians watch Bollywood movies for the broken hearts, lost fortunes, dishy actors and catchy tunes. But beyond mere escapism, such fare may have a role to play in fighting illiteracy. Between 1991 and 2011 India's official literacy rate rose from 52% to 74%. But about 400m of those counted as literate are only barely so. Bollywood, with its powerful pull among the least-educated, may help the many who can read only simple words.



The power of song

Brij Kothari of PlanetRead, an NGO, believes that “same-language subtitling”—providing subtitles for the lyrics of catchy Bollywood songs—offers valuable reading practice. Fans keen to mimic their screen idols are drawn to the written versions as they scroll by. The repetitive verses offer a chance to practise more complex words. Children learn well when a ball bounces along the words on screen. Adults generally prefer the words to be highlighted as they are sung.

Mr Kothari says the idea came to him when he tried to improve his rudimentary Spanish by watching films in the language, and found himself wishing they came with Spanish subtitles. Students of Chinese will know how useful this can be. Since dialect-speaking viewers may struggle with spoken Mandarin but understand the written form, many films are subtitled in Chinese characters.

Since the mid-1990s, PlanetRead has subtitled songs in a range of Indian languages. Some

are broadcast by Doordarshan, the state broadcaster, in a weekly hour-long programme. Two years ago Zee Talkies, the biggest private film channel in Maharashtra state (of which Bollywood's home, Mumbai, is the capital) began subtitling songs in ten prime-time movies each week. Bollywood songs with subtitles are now estimated to reach 150m-200m Indian viewers each week.

A high proportion are women, 65% of whom in India are classified as literate even though many have poor reading skills. Bollywood's allure among women helps overcome the difficulty of persuading those in rural areas to attend classes away from home. Among children, too, the effect is pronounced. A study by Nielsen, a research firm, found that only a quarter of Indian children become good readers at school. When exposed to just 30 minutes of subtitled film-songs a week, that proportion doubles.

From the print edition: Asia