

[Home](#) > [Education](#) > Reading Between the Frames: Literating Rural India Using Movie Subtitles

# Reading Between the Frames: Literating Rural India Using Movie Subtitles

*Dr Brij Kothari, Founder & Director, PlanetRead and co-lead at the Billion Readers (BIRD) initiative, talks about one eureka moment while watching a Spanish film with subtitles that led him to hop on to a journey of 27 years of liberating people using movie subtitles.*



Pushpita Chatterjee | **Updated:** Thursday, June 08, 2023, 09:38 PM IST





Reading Between the Frames | Special Arrangement

Dr Brij Kothari, Founder & Director, PlanetRead and co-lead at the Billion Readers (BIRD) initiative, talks to Pushpita Chatterjee about one eureka moment while watching a Spanish film with subtitles that led him to hop on to a journey of 27 years of liberating people using movie subtitles. He aims to make it happen on all Indian language content and coined the term 'Same Language Subtitling,' or SLS.

### **What made you come up with this idea?**

The idea struck me in 1996 when I was a student at Cornell University. I was watching a Spanish film with friends, and it had English subtitles. In those days we watched movies on



VHS tapes. As a student of Spanish, I wanted the subtitles to also be in Spanish to be able to catch the words with more ease. I thought out loud, “Hey why don’t they add Hindi subtitles on Hindi films and India would become literate.” Of course, I meant this to happen on all Indian language content and coined the term ‘Same Language Subtitling’ or SLS.

The same year I joined the faculty of IIM Ahmadabad and began researching the possible impact of SLS on reading literacy in villages, urban low-income communities, train stations, bus stops, and so on in and around Ahmadabad.

### **Who are your target audience in specific?**

Our specific target audience is all weak-reading TV viewers. India has one billion TV viewers. Sixty percent of 600 million TV viewers are weak readers, and the majority are female and live in far flung rural areas. They all watch an average of 3 to 4 hours of TV every day and most of it is entertainment content. By adding SLS to the content they watch, we will be able to ensure lifelong, that is, 70 years of reading practice and improvement to one billion TV viewers. Who doesn’t want to be able to sing along to their favourite film song?

### **How are you implementing SLS nationally?**

The core of our strategy to implement SLS nationally is as simple as the idea itself. We are redefining professionally produced video. Today ‘video’ has two separate elements – audio and visuals. We are in the process of adding a third element, SLS, by working closely with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) and the film, TV, and streaming content production industry. Once video is redefined in the industry as having audio +



visuals + SLS, the content licensing and distribution system will allow for any of these three elements to be turned on or off.

**Any challenges that you faced implementing this initiative, if yes what were they?**

The idea was born in 1996 and we are in 2023. It is in its 27th year, has been proven to work in research, has made several policy breakthroughs, and it is yet to be scaled up nationally. That we have faced challenges and continue to do so, is an understatement. Despite the evidence supporting SLS, it took the government 20 years to come around to accepting that SLS has value for reading literacy. But to its enormous credit and leadership, MIB framed the Accessibility Standards, 2019. However, these standards are yet to be notified and that means implementation is lagging. On an encouraging note, the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) is in the process of considering the submission of an SLS file with every film that it considers for certification.







*Reading Between the Frames / Special Arrangement*

**How far do you think you have come and how happy does all of it make you?**

I am ecstatic with the progress we have made with SLS over 27 years. The prize is a billion Indians becoming fluent readers through a lifetime of guaranteed reading practice. From this perspective, 27 years on a simple idea is worth it.

Our SLS project is now the Billion Readers (BIRD) initiative, supported by [Co-Impact](#), "A global philanthropic collaborative focused on improving the lives of millions of people through just and inclusive systems change."



We are now building partnerships with the central government but also state governments to scale SLS, language by language. We are contributing to the development of AI technology for speech-to-text solutions in partnership with national institutes of repute.

“Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication,” is a quote attributed to Leonardo da Vinci. Our BIRD initiative and its core SLS innovation embraces this deeply.

Read Also

**MP Hijab Controversy: Madarsas, Other Edu Institutes To Be Probed, Says CM Chouhan After Damoh...**



(To receive our E-paper on WhatsApp daily, please [click here](#). To receive it on Telegram, please [click here](#). We permit sharing of the paper's PDF on WhatsApp and other social media platforms.)



Follow us on



ADVERTISEMENT

THE  
FREE PRESS JOURNAL

f

tw

in

ig

yt

Analysis	Entertainment News	BrandSutra	Sports	Top News
City News	Bollywood News	Corporate Corner	Cricket News	Photo Gallery
Mumbai News	Hollywood News	FPJ initiative	Footall	Tech News
Indore News	Movie Reviews	Horoscope	Lifestyle	Videos

About Us

Editorial Policy

Careers

Disclaimer

Privacy Policy

Contact Us

Advertise With Us

RSS

© The Free Press Journal

