

Freewheeling



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DR BRIJ KOTHARI

Huned Contractor introduces us to Mumbai-based PlanetRead which has been doing wonderful work in reaching out to illiterates across the country — by helping them learn reading through the medium of film songs and music videos



PlanetRead, a Mumbai-based Indian non-profit organisation, 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 (same language subtitling) 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.

Kothari co-founded *PlanetRead.org* and *BookBox.com* as a Reuters Digital Vision Fellow at Stanford University. He grew up in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry and went on to get a Masters in Physics at IIT Kanpur, a Masters in Development Communication and a PhD in Education from Cornell University.

Excerpts from an interview...

HOW DOES PLANETREAD FUNCTION?

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 each of India's official languages. Every word is highlighted in perfect timing with the audio, causing a 'what you hear is what you read' effect. The concept is: Bollywood film songs marry karaoke to produce mass literacy.

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 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 implement-

ed on a national programme of Hindi film songs in September 2002 and continues till 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' time is by no means an easy task. Even though the Indian government is doing its best, it is left to socially motivated organisations 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, 45 per cent could not. 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.

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 BookBox's 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 6,00,000 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.