

Learning to Read

DR. Brij Kothari and his team have innovated and nationally implemented Same Language Subtitling (SLS) on TV in India, for mass literacy. He founded PlanetRead (*non-profit*) and BookBox.com (*for-profit*) as a Reuters Digital Vision and Microsoft Developing Country Fellow at Stanford University. The SLS project has received awards from organisations like the Tech Museum of Innovation and the Institute for Social Inventions.

Dr. Kothari grew up in Pondicherry and went on to get a Masters in Physics at IIT Kanpur, Masters in Development Communication and Ph.D. in Education at Cornell University. Dr. Kothari speaks six languages and is passionate about creating reading opportunities. A finalist for India's Social Entrepreneur of the Year Award-2008, he tells us more about SLS and its impact in this exclusive interview with *The Human Factor*.

Q. What motivated you to become a social entrepreneur?

A. I owe it to Ashoka, a global network of social entrepreneurs, for nudging me to consider their fellowship. This gave me the courage to transition from being an academic to a social entrepreneur with an academic bent.

Q. Please tell us about PlanetRead and SLS.

A. PlanetRead and the Indian Institute of Management's SLS innovation is the simple idea of subtitling existing song-based programmes on TV in the 'same' language as the audio. It is the first initiative of its kind, anywhere in the world. SLS has already woven regular reading practice into the lives of 150 million early-literate people in India, in their own languages. Over the last 10 years, SLS has been implemented in Bollywood film songs on TV in ten languages. Thus, a Hindi song is shown with

THE SUBTITLES ARE DESIGNED TO CHANGE THE COLOUR OF EVERY word in timing with the song; so ultimately what you hear is what you read

He Who Makes Reading Inescapable



Dr. Brij Kothari, the man who won the Best Social Innovation-2000 award for his work on 'Same Language Subtitling', talks to *The Human Factor* about this award-winning idea that is helping improve literacy

Hindi subtitles in Hindi, Bengali songs with Bengali subtitles, and so on. What you hear is what you read. The subtitles are designed to change the colour of every word in timing with the song.

Several research studies have found that SLS makes reading inescapable and leads to improved reading ability. Furthermore, SLS enhances the entertainment value of song programmes, even contributing to their ratings. SLS is extremely inexpensive. For example, on a Hindi programme, one US dollar gives 30 minutes of weekly reading practice to 5000 people for one whole year.

SLS has been implemented nationally in partnership with Prasar Bharati and Doordarshan. Donors to

the project include Development Marketplace (*World Bank*), Google Foundation, Sir Ratan Tata Trust, Ashoka, Hewlett-Packard, Mahindra & Mahindra and India's National Literacy Mission.

Q. What other areas are you focusing on?

A. BookBox, Inc. is a social venture that

innovated the concept of 'AniBooks' to promote reading and language learning through TV and digital media. AniBooks are animated stories for children, with narration supported by SLS. The key features are: adaptability in different languages; can be distributed on any audio-visual media; cost of production in additional languages is marginal; and they are powered by SLS – a pedagogically sound and proven complement to reading and language development.

BookBox creates and adapts AniBooks in many languages, transporting them to most audio-visual media platforms like TV, internet download, VCD, DVD, iPod, cell phones, and other portable media players. Presently BookBox content is available in a mix of 25 languages.

BookBox has so far produced 20 AniBooks and aims to create sufficient content to mount TV programmes.

Q. What kind of impact has PlanetRead made so far?

A. An independent study by Nielsen's ORG Centre for Social Research has found that SLS more than doubles the number of school children who would otherwise become good readers even after five years of primary schooling.



SLS has a powerful complementary impact because it reinforces reading at home



एक बार की बात है

Once upon a time

The most challenging aspect has been to get educational policy makers to look at the SLS innovation with an open mind

The combined annual budget of SLS project at IIM-A and PlanetRead is one crore at present. That gets us 30 minutes of weekly reading practice for 200 million weak readers. That is regular reading for Rs. 0.05/person/year. For a comparable goal, effectiveness notwithstanding, the government typically budgets around Rs. 150/person/year. So the social ROI for every crore on SLS is 3000 crores. If Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan spent just 5 paise more per child on SLS, it would more than double the number of children who will become functional

readers and halve the number of illiterate children after going through primary education. SLS has a powerful complementary impact because it reinforces at home, the same day, any reading one might have picked up in school.

Q. What are your future plans?

A. Our ultimate goal is to get the Indian education and broadcast policy to accept and implement the SLS innovation on all song-based TV programming, in every language, on the national and state broadcaster, Doordarshan.

Q. What is the ideal recognition for you?

A. Policy acceptance of SLS in India would be my ultimate award because that will guarantee that 200 million weak readers, children and adults would get regular reading practice. Every award helps to enhance the confidence of decision-makers and win supporters.

Q. How can companies help the cause of reading and literacy?

A. Over the last decade, the SLS project

has drawn financial support mostly from foundations. About 10% has come from the Department of Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development. For the first time, we have tapped into a corporate partner, Mahindra & Mahindra. We need to reach out to the corporate sector more as we build a coalition to ultimately influence policy.

Q. What has been the proudest moment of your career?

A. My most satisfying moment was when I first saw a school girl in a village in Gujarat, singing along with the subtitles on a Gujarati film song. I knew we had struck gold. My proudest moment was when the President of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, announced that we had won a global innovation competition for SLS and a whopping grant to go with it.

Q. What has been the most challenging aspect of your work?

A. The most challenging aspect has been to get policy makers in education to look at the SLS innovation with an open mind and a mind that can appreciate hard data.

Q. What people management lessons can you share with us?

A. If you imbue organisational culture with passion for a cause higher than individual glory and financial benefit, self-management becomes the bedrock of people management.

Q. What was the best advice you got?

A. I got wonderful advice from Prof. Randy Pausch's 'Last Lecture' video: "Brick walls are there to see how badly you want something."

Q. What do you enjoy doing in your free time?

A. I love reading to my children, in bed, just before they drift off to sleep into their own world of dreams.

MY MOST SATISFYING MOMENT WAS WHEN I SAW A SCHOOL GIRL in a village in Gujarat, singing along with the subtitles on a film song