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## Words Fail Them

Music and song videos are helping many in India to step into the world of education and literacy. But government policy lags behind supporting innovative ways of improving literacy

Pranjal Sharma

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India's literacy programme may be chugging along with claims of success, but it is leaving behind a huge population that can barely read what's written on the blackboard.

Under government rules an adult or a child is literate just after acquiring the ability to read a few letters of alphabet. The literacy programme does not focus a lot on measuring and nurturing the reading ability of the just literate. As a result, most remain semi-literate. Without continuing support, many slide back into illiteracy.

But in government books, these remain literate. This is pretty much like taking a power line to village and offering a couple of hours of low voltage electricity in a week. From the government's point of view, the village is electrified. The villagers get a few extra poles in the neighbourhood...and darkness remains.

"Studies show that of the 750 million considered literate, about 375 million are weak readers. Without support, they are rapidly becoming illiterate again," says Brij Kothari, faculty at IIM Ahmedabad and founder of Planet Read, a social enterprise.

To attack this, Kothari launched an innovative project that offered same language sub-titling (SLS) for songs based shows on the various channels of the Doordarshan Network a few years ago. In SLS, subtitles appear in sync with the lyrics in Karaoke style. The effect was amazing.

An IIM Ahmedabad study tracked the impact of SLS on semi-literate students. The study compared the literacy levels of 700 students between 2002 and 2007. The literacy levels of those who watched the shows were compared with those who did not. The number of students who were watching SLS shows had seen a doubling of literate kids. Among those who saw shows without SLS, literacy levels fell.

"Kids who were not exposed to text lost their ability to read. But the sub-titles in songs helped the other kids become better in reading and writing," says Kothari. A similar research showed that newspaper reading habit in adults increased after watching SLS shows. Entertainment channels can benefit from this too. "Another project with a private channel showed that viewership ratings of movies and songs with SLS was significantly higher," says Kothari.

As in many good projects, this one continues to remain at the pilot level as the HRD ministry has ignored the impact of SLS. HRD ministry and therefore the state governments are perilously ignoring the semi-literate who remain in the no-man's land of education. The system sees them as literate, but they can't read or write. The government preens with glowing figures, while people slowly forget what they have learnt.

This deeply affects their employability. Kothari estimates that using songs based shows in all Indian languages can directly impact close to 200 million semi-literate people to TV networks and help them become employable.

Since TV watching is at home, even women and girls can learn to read and write. Many are not allowed to go to school or are pulled out of school early. For them SLS can be a boon.

Tackling the massive levels of illiteracy and semi-literacy will require government departments to be open to funding innovating new ideas. Education efforts will have to recognise the existence of semi-literates and create a new policy for supporting them.

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