

# Same Language Subtitling: Karaoke for a well read India

Kishore SU — 16-January 11:00 am 0

Raise your hands if you knew that the karaoke type subtitles that appear on quaint TV shows Rangoli and Chitrahaar as India are aimed at making us a country of billion plus literate people!



SLS on Taare Zameen Par

Same language subtitling (SLS) as a concept struck Brij Kothari, a student of Cornell University, while hanging out at a friend's living room in Ithaca, New York, in 1996, watching an Oscar award winning Spanish movie 'Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown' with English subtitles.

"As a student of Spanish I wanted the subtitles in the same language, so as to catch and reproduce it better. That is when it occurred – if Hindi film songs were subtitled in Hindi, India would become literate," he recalls.

Intrigued by his keynote speech on SLS at the ACM DEV 2013 conference, I catch Brij Kothari, a professor at IIM-Ahmedabad and founder of non-profit organization [PlanetRead.org](#) and a social enterprise, [BookBox.com](#), both dedicated to impart literacy through mass media. He is a Schwab Foundation 'Indian Social Entrepreneur of the Year' awardee, an Ashoka Fellow and was a Reuters Digital Vision Fellow at Stanford University.

After sustained research, Brij and his team have implemented SLS for Bollywood songs on television for the purpose of mass literacy, thereby imparting reading practice to over 200 million early readers in India.

"Initially, the plan was to present SLS as a research article for academic purposes, but a response a pilot we ran in Gujarat challenged me to take it to next level of changing mindsets," he says.

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Kothari started PlanetRead as a Reuters Digital Vision Fellow at Stanford University; the organisation's biggest achievement to date has been persuading public broadcaster Doordarshan to introduce SLS in its Bollywood music shows, Rangoli and Chitrahaar, on DD1, in 2002.

Convincing Doordarshan was not so easy, he recalls, as they were not excited about SLS. They felt it may distract their audience, and had serious doubts about readability due to quick moving text.

It was only after SLS won the Development Marketplace, World Bank's Global Innovation Competition and a 2,50,000 dollar grant to take it forward, things started moving.

"After S.Y Quaraishi, the then Director General of Doordarshan allowed SLS for the first time on Chitrahaar and Rangoli, K.S. Sarma, the next CEO of Prasar Bharati gave the go-ahead to implement SLS in different language and states," says Kothari.

And SLS has travelled a long way – from its first broadcast in 1999 for a film song in Gujarat to 10 regional languages nationwide. Doordarshan has seen around 15% increase in ratings for the programmes telecast with SLS.



An SLS session at Tekra slum in Ahmedabad.

### Reading through Bollywood

Bollywood is really the main attraction. We on our part make sure that the experience of watching Bollywood song becomes more meaningful, and so it becomes karaoke for them, he says.

According to Kothari, the target audience of SLS programmes is a weak reader – children both in and out of school, school dropouts, youth and even adults.

"Conscious efforts are being made to include women in this fold as the concept fits very well in the social space that girls and women occupy," he says.

As per gathered evidence on cost efficiency, SLS costs around 15 paise a person per year for a guaranteed weekly reading practice for 350 million weak readers.

### Literacy and Knowledge gap

But literacy does not always translate to knowledge, isn't it? Well, we are trying to solve one basic problem of comfort

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in reading. This gives people access to information on which knowledge can be built. Basic reading skills also renders children more suited to avail of schooling.

“Without basic reading skills, these people will be left out of the entire information revolution. Today 600 million people in India are left behind by the digital revolution.”

### A book for all dialects

Bookbox, another revolution from the Brij Kothari stable, involves creating a book reading experience for children through an animated story and narration using subtitles.

“Most children in India don’t read children’s books and even more so don’t have access to children’s books in their native language. So here, once you create an animated story with subtitles, it can then travel in any language easily – you just need to replace audio and text. This concept can solve distribution problem, affordability problem and language accessibility problem,” he says. “We have examples of publishing books in lesser known languages of Santali and Bhili because of availability of translators,” he adds.

### Coming to a channel near you

On scaling up SLS to private channels, Kothari says that private channels have taken note of the effort and picked up on it in their own ways. Talks are on with Zee network; they have tested the idea and have found out that people like it.

“The problem with private players is that they don’t want to pay at initial stage but I think there is an opportunity because now big private channels have to allocate 2% for Corporate social responsibility (CSR), so this could be an interesting positioning for them, as they can allocate CSR for literacy because it not only improves TRPs of their programme but also contributes towards literacy.”

Crowd sourcing is another way to build scale and momentum on the book box movement, and this is already underway. Bookbox puts out its English stories and people all over the world access it, translate and narrate it at their end. “But crowd sourcing is not completely under the control of the contributor, we still hold publishing rights due to reasons of quality,” adds Kothari.

### All songs in SLS

SLS’s efficacy in promoting mass literacy has received many national and global recognitions. Bill Clinton called it “a small change that has a staggering impact on people’s lives”. Ministry of Human Resource Development, Google foundation, Sir Ratan Tata Trust, Dell and an anonymous donor are few among notable partners in PlanetRead’s effort to move SLS as a policy.

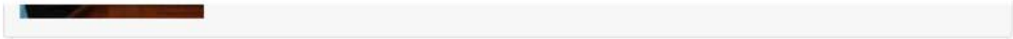
Kothari sums up the possibilities simply – “750 million people in India today have access to television. If we could subtitle all songs, all of them could practice reading. At least half of them are weak readers, so around 375 to 400 million people can easily transition to being fluent readers in the next 5-6 years. If this can happen, it would result in a massive revolution in terms on news papers, media access, and internet access at a national level. We only need policy to move this.”

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