

How reading subtitles is improving literacy in rural India

An initiative aims to bridge the gap between readers and non-readers by creating access to same-language subtitling for entertainment content on television

By **Aisiri Amin**

LAST PUBLISHED 18.01.2024 | 10:30 AM IST

For 20-year-old Santoli Kumari, from Jehanabad district, Bihar, English had always felt intimidating. “I grew up in a Hindi medium school so English never felt familiar or inviting,” she says. But in 2021, she started practising reading English by watching TV shows and films with subtitles in the same language, which made the language accessible. Currently, as she is working towards becoming a police officer, English has become a skill set, not a hurdle.

Same-language subtitling (SLS) is a simple concept of watching video subtitles in the same language as the audio.

Santoli is one of the many people that the Billion Readers (BIRD) project, an initiative by PlanetRead, a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting literacy, aims to reach. Launched in 2021, the Pondicherry-based BIRD project, focuses on developing a daily and lifelong reading practice among people across India using SLS in entertainment content, says Brij Kothari, founder of PlanetRead and lead at BIRD. The initiative especially focuses on young girls and women in marginalised communities for whom education remains entangled in gender disparities.

The idea of using SLS as a way to improve literacy levels started as a research project in 1996 when Kothari was teaching at IIM Ahmedabad. “It seemed like an obvious idea at that time. If you are reading while watching a film you can pick up words and match them with what you hear, thereby improving language skills,” he says. The project led to PlanetRead's launch in the early 2000s to collect evidence about SLS's impact and in 2021, BIRD was launched to implement the solution nationally.

Since its inception, BIRD has focused on bringing policy changes to make SLS an option for entertainment content. Their work has led to changes in national broadcast policy to mandate SLS on 50% of entertainment content on television by 2025 in every language, state, and channel.

“Every time entertainment content, in any regional language, is produced, it should have a file with the same language subtitles. Our research has shown that TV is accessible to all, even young girls and women, in rural areas. They read what they hear,” Kothari explains.

Even when children go to school, especially those from rural areas, they often do not get the support to develop the required skills. For instance, the ASER 2022 report shows that the proportion of children enrolled in class five in government or private schools who can at least read the text of class two stands at just 42.8% in 2022. “But they watch cartoons on TV so encouraging learning through things that they find interesting can improve their language skills. It’s also a way to keep a weak reader reading for life,” Kothari says.

Using SLS as a way to promote literacy is especially helpful for young girls and women, who often face gender barriers in accessing literacy, to become self-reliant. “To date, girls get fewer opportunities for schooling than boys. They can get pulled out of school for domestic work or family obligations. They also face pressure to get married early. Although there are differences in who controls the remote, girls and women generally have access to television, so it becomes a way for literacy to reach them,”

Kothari says. Acknowledging this, BIRD prioritises adding SLS to content that young girls and women watch, which, according to their survey, is mostly music programs such as Rangoli, cartoon shows, educational content, and TV serials.

This has helped women hone their reading and writing skills to find a way to be independent despite the social structures imposed on them. For instance, 50-year-old Fuliben Sodha from Khodi, Gujarat, was part of the initial testing of BIRD in the 2000s where she learnt to read and write Gujarati through subtitles while watching TV programs. Today, she runs a ration shop where she takes care of the record-keeping on her own.

“There is always hesitancy when you aren’t confident to read or write in a language. But that’s not the case for me today, I take care of things at the shop and I’m also trying to learn Hindi through SLS,” she says.

Meanwhile, for 62-year-old Fati Sodha from Khodi, it’s about being able to travel on her own. She has also learnt to read and write Gujarati and a bit of Hindi through SLS. “I have travelled to Delhi, Kashi and Haridwar where I have managed to talk in Hindi,” she says proudly.

For some women, it’s also about breaking generational cycles. Often young girls don’t get support even after enrolling into schools. Bhavana Sodha, 33, from Khodi uses SLS to read and write in Hindi so that she can help her daughter with her homework—to give her the support she never got. “She is in the fourth standard and often needs help with school projects and work. If I can read and write in Hindi, I can also be her support system,” she says.

It’s about making literacy as accessible as possible so that it reaches people who have societal restrictions, Kothari says. “Moreover, often weak readers don’t want to expose themselves. So, SLS is a way of improving reading and writing skills within the privacy of one’s home,” he adds.

Currently, with the rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI), BIRD is also using AI to convert speech to text in Indian languages to significantly reduce the cost of SLS work and make it easier to reach more people.