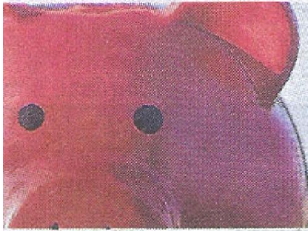


FEATURES



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To this day in the Netherlands and German speaking countries, it is customary to give piggy banks as gifts because they believe that pigs bring luck and good fortune.

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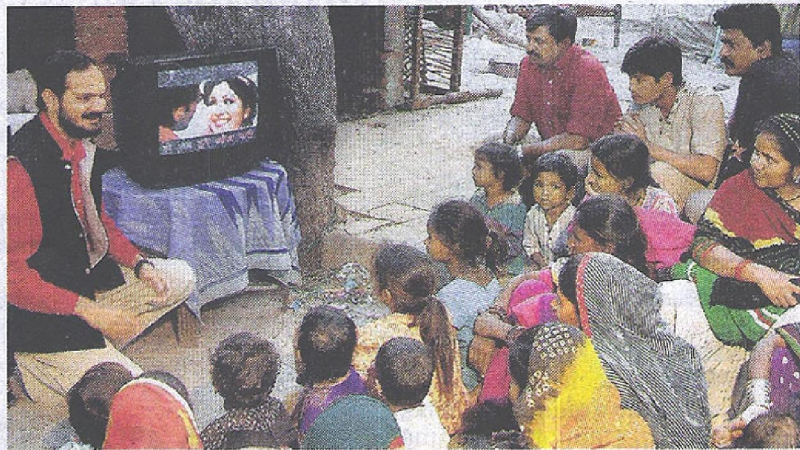
Spreading mass literacy through Bollywood songs

NGO adopts a unique way to teach semi-literates

Debjani Ray

As a student of Spanish, Dr Brij Kothari, former associate professor at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, (IIM-A) used to watch Spanish films, available only with English subtitles. This made him think that if the film had Spanish subtitles, he would have followed the dialogue better and learnt the language. He told friends, in jest, that if Hindi subtitles were put on Hindi film songs, India would become literate. The idea of mass literacy in India struck him at that very instant.

The incident happened in 1996. In the next 12 years, he researched and implemented Same Language Subtitling (SLS) and convinced policy makers of its ability to spread mass literacy. In SLS, lyrics are added as subtitles to film songs on television and words are highlighted as the song is sung. In 2004, Kothari, who specialises in the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for development, founded PlanetRead, an NGO. In collaboration with IIM-A, it has researched and implemented SLS on film song programmes on TV in 10 languages. "The project benefits 200 million weak readers," says Nirav Shah, chief operations officer, PlanetRead.org. Of the estimated 600 million literates in India, says Shah, around 300 million can be called 'weak-literates'. This means



they have a rudimentary knowledge of alphabets. "Since 2006, SLS has been used in a weekly TV programme in Hindi, Gujarati, Punjabi, Marathi, Gujarati, Bengali, Tamil, Telugu and Kannada on Doordarshan," he says. The figures add up to 30 minutes of weekly reading practice to around 200 million weak readers, in their own language, at an average cost of 10 paise per person per year.

The advantage of this project is that since most weak-literates watch films and film-song based programmes on TV regularly, reading has been integrated into their listening habit. "Every year, millions of weak-literates are being added to the population," says Shah. This project could turn Bollywood songs into a learning experience for them. Recently, Mahindra and Mahindra agreed to support the implementation of

SLS on *Rangoli*, a Hindi film song programme.

All this hard work has brought in great rewards for the NGO. The World Bank, Khemka Foundation, Google Foundation, Tech Museum of Innovations (San Jose) and the Institute for Social Inventions (London) have all honoured PlanetRead. The NGO aims to expand SLS to countries where weak reading skills are widespread, TV penetration is significant and song-based programming is popular.

The NGO's next project focuses on children. PlanetRead has been commissioned a project by Sir Ratan Tata Trust to pilot the use of SLS in animated stories for children in Bhili and Santhali languages. The organisation is also working to see that SLS gets implemented on every song-based programme on TV, in all the states.

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