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MEN & IDEAS

Power of subtitles

6 Apr 2008, 0013 hrs IST, Gurcharan Das

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Girirajsingh Natubha studied up to Class 2 in Jamnagar. All his life he struggled to read simple words. A few years ago, however, he found to his surprise that he had begun to read. It happened quite amazingly after he began watching Chitrageet, a Gujarati television programme of film songs, which had subtitles at the bottom of the screen. Since he knew many of the songs, he could anticipate the next word. When it appeared he would read it unconsciously and sing along, karaoke style. Soon he found he was able to recognise words in the bazaar and before long he was reading headlines in the newspaper.

A brainchild of Dr Brij Kothari, a social entrepreneur and an IIM Ahmedabad professor, 'Same Language Subtitling' is a simple but powerful idea which is proven to improve literacy among adults and children. When lyrics are subtitled on film songs, and words appear in sync with the actor's voice, the viewer makes a sub-conscious link of the spoken to the written word. Literacy, thus, takes a sudden leap for early and struggling readers. Based on his powerful academic findings, Kothari decided to become a social entrepreneur and help raise India's literacy. Between 1997 and 2002, he made countless attempts to persuade Doordarshan to allow him to subtitle film songs on TV. Each time he was thrown out of their offices. In 1999, a new director at the Ahmedabad Kendra agreed to experiment with subtitles on four episodes of the Gujarati programme, Chitrageet. It created such a sensation that they had to continue it for a year.

The breakthrough, however, came in 2002 when a new director general of Doordarshan, S Y Quraishi, overrode the objections of his entire risk-averse staff and allowed Kothari to subtitle their hugely popular national programme, Chitrahaar. It happened soon after he won the $250,000 global innovation prize from the World Bank, which he used to pay for the cost of subtitling. For the past five years, every Sunday morning, 15 crore persons have watched Chitrahaar and Rangoli with subtitles. A Nielsen-ORG study, conducted in 2002 and 2007 to assess the impact of subtitling, showed that only 25% school children could read a simple paragraph in Hindi after five years of schooling. However, this jumped to 56% if they were also exposed to subtitling for 30 minutes a week on Rangoli. Equally dramatic results were found among adults.

Despite this success, however, a Damocles' sword hangs over Kothari's head. Unless Prasar Bharati takes a policy decision, subtitling will depend on the whims of each CEO, although the last two have been supportive. Moreover, the Department of School Education and Literacy ought to fund subtitling rather than Kothari having to go with a begging bowl each year to raise funds. It costs a pittance (one paise per person per week) compared to the rewards of giving lifelong reading practice to 15 crore early literate persons every week. Since subtitling also raises the ratings of the programme by 10-15%, i'm surprised private channels have not jumped into this game, including children's cartoon channels.

You'd think that the best way to bring about change in a democracy is through politics. But when our political class is callous, unreliable and venal, you have to depend on individuals. India has always had our spiritual entrepreneurs, the most famous being the Buddha. In recent years we have seen the flowering of business entrepreneurs, making India one of the world's most dynamic economies. Now, we have also begun to produce social entrepreneurs like Brij Kothari who are making a difference. Hence, India is rising not because of its political leaders but despite them.

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