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 **WORK IN PROGRESS: HANNAH BLOCH**



David Plunkert

Literacy, the Subtitle Way

IN 1996, a Cornell University graduate student from India took a VCR break from working on his dissertation to watch Pedro Almodóvar's

ers to practice outside class. But in a country ravenous for TV, same-language subtitling helps change that. It is sometimes referred to as the key-

tion to watch Pedro Almodóvar's "Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown." Struggling with the comedy's rapid-fire Spanish, the student, Brij Kothari, wished for subtitles in the same language: If he could read along in Spanish, he felt sure his proficiency would improve. This prompted another thought: If viewers back home in India could watch Bollywood musicals with Hindi subtitles, would it help them learn to read their own language?

The answer, which no one knew at the time, was yes. In 2002, after years of rebuffs by bureaucrats and broadcasting executives, Dr. Kothari, now a professor at the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad, finally persuaded India's state-run television network, Doordarshan, to start airing same-language subtitled songs. Ratings jumped 15%. The private channel Zee TV followed, relying, along with Doordarshan, on Dr. Kothari's small nonprofit, Planet-Read, to generate subtitles.

More than half of India's children remain functionally illiterate, even after four years of schooling—in part because there is little incentive or opportunity for beginning read-



Brij Kothari

is sometimes referred to as the karaoke approach to literacy.

"In a song," says Dr. Kothari, "the answer is always there. They know the lyrics, so it keeps getting reinforced." He estimates that 200 million Indians have improved their skills by reading along this way—for a tiny fraction of the cost of traditional education programs. A Nielsen division's 2002-07 study of four Indian states found that exposure to same-language subtitling more than doubled the number of functional readers among schoolchildren. Former President Bill Clinton

has called same-language subtitling "a small thing that has had a staggering impact on people's lives."

A career in literacy development wasn't what Dr. Kothari, 49, expected in graduate school. The bearded, guitar-playing Bob Marley fan spent his formative years in an ashram in southern India, earned a master's degree in physics and wrote his Cornell dissertation on Andean farmers' knowledge of medicinal plants. He is determined to see same-language subtitling enshrined as formal policy in India—and places where formal schooling is scarce. "No one can stop a broadcast signal," he says.

PlanetRead is a registered not-for-profit: 501(c) (3) in the United States and 80(G) in India.