

BILLION READERS

Billion Readers (BIRD) Initiative

Annual Report

1st April 2024 – 31st March 2025

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PlanetRead

Contents

Executive Summary	1
Our Work	3
Partnerships	4
Gender & Research	6
Media & Outreach	8
Technology	11
Quality	12
Fundraising	14
Organization Update	15
Financials	20



Executive Summary

Building the Foundations for Born-Accessible Media

BIRD (Billion Readers) is PlanetRead's initiative to embed **Same Language Subtitling (SLS)** into mainstream video content, transforming everyday media into an inclusive reading resource. By enabling people to read what they hear, SLS turns routine media consumption into automatic reading practice - benefiting persons with disabilities, weak readers, women and girls, and multilingual audiences at population scale. In a country defined by linguistic diversity and large-scale media reach, BIRD positions accessible media as both a literacy innovation and a public inclusion strategy.

During 2024–25, BIRD focused on strengthening the institutional, cultural, and technical foundations needed to embed SLS at scale, moving from a pioneering concept to a recognized accessibility norm within mainstream media. The year marked a significant consolidation of partnerships, with the initiative deepening collaboration with governments, regulators, broadcasters, and civil society actors to advance the vision of born-accessible content: media designed for inclusion from the start.

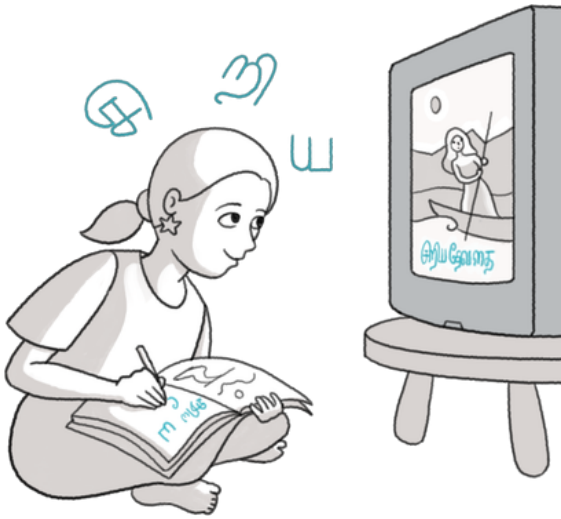
BIRD also translated system-wide goals into practice through initiatives that connected accessibility with everyday culture. StarDost brought together storytellers from cinema, music, and literature to inspire reading through subtitled accessible stories. The Dekhte Dekhte Padhega India (DDPI) campaign encouraged shared family reading experiences and built public awareness of how Same Language Subtitling strengthens literacy through daily media consumption.

On the technology front, BIRD advanced its work on AI-enabled speech and subtitling systems, improved quality assurance workflows, and reinforced internal capacity - laying the digital and operational groundwork for scaling SLS across multiple languages and media platforms.

Overall, the year represented a period of system-building and partnership deepening - anchoring accessibility within national and sectoral agendas, and advancing the integration of reading practice into everyday media experiences. These efforts continue to strengthen the long-term vision of a nation of a billion readers.



Our Work



Our Vision

BIRD aims to ensure daily and lifelong reading practice for a billion people in India to serve a vision: Every Indian, a fluent reader.

Our Values

Six values have guided our work, team culture, and strategy for over two decades

Dignity

Every viewer, language and story treated with respect

Evidence

Research from India's most marginalised contexts drives every decision

Co-creation

Built together with communities, creators, and government

Simplicity

One elegant idea, executed well, at population scale

Coalition

Systemic change needs everyone: regulators, broadcasters, civil society

Agility

Fast learning, quick to adapt in small team.

Our Approach

We take an orchestrated systems level approach. This includes shaping policy so accessibility becomes the norm, equipping the industry with tools and standards to subtitle at scale, generating evidence on what works for whom, and sparking public demand for accessible content. The sections that follow show each of these levers at work.

Partnerships

Building the Coalition for Accessible Media

Systemic change is a team effort. Through 2024–25, BIRD worked alongside national institutions, state governments, regulators, media houses, and research organisations to make SLS a routine feature of Indian media.

Policy & Regulation

TRAI

BIRD's submissions to the National Broadcasting Policy consultation advocated SLS/C for media access, reading literacy, and Indian language promotion. TRAI's final recommendations reflected several of these inputs, embedding accessibility as a key theme for the future of Indian broadcasting.

CBFC

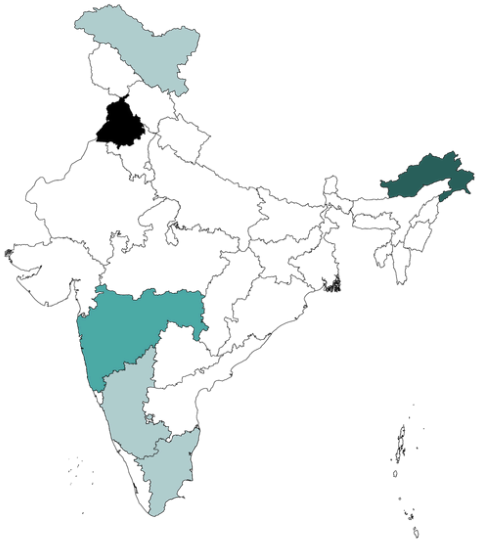
Joint work to promote SLS within standard film certification processes, encouraging industry-wide adoption.

NCERT

Integrating subtitling into children's educational content, aligning accessibility with learning outcomes.

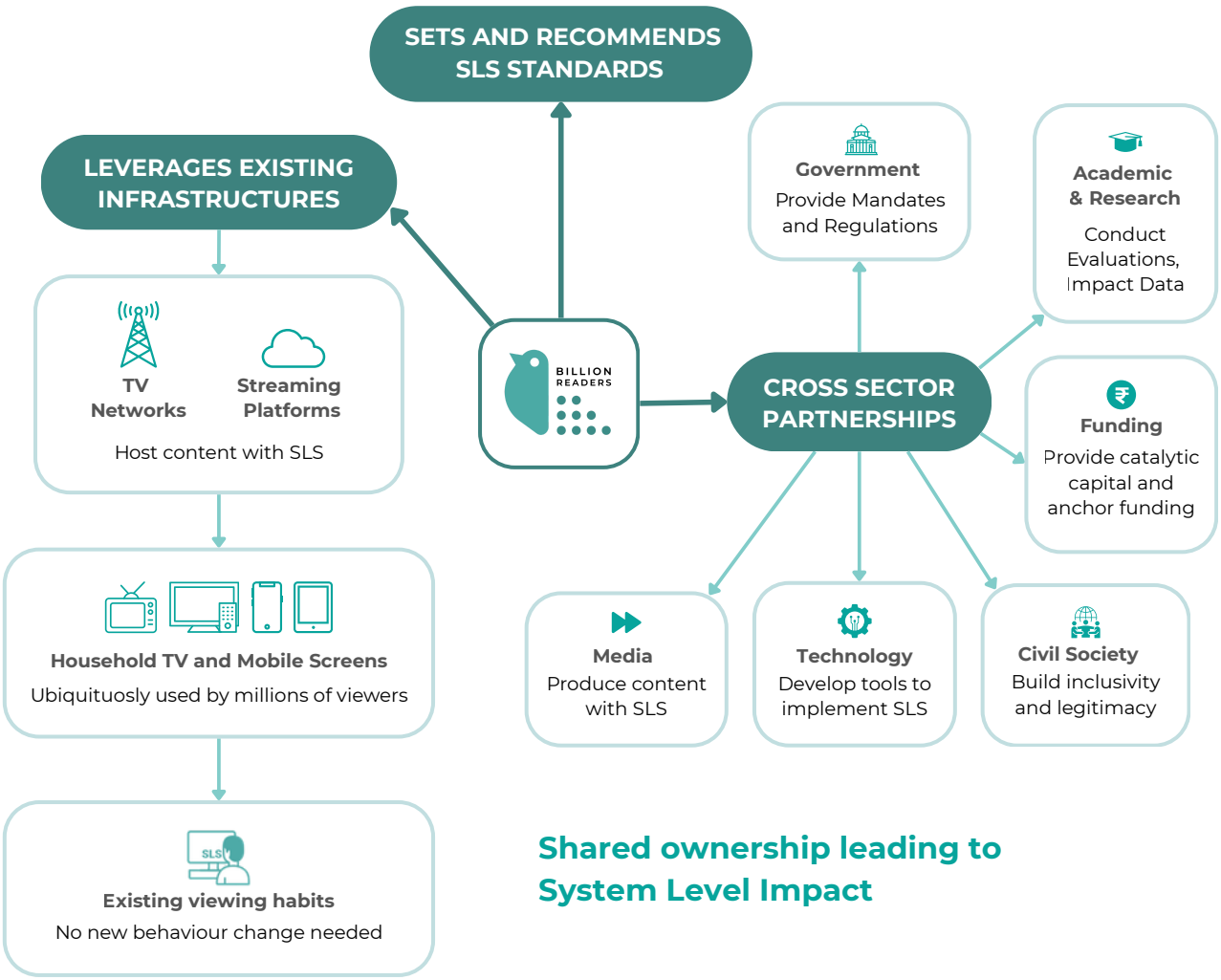
State Governments

- **Punjab:** An operational BIRD office now coordinates SLS in Punjabi films and television, alongside community reading initiatives.
- **Arunachal Pradesh:** Subtitling introduced for indigenous-language content, serving both accessibility and language conservation.
- **Maharashtra:** Groundwork laid for SLS within publicly funded education media.
- **Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Jammu and Kashmir:** Early-stage partnerships toward state-level policy adoption.



Media & Industry Partnerships expanding SLS programming across Indian languages, with Doordarshan, Toonz Media, Tulsea.

Research, Technology / AI and Civil Society moving SLS from a project to a system of how India produces, regulates, and consumes media. Pratham (ASER), Gram Vaani to gather population-level data on reading and media habits and gain insights. Microsoft Research India, Camb.AI and BIRD are developing and testing AI Subtitling technology.



Gender & Research

At the heart of BIRD's work is a simple but powerful commitment: ensuring that girls and women from low-income households gain equitable access to reading and lifelong learning, through the systematic integration of SLS into the content they watch every day. What sets BIRD's approach apart is its deep grounding in research. Every intervention is informed by field insights and evidence generated from India's marginalized contexts.

To understand how girls and women engage with media and how SLS can strengthen reading, BIRD is building a robust evidence base across geographies, castes, and socioeconomic groups. Our research not only informs implementation but also helps shape gender-responsive SLS strategies.

Feminist Framework

The Feminist Framework is BIRD's tool for ensuring that the films and TV shows we subtitle through SLS promote dignity, inclusion, and gender equity. It helps us critically assess content by examining how women and marginalized groups are portrayed, whether harmful stereotypes or power imbalances are reinforced, and whether issues like violence or harassment are normalized or challenged.

The framework uses a simple rating scale supported by qualitative notes, allowing our team and community partners to bring their lived experiences into the analysis. By applying this lens before selecting content, we ensure that the stories we amplify strengthen our goal of creating more equitable and empowering media environments for girls, women, and marginalized communities.



Insights from Current Research

Content gaps shape what girls watch: In our qualitative study across three Punjab districts, school-going girls watched mostly Hindi cartoons, not by preference, but because Punjabi children's content barely exists. Adult women gravitated to Punjabi serials and devotional programming. The implication is direct: SLS must be prioritised where the audience actually is, and the gap in regional children's content is itself an opportunity.

A population-level baseline now exists for Punjab: Pratham's ASER team assessed reading ability and media habits across 2,400 households in 120 villages in four districts, using ASER's standardised Punjabi reading assessment. For the first time, BIRD can connect reading levels and media consumption at population scale, the benchmark against which future SLS impact in Punjab will be measured.

Awareness of SLS in the Hindi belt is nascent, and growable: With Gram Vaani, we surveyed women across six Hindi-speaking states on their familiarity with subtitled content, particularly on popular channels like Dangal TV. The findings deepen our understanding of how SLS can support reading and media engagement in rural Hindi-speaking communities, with a special focus on the intersection of gender and literacy.

Daily exposure builds reading habits: At our community learning centre in Kilokri, Delhi, children combining subtitled videos with a hybrid library of physical and digital books to track changes in reading fluency, confidence, and engagement with text.



Media & Outreach

StarDost is a creative initiative under the BIRD program that was launched as a unique effort to spark the love of reading among children through engaging storytelling, and the power of celebrity.

Launched in December 2024, StarDost invites beloved artists from cinema, literature, sports, and music to read stories to children, each professionally produced as a 4–5 minute video, brought alive with animation, and fully accessible through SLS.

The first episode, featuring internationally acclaimed actor Divya Prabha, released in January 2025.

Episodes have since been filmed with Nadiya Moidu. whose reading of Kabuliwallah captivated audiences at the Kerala Literature Festival, storyteller Indulekha Warrier, Rahul Ram of Indian Ocean, and actor Padmapriya. With each release, StarDost grows into a vibrant, accessible story library for children aged 3–14 and their families.



Divya Prabha



Rahul Ram



Nadiya Moidu

Scan to watch StarDost



Indulekha Warrier



Padmapriya

StarDost's Goals:

- Spark reading through celebrity storytelling that makes children want to read, and parents want to read aloud
- Celebrate regional literature telling stories from India's many languages and cultures
- Build early language, supporting parents who lack the time or confidence to read aloud
- To model what 'born accessible' content looks like

Inviting everyone to read along

While StarDost brings reading to life through celebrity voices, BIRD also wanted to bring it home, encouraging parents, siblings, teachers, and children to read aloud in their own spaces. Dekhte Dekhte Padhega India was piloted as this outreach-first initiative, blending storytelling with Same Language Subtitling and inviting people to record and send in their own read-aloud videos. The first episode was shot by BIRD featuring Kiran Mahendroo, demonstrated the format, capturing the joy of reading the initiative hopes to build on.



Kiran Mahendroo Reads 'Thoda Jeha Hor' | Punjabi Story | DDPI | Join the Reading...

First Songs

With EkStep's Bachpan Manao initiative and Pratham, BIRD is building a linguistically rich collection of lullabies with SLS, preserving first songs across Indian languages.

The project launched with a dedicated microsite.

This year we contributed to public discourse through various op-eds

Bar and Bench

Plea in Delhi High Court
05th Dec 2024
to add accessibility features to Pushpa 2 movie for persons with disabilities

AQA Questions matter

TV subtitles as an aid to literacy
11th Apr 2024
What does the research say?

THE WIRE

The Right to Entertainment
20th Nov 2024
It's Time to Notify Accessibility Standards for Television Content

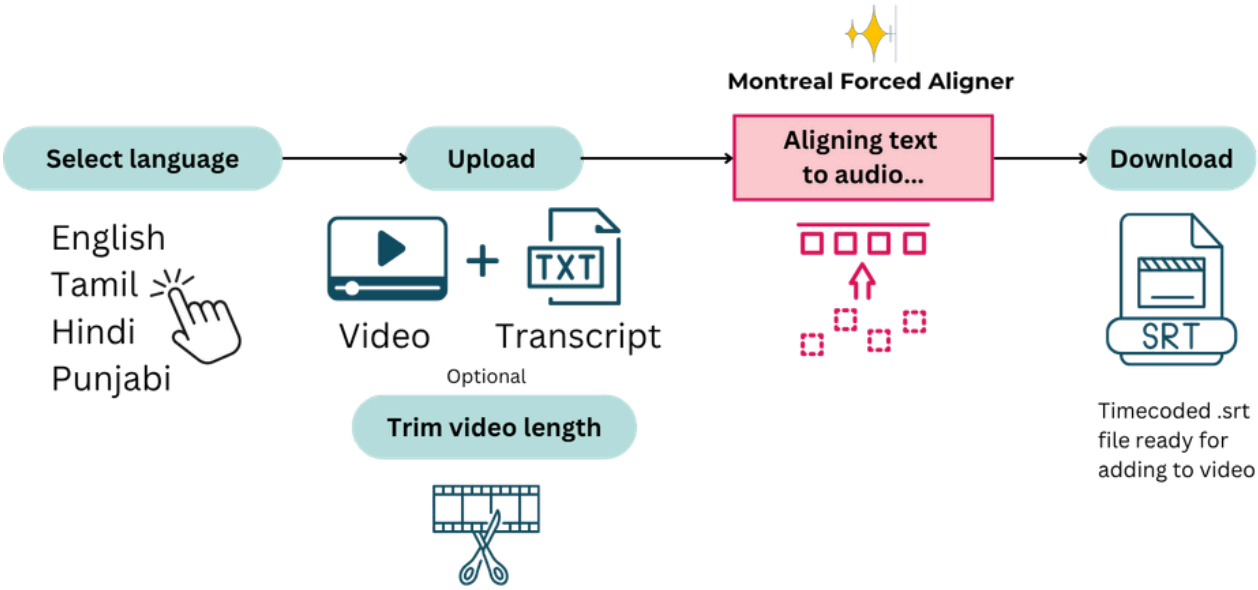
Seattle's Child

Turn on the Subtitles
22nd Mar 2024
Encourage parents to use subtitles when watching television with kids.

Teaching Machines to Subtitle

Creating perfect subtitles is slow, skilled work, and India needs them for millions of hours of content in dozens of languages. BIRD's technology team spent the year building and testing AI tools that can do this work faster, cheaper, and at scale, while keeping quality uncompromised.

The Auto Aligner: Subtitles that sync automatically to words. Advanced in collaboration with Microsoft Research India and in exploratory work with Ashoka/OpenAI and Camb.AI. Give the tool a video and its script, and it automatically matches every word to the exact moment it is spoken, producing broadcast-ready subtitle files in minutes instead of hours. A working prototype already handles videos up to 15 minutes in English, Hindi, Tamil, and Punjabi. This is the single biggest unlock for making all new content born accessible.

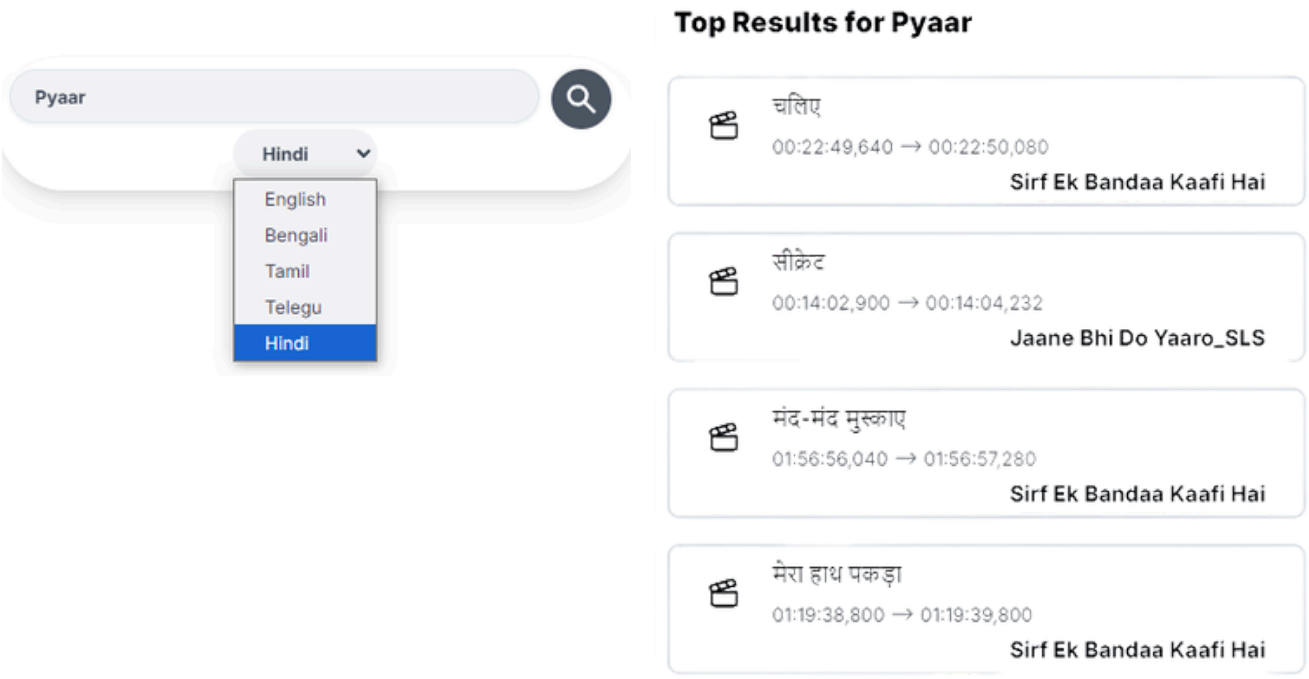


Finding the best AI listeners. Speech-to-text AI software that converts spoken words into written text is improving every month. BIRD runs a monthly benchmark of the leading tools for Punjabi and other Indian languages, tracking which are most accurate. This keeps our own subtitling sharp and positions BIRD as a trusted technical advisor to the film and TV industry.

Subtitles in your glasses:
An experimental project explored smart-glasses (XR) technology that displays live subtitles for Deaf and Hard of Hearing viewers in cinemas in their choice of language, showing how immersive tech can make public entertainment inclusive.



A search engine for movie dialogue. We built a web platform that lets users search film dialogues across Indian languages, a glimpse of the cultural and educational value locked inside movie text.



Growing the talent pipeline. Six technology interns, three from IIT Delhi, three from C4GT, drove much of this prototyping over an intensive two-month programme, building tools and APIs that lay the groundwork for future products.

Quality

Perfect Subtitles, Every Time

SLS works best when subtitles are perfect: word-for-word verbatim, precisely synchronised with the audio, and easy to read. A subtitle that paraphrases, lags, or flashes past too fast breaks the reading effect entirely. Quality is therefore not a final check at BIRD, it is the product.





Current

- Subtitles are positioned too high
- Small font size
- Cramped subtitles
- Multiple dialogues
- Subtitles are on multiple lines
- No subtitle band

Recommended

- Position the subtitles to avoid blocking the scene
- Use a bigger font size
- Increase spacing between words and letters
- Single dialogue
- Keep subtitles to one line
- Add a translucent subtitle band behind the text

More than 70 TV shows in five languages are telecasting with SLS currently. BIRD keeps track of the shows on a fortnightly basis. This tracking is useful for our policy work and advocacy with different government bodies

BIRD met with leading producers in the Hindi Film industry including Yash Raj Films, Red Chillies, etc and sensitized them for the need for quality subtitles and how it is beneficial for them

BIRD is monitoring and tracking TV programs with SLS as well as content with SLS on streaming/OTT platforms.

Fundraising

BIRD has made significant strides in expanding its network of supporters and strengthening relationships with key philanthropic and corporate partners to support its mission. The organization is actively building strategic partnerships with foundations, high-net-worth individuals, and impact investors who share a commitment to improve media accessibility for persons with hearing impairment and indegeneous language preservation.

Partnership Development and Collaboration

Over the past year, BIRD has deepened its engagement with various organizations and continues to explore opportunities for collaboration to scale its impact. These efforts include partnering with media production houses, consulting firms, and philanthropic networks to enhance outreach and program delivery. BIRD has participated in numerous stakeholder meetings and collective initiatives to refine its strategy and prepare for large-scale implementation.

Strategic Priorities



Prioritize the recruitment and development of a dedicated fundraising team to support sustained growth.



Identify influential brand ambassadors and participate in major events to raise awareness and mobilize resources for the initiative's next phase.



Strengthen brand visibility by collaborating with media partners and expand public engagement campaigns.

Organization Update

The Team Behind a Billion Readers

In one year, PlanetRead grew from 20 people in two locations to 40 across seven in Pondicherry, Delhi, Mumbai, Chandigarh, Bangalore, Kerela, Itanagar, and beyond. Growing fast while staying aligned took deliberate work.



Learning together

The Pondicherry team joined a Big Picture Visioning session led by Shweta Suresh, Board Chair of PlanetRead (US) reflecting on the year past, imagining the decade ahead, and setting three priority goals per team member for 2025.





Advisory Board member Vikesh Mahendroo, drawing on 40 years in HR and leadership, led a session on navigating rapid growth.

Strengthening guidance

PlanetRead welcomed two new advisors: Sathyanarayanan Mundayoor, deepening SLS work on language conservation and reading in Arunachal Pradesh, and Luis Miranda, enhancing strategic oversight.

Advisors



Avinav



Raj



Luis Miranda



Tathagata



Vikesh



Sonali



Sathyanarayanan Mundayoor

Governing Board (India)



Chitra



Pekham



Brij

Executive Team



Brij
Founder & Director



Revati
Director- Partnerships & Development



Tanvi
Legal Counsel



Nirav
COO



Parthibhan
CAO



Prasid
Director - Strategic Partnerships

Operations Team



Aditi
Communications Manager



Anusha
Creative Designer



Anushree
Researcher - Gender & Media



Aparna
Director - Content Partnership & Diversity Equality Inclusion (DEI)



Dhanalakshmi
HR Admin



Emma
Project Facilitator, Itanagar



Hema
Field Researcher



Leenata
Video Editor



Malavika
Research Associate - Gender & Media



Priyanka
Video & Subtitle Editor



Regis
Video Editor



Reshma
Hindi Language Expert



Rubina
Operations Manager
(Chandigarh)



Sandhya
Manager - Film & Partnerships
(South India)



Santosh
Video Editor



Saurabh
Eye Tracking Co-ordinator



Sivasailam
Accounts Officer



Sonia
Project Manager



Vijay
Operations Manager
(Mumbai)



Saba
Project Coordinator - Delhi



Swapnil
Video Editor



Tamanna
Field Co-ordinator

Financials

Balance Sheet as on 31st March	2025	2024
Assets		
I. FIXED ASSETS	**14,04,000**	**11,17,244**
II. CURRENT ASSETS		
Loans, advances & prepaid expenses	55,78,675	14,94,319
Deposits	3,33,78,567	6,87,95,595
Cash in bank	11,44,516	65,21,328
Total Assets	**4,15,05,758**	**7,79,28,486**
LIABILITIES		
I. Capital fund	4,13,24,154	7,72,00,305
II. Loan	-	-
III. Current liabilities	1,81,604	7,28,181
Total Liabilities	**4,15,05,758**	**7,79,28,486**

Income and Expenditure Account		
INCOME		
I. Grants & Donations	94,07,660	1,01,08,951
II.Earned Income	-	7,500
III. Bank interest	35,47,234	47,89,268
IV. Excess of expenses over income	3,58,76,151	1,32,46,144
Total Income	**4,88,31,045**	**2,81,51,863**
EXPENSES		
I. Operational costs ***	4,68,25,290	2,75,46,988
II. Administrative costs	20,05,755	5,96,393
III. Bank costs	8,482	8,482
IV. Excess of income over expenses	-	-
Total Expenses	**4,88,31,045**	**2,81,51,863**
Turnover in lakhs	**488**	**282**