

# Streaming for reading

Same Language Subtitling of visual content can enable a viewer develop life-long reading engagement



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Last month, Bollywood released the star-studded *Gulabo Sitabo* on Amazon Prime Video. The movie began streaming with subtitle options in 15 languages. However, the bad news was that the Hindi movie did not have Hindi subtitles.

But why should any movie have subtitles in the same language as the audio? If that sounds absurd, consider why English movies on all streaming platforms come with English subtitles. In fact, in India, English movies shown on television channels too have English subtitles. The Same Language Subtitling (SLS) project at IIM-Ahmedabad has researched and implemented SLS pilots on TV in eight major Indian languages. Six distinct phases of evidence-based policymaking, with milestones ranging from rejection to acceptance, marked a journey that took 23 years. And yet, the most critical policy step remains unaccomplished – quality implementation of the policy on TV channels.

## Revolutionary potential

A national implementation of SLS on existing general entertainment content (GEC) on TV and streaming platforms, also known as Over-The-Top (OTT), would revolutionise reading literacy in India, in addition to having massive national impact in two other domains, that of media access among Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) people and of language learning. India is globally the first country where the mainstreaming of SLS on TV and streaming content is being advanced for mass reading literacy. When SLS is implemented on TV in all Indian languages, as broadcast policy now stipulates, it will automatically give daily reading practice to an estimated 600 million weak readers who currently cannot read and understand simple text, like a newspaper. Within three to five years of regular exposure to SLS on entertainment content already watched, many of them will become functional and some even fluent readers.

Close to a billion viewers in India watch on average 3 hours and 46 minutes of TV every day (FICCI-EY, 2019). No other activity, nationally, comes close to commanding four billion person-hours every day. SLS has the proven power to transform much of TV and OTT content consumption into routine reading practice that is inescapable, subcon-

scious, sustainable, scalable, and extremely cost-effective. COVID-19 has further highlighted the potential of the SLS solution for upping the nation's mass reading skills. Globally, 1.4 billion children, and in India 300 million, have been locked out of schools. Intermittent school openings and closures are to be expected going forward. Even prior to COVID-19, the primary education system's long-standing crisis was captured in the well-known outcome that half of India's rural children in Class 5 could not read a Class 2-level text. The 'Accessibility Standards' of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB), framed in September 2019 under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, require 50% of all entertainment content on TV to carry captions in the same language, or SLS, by 2025. Perhaps, the onus is on Doordarshan to implement its own parent Ministry's standards, before private channels can be obligated to do the same.

## Taking Netflix to court in the U.S.

A policy quirk is that the MIB's Accessibility Standards do not automatically apply to the content on OTT platforms, even though the content overlap is over 90%. In the U.S., the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) took Netflix to court on this issue, citing that its lack of closed-captioning on streaming content was a violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Netflix lost and was ordered to caption all its streaming content by 2014, and to continue captioning content hosted thereafter. This explains why OTT platforms globally now offer captioning or SLS on all English content, because they have a legal obligation to do so. This victory did not come about through an appeal to corporate conscience, but rather, through the courts.

In India, OTT platforms are currently in a dance with the government, arguing for self-regulation. Going by historical precedent, the only languages that OTT platforms provide SLS in are those that have been mandated generally in a country in the 'Global North'. The 'Global South' is lagging in this regard, thus missing out on a simple and affordable intervention that it needs the most to address its low-reading literacy challenge. India could take the lead by mandating SLS on all Indian language content hosted by OTT platforms.

If in normal times, reading along with SLS on TV at home, is known to complement and improve reading skills picked up in school; in the context of school closures and in life beyond schooling, SLS can power lifelong reading engagement and progress.

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