

The Power of Oral Communication

Case Studies to show how Oral Communication helped the native evangelists to communicate the gospel effectively among the majority non-literate population of Bihar State

The Challenge of Reaching the People of Oral Cultures

Non-literate population in India has been posing a great challenge for the evangelization of India and especially this is true in many parts of North India. Many of the rural and tribal people are the least literate people in India today. Except for some tribal people in North East India and the Chotanagpur region, most of the tribal people are still pre-literates. Though the national literacy is 62 percent, yet functional literacy is much lower than this. It is estimated that only about 30 percent of the people are illiterates in the villages of India. The percentage is lower than 20 among the women in the rural and tribal communities.

The Need for Oral Communication

These non-literate people are considered as oral societies and their history is not written but oral and it is kept in the form of poetry, songs, proverbs, stories, narrative dances and various rituals. Their historical and cultural information is passed on from one generation to another through some of these means. To these oral societies, any written form of information and communication has little value. Personal encounter is a basic requirement and oral or verbal communication is the most effective method. The use of storytelling, song, drama, dance, visual illustrations, art and rituals are the best methods of gospel communication. More recently, such methods include the use of radio, tape cassettes, movie films, videos and television.

Communication Bridges Seminar

To meet the challenge of reaching the non-literate people in India, we have developed a study called Communication Bridges to Oral Cultures. This study was originally prepared in 1997 by Scripture In Use (SIU) and later adapted by Bihar Out-Reach Network (BORN) and familiarized as "Communication Bridges Seminars." During the last eight years in Bihar alone we have trained over 2000 people in this program. During the last two years we have extended this program in several parts of India and trained another 1000 people. The following case studies are taken from Bihar State to share the power of Oral Communication and the effectiveness of the "Communication Bridges" method.

The Content of the Communication Bridges Seminar

It is a five-day seminar combining both theory and practical training. There are fourteen lessons covering eight bridges and different aspects of Oral communication. The focus of the seminar is to show the evangelists how to use the oral methods to communicate the gospel effectively and plant churches. Native language, storytelling, Parables, Drama, Songs (Music), God's Story, Memorization, Audio and Video are some of the oral methods taught in the seminar. There is also a lesson to help the evangelists to choose the right story for the different stages of the gospel presentation to the people of the oral culture. A text book titled "Bridge the Gap" is used in the seminar.

Case Study One - from God's Grace Mission Society, Bihar State

I am Dinanath Kumar of God's Grace Mission Society and I live in Fatuha town in Patna District of Bihar State. I was saved from a Hindu family in 1995 through a cross-cultural missionary. I had a desire to learn more about the Word of God and I shared this with the missionary. The missionary sent me to Central India Bible College in Itarasi, Madhya Pradesh in 1996. I finished my two years of theological study and came back to my village in May 1998. I started sharing the good news in the way as I learnt in the Bible college. To my surprise my people were not able to understand my message. I was discouraged and confused and did not know what to do. A few people accepted the Lord after much labor. I continued to preach the gospel. One year passed without much result in my ministry.

Bihar Out-Reach Network invited me to the Communication Bridges Seminar in 1999 February. Jim and Carla Bowman and S. D. Ponraj were the teachers at the seminar. In the Seminar I and my wife learnt how to communicate the gospel to non-literate people using different oral methods. I understood the problem in my communication as I was mostly using "lecture method" and "printed books" which I learnt in the Bible School.

After the seminar I went to the village but this time I changed my way of communication. I started storytelling method using my native language. I used gospel songs and native music. And also I used the audio cassettes and video films such as "Dayasagar" and "Jesus film" which were made available by Bihar Out-Reach Network (BORN). This time the non literate people in the villages began to understand the gospel in a better way. As a result of it people began to come in large numbers to the gospel meeting. Many accepted Christ and took baptism.

I had one church with few baptized members in 1999 when I attended the Bridges Seminar. But now in 2005, in seven years we have 95 churches with 1600 baptized members and 100 more people are ready for baptism. We have 25 evangelists and 50 volunteers all of them are trained through Communication Bridges Seminar under BORN's initiative in Patna. Later BORN helped me to develop my ministry in different ways and that resulted

in developing Church Planting Movements in five different unreached people groups in Patna and Nalanda Districts of Bihar State.

Thus the oral communication methods revolutionized my life and ministry. I found new confidence in my ministry. I saw my ministry growing and established. I am thankful to BORN and Scripture In Use Ministries for providing this wonderful skill-based teachings.

Case Study Two –Good Life Mission Society from Bihar State

I am Pastor Ramesh Kumar of Good Life Mission Society. I started my ministry in the year 1997 and worked in different places in Bihar with two different missions. I had great burden to reach my Chamar people but I was struggling in my communication. Wherever I went I found the people non-literate and they were not able to understand my message. Finally I came to Mohaniya in Bhabua district and started my ministry with great hope. There I tried different methods but I continued to struggle in my communication.

I attended the “Bridges Seminar” – training conducted by BORN in Patna in August, 2002. During the training I learnt the communication skills that were relevant to the oral society. I was convinced that in order to bring my Chamar people to Christ I had to change my methods and use local language (Bhojpuri), songs and Bible stories.

I humbled myself and changed my communication methods. I started using my native Bhojpuri language and storytelling method. I also worked hard with my fellow evangelists visiting the villages and communicating the gospel to the non-literate people. We were surprised to see the good response from the people. We were having gospel meeting in the villages till late night and yet people were not willing to leave as they enjoyed the program so much. They enjoyed the Bhojpuri songs, which contained gospel messages. Many people came forward for prayer for healing and they also accepted Christ as their personal savior.

We are thankful to God for BORN Movement for helping us to understand the oral methods to reach our non-literate people. By God’s grace at present we have 40 village churches (mostly house churches) with over 500 believers. There is a Church Planting Movement among the Bhojpuri speaking Chamar people in our region. Praise the Lord.

Case Study Three –Bethel Prarthana Bhawan Society from Bihar

I am Pastor Jabesh Das of Bethel Prarthana Bhawan Society, Saharsha District, Bihar State. I studied in a Bible college for one year. After the graduation I got the vision to reach the people of Bihar and started my ministry in Saharsha in the year 1999. Many people were coming to me for prayer for healing and the Lord gave special gift to heal people through prayer. Among them most of the people were from the villages and they were non-literates who did not know how to read the Bible. I was

communicating with them in the way I learnt in my church and in the seminary. I was using the lecture and preaching method. I found that they did not understand the gospel. I was struggling without knowing how to communicate effectively to these non-literate people.

Then I had the opportunity to attend the Communication Bridges Seminar conducted by Bihar Out-Reach Network in Patna in the year 2001. In the seminar I learned about the methods of communication to non-literates. I felt that I should change my methods if I have to bring people to Christ and not just by the healing ministry. I decided to follow the oral methods in my communication. I also learned the local language and communicated the gospel through singing and storytelling. I decided to train the local new believers who can communicate in the heart language of the people.

I found amazing results in my ministry when I used the oral communication methods. I saw the people began to respond to the gospel. And many accepted Christ and took baptism. During the last four years the Lord enabled us to plant 22 churches and to baptize over 350 believers. Praise God for this breakthrough. I thank the Lord for the opportunity I had to learn the power of the oral communication methods.

(Rev. S. D. Ponraj is the General Secretary of BORN Out-Reach Network, which he initiated in the year 1992. He has been associated with Scripture In Use for the last eight years. The three missions sited in the case studies are members of BORN Network)

Resources Available at Mission Educational Books

1. **Bridge the Gap** – Gospel for the Non-literates (available in English, Hindi and Tamil). Price: Rs. 80/-
2. **Communication of the Gospel to Oral Cultures** (available in English and Hindi only). Price Rs. 60/-
3. **God and Man** (A handbook with 35 Bible story lessons in chronological order for effective communication to non-literates)
4. **God and Woman – Vol. One and Two** (A chronological Bible Storying model for storying the good news to a primarily oral culture in Muslim Women's world view)
5. **30 Bible Stories for Church Planters** (available in English and Hindi)
6. **25 Favorite Stories** – from Genesis to Revelation (available in Tamil and Hindi).
7. **Discipleship Through Story Telling** – Picture book and guide
8. **Communication Bridges** –VCD / Videos available in English and Hindi
9. **Picture Books** – Story Telling Bible (available in English and Hindi)
10. **Biblical Models for Strategic Mission** (Ten stories for development of leadership for mission – available in English, Hindi and Tamil)

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