

The Role of Partnership in Oral Evangelism: A Case Study in India

By S. D. Ponraj

The Challenge

Reaching the seventy percent non-literate oral population with the gospel in Bihar State, India has always been a problem. Indeed, of the ninety million people who live there, only 0.06% are Christians. For years evangelists and missionaries have been struggling over this issue, not knowing how to solve the problem of communication. In the process many were discouraged and some have even left the field.

The Beginning of Partnership

The Lord, in his sovereign grace, opened up an opportunity in 1998 when we were introduced to one of the most powerful methods of communicating the gospel to oral cultures. A

three-day intensive seminar known as "Communication Bridges to Oral Cultures" was conducted by [Scripture In Use](#) (SIU) ministry. This seminar made all the difference in the church planting program in Bihar. Through this training the grassroots church planters and missionaries in the region have learned the methods of effective communication of the gospel to the majority population of Bihar State. Since 1998 we have trained over three thousand Grass Roots Church Planters (GRCs) and church and mission leaders who are now part of fifteen church planting movements spread across twenty-five different districts in Bihar.



Christians in Bihar State are seeking to reach the more than seventy percent non-literate oral population with the gospel.

A Bible School for Oral Learners in Partnership with Indigenous Missions

Later we felt the need for training new believers not only in "the method" but also in "the message" of communication to oral cultures. In 2004 we opened a six-month residential oral section as part of the Bihar School of Evangelism in Patna, Bihar. People wondered how there could be a Bible School for non-literates; many pastors and mission leaders hesitated to send their students. However, through the Bihar Out-Reach Network (BORN) we built a partnership with the indigenous missions of Bihar. These mission leaders had confidence in BORN and sent their students to the Oral Bible School.

The students found the Oral Bible School an effective way of learning the Bible. While there they learned the Bible, biblical doctrines and church planting skills using different methods of oral communication. While the students in the regular Bible School learned everything through the lecture method, the students in the oral section learned via storytelling, singing, drama, dance, memorization and audio and video cassettes.

The oral section of the Bible School became the most effective tool among other schools in producing grassroots church planters for the church planting movements in Bihar. So far we have trained over one hundred men and women who are working as full time GRCs.

The Power of Oral Communication—A Case Study from Bihar

There is power in oral communication. *Because these orally-trained GRCs go and share the gospel to non-literates using oral methods, we are seeing thousands of people responding to the gospel and taking baptism.* This response has helped us to develop church planting movements among fifteen different people groups in

Bihar. Thus, the “weakness” of non-literacy was transformed by the power of oral communication.

Following is one story of how oral methods have helped indigenous mission workers in Bihar to transform their lives and ministries:

“I am **Pastor Ramesh Kumar of Good Life Mission Society**. I started my ministry in 1997 and worked in different places in Bihar with two different missions. I had a 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 learned the communication skills that were relevant to an oral society. I was convinced that in order to bring my Chamar people to Christ I had to change my methods and use the 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 meetings in the villages until late at 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 the BORN movement for helping us to understand the oral methods we needed to reach our non-literate people. *By God’s grace we have seventy village churches (mostly house churches) with over 950 believers.* We have developed a church planting movement among the Bhojpuri-speaking Chamar people in our region. We have seven missions working among the Bhojpuris in this region and so far we have planted two hundred churches and three hundred small groups and baptized over 5,500 people. Praise the Lord.”

The Role of Partnerships in Oral Evangelism—Case Study from Bihar

BORN has adopted a church planting project called “Bless Bhojpuri” for the twenty million Bhojpuri-speaking people in Western Bihar. It is a *four-way partnership in oral evangelism and church planting*. All four partners have committed themselves to a common vision to reach the unreached people and to bring a total community transformation. We work together sharing our resources in equipping, supporting and mentoring the grass roots church planters. International, national and local partners are involved in the church planting movements among the Bhojpuri speaking people. Groups involved in this partnership are:

- **Scripture In Use Ministries (SIU)**, which is committed to teaching and training the GRCPs through



Students in the Bihar School of Evangelism are being transformed by the gospel.

Communication Bridges materials.

- **Pantano Christian Church** (from Tucson, Arizona USA), which is committed to supporting the GRCPs who were trained in oral methods in our seminars and in Oral Bible Schools. The partnership project is known as "Bless Bhojpuri" which covers the Bhojpuri-speaking people group in four districts of Bihar.
- **Bihar Out-Reach Network (BORN)**, which is committed to bringing different churches and missions together to focus on church planting movements among unreached people groups, and to bring a total community transformation, using oral communication as an effective method. BORN is made up of sixty-two different churches and indigenous missions; it not only conducts training but also mentors the GRCPs and monitors their activities in the field. It provides GRCPs with resources such as picture books and audio and video cassettes in their native language.
- **Local indigenous missions in Bihar State.** There are seven indigenous missions actively involved in church planting movements in these four districts. They were formed by the local Bihari leaders during the last five years. BORN helped them in the formation and establishment of these missions. The mission leaders recruit the students and send them for training. After the training the leaders appoint the recruits as church planters and mentor them to lead church planting movements.

An Effective Partnership

The four partners share six important values:

1. A **common vision** to reach unreached people with the gospel and bring a total community transformation, with a special focus on the people of non-literate oral cultures of Bihar State.
2. **Common values** of believing in the oral Bible and in the power of oral communication. We believe that people of oral cultures do not need to be literate in order to be made disciples and leaders in the local church.
3. A **common mission** to (1) disciple all the people of the oral cultures in Bihar and bring them into a church fellowship, (2) plant churches that would plant other churches and (3) develop a church planting movement.
4. **Common goals** to plant two thousand churches and to baptize twenty thousand people between the years 2000 and 2010.
5. A **common sharing of resources** between each of the partnering agencies. We want to bring all the partners together in order to fulfill the goals that we have jointly set. This involves prayer, training programs, funds, the mentoring process and field administration.
6. A **common appreciation/reporting** that results in each of the partners taking equal credit for the final goal accomplished in terms of baptisms given and churches planted. We have common appreciation for each partner's sharing in the project.

The Result of the Partnership in Oral Evangelism

Through this partnership in the "Bless Bhojpuri" project we have been able to train three hundred grassroots

church planters in oral communication through the Bridges Seminars and the Oral Bible Schools. These GRCPs were under the supervision and mentoring of the indigenous mission leaders and BORN leadership. As a result we have seen God work in mighty ways. Indeed, working together works.

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