Strategizing to Reach the Unreached

Communication Bridges to Oral Cultures

A Method that Caused a Breakthrough in Starting Several Church Planting Movements in North India

by S. Devasahayam Ponraj & Chandon K. Sah

Introduction to Oral Cultures

any of the rural and tribal societies in India are oral societies. They are considered oral because they are either non-literate or semi-literate. Therefore, 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 are passed on from one generation to another through some of these means.

Missionary anthropologist, Paul Heibert¹ (who worked in India for several years, and is therefore familiar with Indian society), has analyzed the different means of storing information by oral and non-literate societies.

They are:

Memory: the use of poetry, songs, riddles and proverbs.

Symbols: the use of color, art, paintings, carvings, symbols.

Stories: the use of stories, dramas, and narrative dances.

Rituals: rituals are the enactments of their fundamental beliefs and speak of their ideas through actions.

In oral societies written forms of information and communication have very little value, whereas personal encounter is a basic requirement. The gospel must be communicated indigenously using songs, dramas, dance, stories, proverbs, visual illustrations, music, art, rituals and other effective methods. More recently media such as radio, tape cassettes, movie films, videos and television have been successfully used.

The Challenge of Reaching Non-literate People in India

As stated above, many of the rural and tribal people in India (75%) are among the least literate. Even though the national literacy average is over 50%, functional literacy² is much lower. It is estimated that only about 20% of the people in the villages of India are literate (less than 10% among women).

The Anthropological Survey of India reports that

the tribes are one of the best studied communities in India. They have their own rich oral traditions. As many as 449 tribal communities, i.e. 70.6% have an ethnographic account...there has been a continuity in the oral tradition which are being recreated."³

S. Devasahayam Ponraj heads up the Bihar Out-Reach Network (BORN), a cooperative partnership of over 50 church denominations and native missionary organizations working in the Bihar State of North India. He is a widely known Christian author in that country.

Chandan Sah is the Administrator of BORN. He and his wife Pramila have been involved in training grass roots church planters. Earlier they served as native missionaries to their home state of Bihar.

Training Grass Roots Church Planters (GPRCs) in North India

In training and developing leadership for church planting, the importance of local people—and their proper training—must be stressed. Many of them will work as volunteers, others as full-time church planters. These are local people who have a burden to reach their own people in their own native geographical location like a block or district. For the last five to six years, hundreds of these grass roots church planters have been identified, trained and used all over North India.

Case Study from North India

The Grass Roots Church Planters (GRCP) Training Program was first initiated by a group of mission leaders who met in Delhi for an informal consultation in July 1994. These leaders discussed the challenge of reaching North India in terms of Saturation Church Planting. They unanimously felt the urgent need to train several thousand GRCPs and proposed a wider consultation of church and mission leaders.

Thus the North India Consultation on GRCP Training was held at Jabalpur in May 1995. There leaders discussed the objectives, training methods, curriculum, teaching materials and structure for the proposed GRCP Training. They also proposed a goal of training 50,000 GRCPs for North India.

Several churches, missions, and networking agencies have considered GRCP Training as a viable and relevant to meet the challenges of reaching the unreached of North India and to plant churches.

Case Study from Bihar State in India During the last five years (1998-2002) about 1,000 grass roots church planters have been trained and raised up in Bihar. How did this happen?

Here are the steps followed:

Step One

We invited the grass roots evangelists (they were not Church Planters at that time) for a seminar on "Communication Bridges to Oral Cultures." We trained about 100 of them in 1998. We noticed a great excitement in these "trained evangelists." It was like their eyes were opened and now they knew what to do and how to do it! We have repeated this training every year since.

The training itself is a 3–4 day intensive course held near the region of the grass roots church planters. Participants often travel by local transportation. Partners of the Bihar Out-Reach

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Network (BORN) often provide the training facilities, food and lodging for each training event. The training is presented by a team of BORN trainers who work in collaboration with about 50 native mission organizations and churches that belong to the BORN training network. Each mission agency recruits and sends its own grass roots church planters to regularly scheduled events (usually about 8 to 10 events are held each year).

Ten Communication Bridges The training consists of the follow

The training consists of the following 10 Communication Bridges:

Day One Bridges 1-4:

- 1. Introduction to Oral Cultures
- 2. Use the Native Language
- 3. Use the Example of Jesus as Storyteller
- 4. Use Scripture Storytelling and Dialogue

Day Two Bridges 5-7:

- 5. Develop Church Planting & Apostolic Teams
- 6. Understand the Circular Process of Church Planting
- 7. Tell God's Story from Creation to Revelation

Day Three Bridges 8-10:

- 8. Use the Parables of Jesus
- Develop Disciples and Leaders through Storytelling
- 10. Use Cultural Adaptations to Scripture in Song.

The training places importance on practical applications of Bible storytelling, music and drama. Plenty of time is set aside for practice and discussion including practical steps needed to plant house churches and start church planting movements through systematic Scripture storytelling, music and drama.

Step Two

We followed up these trained grass roots church planters in their mission fields. We kept in contact with them and continued motivating them to practice what they had learned in reaching non-literate people and brining them to Christ.

Step Three

We provided them resources. This was important because in the process of practicing what they had learned, they felt the need for resources like videos, video players, cassettes, cassette players, picture books, story books, song books, etc. Since most of the GRCPs were either independents or representing smaller missions, they were not able to afford these resources. Most of these items were not available in Bihar even if they had had funds to buy them. In this context Mission Educational Books (MEB)'s partnership helped a lot in providing these resources at an affordable price.

Step Four

We visited the church planters on the field and encouraged them. Sometimes we participated in their field programs such as volunteer training, Children's Bible Clubs, and baptism services. Some of the BORN leaders served as "Barnabases."

Step Five

We invited them for further training. This time we gave some specialized training such as "Reaching the Neighbors", "Ministering to the Hindus," "Strategic Coordinators Training," etc.

This process has continued for the last five years and over 1,000 GRCPs have gone through it. Today they are effective church planters bringing thousands to the Lord.

The Present Status of the 1,000 GRCPs Trained in Bihar

These Grass Roots Church Planters represent:

50 different churches and missions

80% native people (Biharis) and 20% cross-cultural missionaries

60% full-timers and 40% volunteers

80% involved in church planting and 20% in social activity

80% who are below 30 years of age and 20% above.

Brief Overview and History of Bihar Out-Reach Network

Bihar State in India is known in mission history as "the graveyard of missions." In the past, mission efforts did not yield much fruit in terms of conversions and church planting among the caste Hindu and Muslim people groups. Several socio-economic and political factors contribute towards the spiritual dryness of Bihar.

The BORN movement was started in 1992. For the last ten years God has been drawing leaders in Bihar and calling them to united mission. The leaders have come together across many denominational and ethnic lines, from Anglican to Independent and from Baptist to Pentecostal. They know God has called them and is blessing their efforts at a united harvest. They believe He has spoken and is "breathing" on the dry bones of Bihar (Ezek. 37:5,10,11).). "This

is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will put my Spirit in you and you will live." They believe that "graveyard of missions" is becoming a "vineyard for missions" as God pours out His Spirit on Bihar.

BORN is a movement of church and mission leaders who are committed to pray and work together for the total transformation of Bihar through wholistic mission. It represents over 50 denominations and missions who are working towards a goal: To plant 10,000 new churches, to send workers to each of the 1,000 unreached PIN (Zip) Codes and to establish Church Planting Movements among the 100 unreached people groups in the next ten years.

Training Grass Roots Church Planters

The Grass Roots Church Planters are local people—Christians or new believers—of good character who have taken initial training and are committed to work in their own community or place to share the gospel and plant churches. The most effective church planters will be from the unreached communities themselves, the representatives of the local people. This is clearly demonstrated among the GRCPs in Bihar State. These are new believers who are effective in their ministry because they know the people, their language, religion and culture. They are committed to reach their people. For example, the Chamars of Patna District in Bihar are committed to reach their own Chamars in their own district.

Thus training grass roots church planters is the key to Church Planting Movements among unreached people groups.

Church Planting Movement

What is a Church Planting Movement (CPM)? "A CPM is a Holy Spiritinspired and controlled process of

planting indigenous churches among a specific people group or a geographical location that would rapidly grow, mature and multiply themselves and spread spontaneously into the whole population without outside help."⁴

"It is not enough to do evangelism or to plant single congregation" says Floyd McClung, the former president of Youth With A Mission. "We have not done our job unless a movement of fully indigenous, mission-minded, multiplying churches is planted in a people group. Then they can evangelize their own people, city or nation." 5

GRCP Training Integrated into CPM Training

The GRCP Training has been integrated into the Church Planting Movement (CPM) Training. This has given the GRCPs a focus in their ministry. In all the GRCP training Church Planting and Church Planting Movements have taken center-stage.

Bihar: From "Graveyard of Missions" to "Vineyard for Missions"

In Bihar for several years the pastors and evangelists have been working, but without much fruit. In 1997 the Lord brought Rev. Jim Bowman and his wife Carla to North India. We had our first Communication Bridges Seminar in 1998 in two locations in Bihar. 120 evangelists and pastors were trained. They returned and practiced what they learnt in the seminars. There were amazing results in church planting (See Table 1 below).

These totals show a pattern of slow growth in the beginning, but growing effectiveness as time passed. It also shows the positive accumulative effect of a consistent and ongoing training program.

- Table 1177 Sample Sarvey of Charen Growth III Billar	111 1998 ("= est. in 2000, 1 = 2001)		111 2002	
Names of the Leaders and their Missions	Baptisms	Churches	Baptisms	Churches
Pastor Dinanath Kumar, God's Grace Mission	8	1	620	35
Pastor Subodh Daniel, Bihar Missionary Movement	35	3	200	20
Pastor Rajesh Kumar, God's Gift Mission	10	1	125	15
Pastor Mahesh Kumar Verma, Bethel Mission Society	4*	0	82	5
Pastor Jabesh Das, Bethel Prarthana Bhawan Society	0†	0	162	17
TOTALS for 5 of the 50 participating BORN ministries	57	5	1189	92

Testimonies of Church Planters

I thank God for the Communication Bridges Seminar. Earlier I was not able to understand how to communicate the Gospel to my people in the villages who are mostly non-literates. Now I understand how easily I can communicate the gospel to the people in the villages. *Rupa Kumari*

In this training I got burden for my people. [Previously] I was taught to communicate the gospel through the old methods like distribution of tracts and literature and through teaching the Bible. I was confused because our people in the villages can't read much. Now I have the tools to share the gospel to the people. Now I can easily fulfill my vision. *Hanna*, *Bethel Mission*

I was thinking that the stories are for children only and not for the adults to communicate the Gospel. Here I learnt how to use stories, songs, and drama for the communication of the gospel to all people. My eyes are opened now. I thank God for such a seminar. Suhagini, Nav Bharat Mission:

I learnt to communicate the gospel orally. I thought that the Bible is too difficult and I was not able to make it simple for our people. But now I learnt about Oral Bible and how to use it for the people of oral culture. Jennifer, Brethren In Christ Church

The methods of communication of the gospel to non-literates are very useful for my society in Nepal as the literacy in Nepal is very low. I praise God for bringing me to this Seminar. I got the right method at the right time. *Basanti*, *Prarthana Bhawan*

Role of Partnership in Training

A four-fold partnership in training has resulted in equipping over 1,000 grass roots church planters in Bihar State during the last five years. These 1,000 GRCPs are now part of fifteen Church Planting Movements. International, national and local partners are involved in this as we see them in the following order:

First partner (International)

Scriptures in Use Ministries committed to teach and train the field workers in Communication Bridges materials to plant and multiply churches.

Second Partner (National)

Bihar Out-Reach Network committed to bring different churches and missions and to focus on the Church Planting Movement to bring a total transformation.

Third Partner (National)

Mission Educational Books committed to produce the text books (which includes the curriculum for the seminar) in different languages and make them available on time in an affordable price.

Fourth Partner (Local)

The individual local mission or church in Bihar State committed to attend the seminar and to learn the Communication Bridges method and to use them in communicating the gospel to the people with a focus of starting a Church Planting Movement.

This is a case study of how the united and partnership efforts in training 1,000 GRCPs in 'Communication Bridges to Oral Cultures' has resulted in starting fifteen Church Planting Movements among the unreached people groups in Bihar. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹Paul Heibert was born to missionary parents in India and worked in India as a Professor of Anthropology. Paul Heibert, *Anthropological Tools for Missionaries* (Singapore, Haggai Institute, 1978), p.26.

²Functional literate is who is able to practice what he had learned as a literate person. This is in contrast to some who had gone through some years of learning process but still practically not able to practice what they had learned because of non-proper learning process adopted or no opportunity to practice their learning skills.

³S. K. Singh, *Scheduled Tribes* (Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, 1994), p.7.

⁴S. D. Ponraj, *Biblical Models in Strategic Mission* (Chennai: Mission Educational Books, 2002).

⁵S. D. Ponraj, (ed) *Grass Roots Church Planters Training Handbook*, (Chennai: Mission Educational Books, 1996).

⁶Rev. Jim and Mrs. Carla Bowman have worked in Mexico as missionaries for several years. They have established the Scriptures in Use Ministries, USA. They are the authors of *The Gospel Communication Bridges Handbook*, which has been widely used all over the world.

