

The Storytellers of Dulumpur

By Carla Bowman

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It is nightfall in Dulumpur, a miniature hamlet in tribal Jharkand, East India. Thousands of stars cling recklessly onto an ebony sky. The tribal welcome foot washing and the artful, ritually paced serving of the meal on giant leaves take place as if in slow motion. Below the star-encrusted sky this place is suspended in time. Shrouded women dance in a millennia-old line. To the silken movement of saris they rock faintly back and forth on bare feet to an irrepressible, soft, high-pitched, repetitive chant of a biblical song.

The perceived sluggishness of the dance, the foot washing, the ritual meal, and the hypnotic sounds of the music-chant are illusory because there is evidence all around of the reality of hard work: rice and lentils cooked for hours on dry, dung fires; swept dirt streets; immaculate, smooth, plastered, mud-brown walls adorned with white geometric designs and painted with whimsical gazelles floating in a line under tiny windowsills.

Abruptly, a loud beating of the *dolak* assaults the night silence. It is a drumbeat contradicting the slow rhythm of swaying hammocks that creak as the rope-ends make contact with the trunks of the *kikar* tree. Contrasting with the slow motion of village ritual, the drum heralds an arrival. A team of community church planters has arrived at the house of peace, a place for night fellowship consisting of a ceremony of scripture, story, song, drama, dance, and prayer.

Adam, Eve, and the Church Planters

On this night a story of Adam and Eve is told and enacted by the community church planters. It is part of the Old Testament Series, a set of stories being presented in Dulumpur and other tribal villages. A pervasive silence hangs in the air as the drum stops and the actors playing Adam and Eve stroll forward.

The subtle chant-song of the narrator begins. Her voice penetrates the night as she begins to sing the enthralling tale from Genesis 3: "Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made." At this instant a large serpent slithers across the dirt, weaving and gliding toward Adam and Eve. The observers, enraptured and speechless, are gathered under the thatched roof veranda. One can hear a simultaneous, forceful gasp from the audience as the serpent moves across the ground.

It is in reality a small woman wrapped in a silk-stripped sari, slinking realistically in curved slow motion toward Eve. As the serpent lets out a hissing sound the narration in the form of song continues: "The serpent said to the woman, 'Did God really say, you must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" Eve is startled. Her face shows incredulity. The narrator continues in song, changing nothing from scripture, not adding or deleting from the Word of God. The story moves



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on to its conclusion as the villagers of Dulumpur have watched electrified, spellbound.

BRIDGES Curriculum in Southeast Asia

The performer church planters are talented and creative. Their success is due in no small part to the fact that they have been trained flawlessly by Master Trainers in the Madhupur-based “Engage India” hub that is located in the geographical center of the large Indian state of Jharkhand.

These master trainers of *Communication Bridges to Oral Cultures* (“BRIDGES”) curriculum have insightfully identified the communication style of the Santali people group and have used to huge advantage the tribal skills in dramatic arts, music, and dance. Their repertoire of stories complete with drama, song, and dance reaches upward of thirty. The stories are sung to one of twelve traditional tunes with total fidelity to the biblical text.

Other stories have been memorized, but are not yet developed in drama and song. The church planters have been taught to revisit these same stories with dialogue later as the villagers sit in a circle around the storyteller. The trainers have taught the church planters to help the listeners discover the meaning of the story through dialogue. The semi-literate storytellers use the printed Santali Bible as an aide to memorization. They are the ideal practitioners of an orality-based method of evangelism and church planting that has gained popularity and momentum in the past decade.

Communication Bridges to Oral Cultures curriculum has been developed by [Scriptures in Use](#) (SIU), an agency focused on orality training. It is at the heart of the SIU ministry ethos that a systematic church-planting curriculum designed specifically for oral cultures is a powerful tool when it is in the hands of national churches, agencies, and trainers.

We see evidence of the effectiveness and innovation of the Indian trainers by the results in Dulumpur and scores of other villages dotted around Jharkand, where many scripture stories have been adapted to drama. We see results north of Dulumpur, several hundred miles across the Nepalese border, where teams of Master Trainers travel on foot, boat, bus, train, jeep, donkey, and yak to reach their venues. For years now, these teams have faithfully multiplied “BRIDGES” training all across Nepal and on the borders with Tibet and Bhutan.

We see the effectiveness of national trainers multiplying this training among twenty-eight Majority World churches and agencies of South Asia. Their ownership of the method and material has inspired the translation of manuals and video supplements into eleven languages of the Indian sub-continent alone. We have observed the leaders of training hubs develop their reproducible innovations: the House Church Bridges Model, Bridges in a nutshell, Bridges for Women on-site demonstrations, Integrated Children’s Ministry, the Esther Institute, Story Bible schools, Bible story training during tailor classes, story memorization after prayer meetings, and multiplying the



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Bridges for Women training in small groups.

There have been other forms of innovation to multiply the training and encourage self-sustainability. Some believers bring goats and rice so food may be shared with participants. Trainers meet with church planters once a month in the context of normal coaching and mentoring. It is no mystery why oral communication methods have been so successful in South Asia. For people groups like the Santali of Dulumpur or the Banjara of South India, the creative arts are their heart and soul. But the success national trainers have had is not limited to that region of the world.

Storytelling Trainers Journeying from the Rising of the Sun to Its' Setting

In Vietnam, storytellers journey with their "Traveling Bibles," the Word of God safely stored in their minds and hearts as they go from village to village. In Sumatra, storytelling teams dramatize Old Testament stories of the prophets and chant corresponding Psalms. In Latin America, we have seen innovative nationals create urban *barrio* story groups in Peru, as well as jungle story groups in Brazil.

Across the Atlantic to the continent of Africa, innovation and multiplication abound: among the Pygmies, an oral Bible school, which is in reality a simple grass-roofed veranda in the heart of the rainforest; long storytelling afternoons under the acacia trees among the Turkana of northern Kenya; storytelling among the nomadic MBororo of Niger; story and dance by firelight for the Tuareg, who have come to the Lord by family group conversion.

In Ethiopia, hard-working trainers travel long distances to be greeted by church planters who welcome them eagerly and embrace their teaching. In Khartoum, the stories from God's word are "internalized" by non-reading oral culture believers after the effective training by an African national from Kenya. In Chad, classes on oral culture communication are filled to capacity, sometimes exceeding seventy students. In Mauritania, stories are encouraged as sweet mint tea is passed.

All across the globe national training teams are presenting what we consider the essential elements of effective oral communication of the scriptures. They instruct new storytellers to memorize the biblical story exactly as it is written. They teach that printed scriptures are an aide to memorization and that the stories must be told with complete biblical accuracy and fidelity to the text.

At the same time storytellers learn how to create introductions and develop dialogue. They are taught how to differentiate wisely between dialogue for stone clearing and dialogue for discipleship. They are instructed to follow chronological order in their storytelling, as well as to select from worldview story collections. They are encouraged to have command of 50-225 stories. Although scripture tapes, media, and radio presentations are useful tools, participants learn that face-to-face interaction and community relationships developed through storytelling and dialogue are crucially important. They have also learned that literacy is not dispensable. Literate mentors are essential to teach the stories to non-reading believers and are a key to maintaining fidelity to the word.

In addition to the quality of instruction in the essential elements of oral communication presented in hundreds of events yearly by national training teams, it has been a significant joy to the Scriptures in Use team to see the innovative adaptations made by nationally-led training hubs.

It is a credit to mission leaders and practitioners in the Majority World that they have so quickly become staunch advocates and champions of oral communication of the scriptures. They have demonstrated vision, adaptability, and willingness to venture forward in a new paradigm for missions, utilizing ancient communication methods of the oral arts.

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Carla Bowman and her husband, Jim, are founders of [Scriptures in Use](#). SIU currently holds nearly ninety training events each year in over fifty countries. The Bowmans served as missionaries in Latin America, and subsequently extended their training courses worldwide.