

LITERACY MOVEMENTS

The community house may serve as a classroom for adult literacy classes. India, by official figures, has some 87 per cent illiteracy among her 440 million people. Here, in literacy classes, is where a woman takes on a new world, for when she can read a simple book after six months in the class, she enters a new existence. One young woman said, "At first those scratches on the black chart frightened me. How could they talk to me? Now I cannot put the book down and whether I am ginning cotton, spinning, or pounding the corn, the book is always with me."

I shall never forget the woman with the baby on her back kneeling beside a bench as she was learning to write the names of her children. All at once she looked up, shouting with delight, "Look, here is my baby's name. She has a name. I have never seen the names of my children before. They have names.

Now I have a name." The thumb print had been her only signature.

As many of you know, I am connected with Literacy Village in Lucknow, India. It is Welthy Honsinger Fisher, the founder of this village and the leading spirit in planning and program, whom you have made an international honorary member today. Literacy Village is a campus with offices, classrooms, dormitories, simple staff houses, and a production and writing center. Here teachers are trained to teach adult illiterates, to write and prepare materials for the new literates; and here many social welfare groups in India come for training in various fields.

Literacy Village also has an exciting tin trunk library project. The Tin Trunk is a library of seventy-five paperback, easy-to-read books for the new literates. They are on such subjects as hygiene, family planning,

and farming; and there are many story books. These link literacy with the real concerns of India's 300 million illiterates. The Tin Trunk libraries travel by jeeps and bicycles to villages and markets. The mother who has learned to read can sign a card and take a book straight to her mud-walled home for all of two weeks. Of the many thousands of books loaned, practically none have been lost.

In Africa I was asked to speak many times on the topic of literacy. In one of the United States Information Centers, scores of young men in the audience kept on for hours, asking many questions as to what they could do with their illiterates. "Forty-three per cent of our population is under fifteen years of age. How can we let them go the rest of their lives without reading and writing if we expect to build a strong nation?" "What are you doing in Literacy Village?" "What did you find on this trip that other African nations were doing about this problem?" These were some of their questions.

Christian missions have been helping on literacy in both Asia and Africa with few exceptions the leaders of today in all fields had their primary education, at least, in a church mission school. The missionary was the keystone of all education in Central Africa until the last few years. One African said, "Every hospital today in this part of Africa began with the first aid kit on the veranda of a missionary's home."

There are few nationals to fill teaching positions in Africa's new secondary schools, teacher training institutes, and technical schools, or in expanded college curriculums. Vast numbers of Americans in the last two years have been called in to fill such posts. Peace Corps Volunteers are a part of this new teaching army. Sometimes I wonder, when seeing them at work, which one is the pupil and which one the teacher. One Peace Corps Volunteer said, "Back home in America you think we are doing something for these people. Don't you worry, they are doing something for us much greater than anything we can do for them."