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Laubach in India: 1935 to 1970

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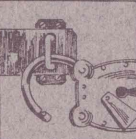


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Laubach in India: 1935 to 1970

BY S. Y. SHAH

DR. FRANK C. LAUBACH, missionary and adult educator, dedicated his life to the cause of literacy for development and world peace.¹ During his travels to 103 countries, he worked toward helping some 60 to 100 million people become literate.² In addition, he founded or helped found four literacy organizations, including Laubach Literacy International; wrote forty books on adult education, Christian religion, world politics, and culture; and co-authored literacy primers in more than 300 languages. He was awarded four honorary doctorates—one of them from Syracuse University.

Although Laubach worked in many other countries, it is said that his heart was always in India, with her massive problem of illiteracy. He played a vital role in laying the foundations of Indian adult education, and his “each one teach one” approach continues to be used there.³ This paper, which draws on the Laubach Collection in the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University, describes his contribution to India.

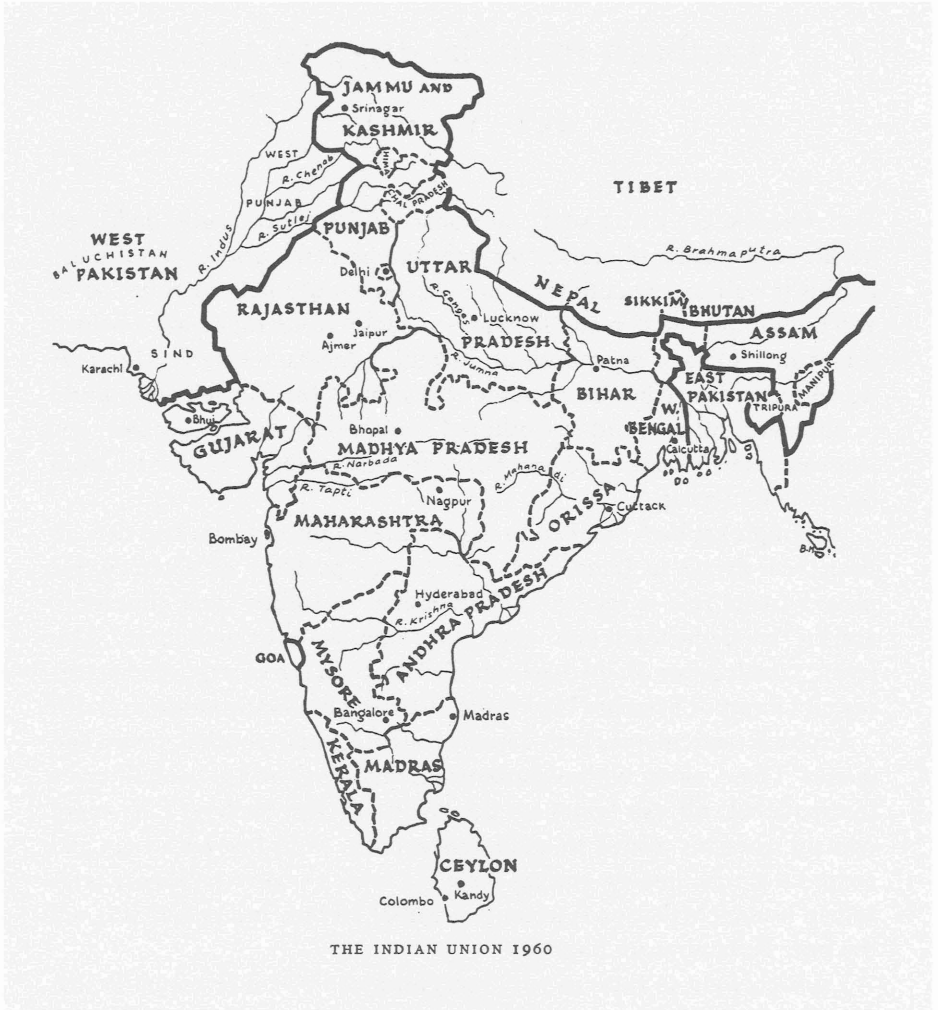
Laubach meticulously kept copies of all his letters, speeches, notes, and diaries. These, along with organizational records from Laubach Literacy International, fill 459 boxes on the Arents Library shelves. Fifty-eight contain materials related to adult education in India between 1935 and 1970. Of special interest among these is Laubach’s correspondence with Indian leaders Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, and the poet Rabindranath Tagore.

Laubach went to India in 1935 and continued his involvement in that country until his death in 1970. His professional association with India fell into three phases. From 1935 to 1947, when India was a British colony, Laubach worked primarily as a Christian missionary. Then, from 1948 to 1955 he acted as a literacy consultant to the newly independent government of India. Finally, from 1956 to 1970, Laubach visited India

1. Born in 1884, Frank Laubach was educated at Princeton and Columbia Universities. After receiving a doctorate in sociology in 1915, he started his career as a Congregational missionary in the Philippines, where he became interested in literacy.

2. David E. Mason, *Frank C. Laubach: Teacher of Millions* (Minneapolis: T. S. Denison Co., Inc. 1967), 83.

3. Although the contents of the primers and the methods of teaching and evaluation have evolved since Laubach’s time, the basic “each one teach one” approach remains the same.



as a representative of his nongovernmental organization, Laubach Literacy and Mission Fund.

FIRST PHASE: 1935 TO 1947

At the time of Laubach's arrival, there were 325 million illiterate adults in India. According to the 1931 census, only eight percent of the Indian population was literate. Though the literacy rate among men was

fourteen percent, it was only two percent among women. With the exception of the state-supported adult literacy campaign launched by the government of Punjab in 1921, there had been hitherto no other concerted efforts to eradicate illiteracy in the country. However, local organizations, philanthropists, and missionaries had established a great many night schools. They used the methods and materials of formal primary schools, though a number of adult educators were using more innovative methods.

Laubach first came to India at the invitation of missionaries, one of whom, Dr. Mason Olcott, had learned of Laubach's work while visiting the Philippines in 1934. "These men," Laubach noted, "expressed their eagerness for me to come to India, though one of them warned me in his letter to expect a task about equal to shovelling the Himalayas into the Indian Ocean".⁴ During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Christian missionaries of British India had established literacy programs to enable church members to read the Bible in their own languages. However, as the teaching process under their auspices took almost three years, they were eager to find a quicker means of instruction.

In January 1935, Laubach departed for India. On the boat he and two assistants, an American missionary and a Hindu gentleman, "with tireless zeal" tried to develop lessons in Hindi like those Laubach had used in the Philippines. He wrote:

I knew the first day that we could never make them as easy as our Moro charts, for whereas the languages of the Philippines have less than twenty letters, Hindi has fifty-one letters—and each vowel is written two ways, making sixty-four forms to be learned. And that is not all, for many letters are applied together, so that the total number of letter forms to be learned is over one hundred. My heart failed me.⁵

Laubach considered sailing past India, "defeated without a fight", but was persuaded by his Hindu friend to continue. Eventually, they decided to divide the Hindi letters into groups having similar sounds, then to create lessons based on key words that used letters from each of those groups.

During his ten-week visit, Laubach also managed, with various assistants, to prepare experimental lessons in Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, and Urdu.

4. Cited in S. Y. Shah, ed., *Foundations of Indian Adult Education: Selections from the Writings of Frank Laubach* (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1990), 62.

5. *Ibid.*, 63.

It was an unforgettable experience to visit village after village where not a soul could read and to see the pathetic eagerness with which men and women learned and taught one another, crowding about the great bright Mazda lantern as far as its rays would reach.⁶

Laubach's ambitious goal was to make all of India literate. Among the obstacles he faced was the fact that there were 226 Indian languages, most of which were basically two languages—in that the spoken and written versions followed separate traditions of phrasing and vocabulary. Even young people who had learned to read in school often lost their skills after returning to their illiterate villages, where there was nothing to read and where the educational gap between illiterate parents and school-going children tended to threaten family unity. Further, during the rainy season people were too busy working in the fields to study, and during the dry months they were exhausted by undernourishment and temperatures up to 120 degrees in the shade.

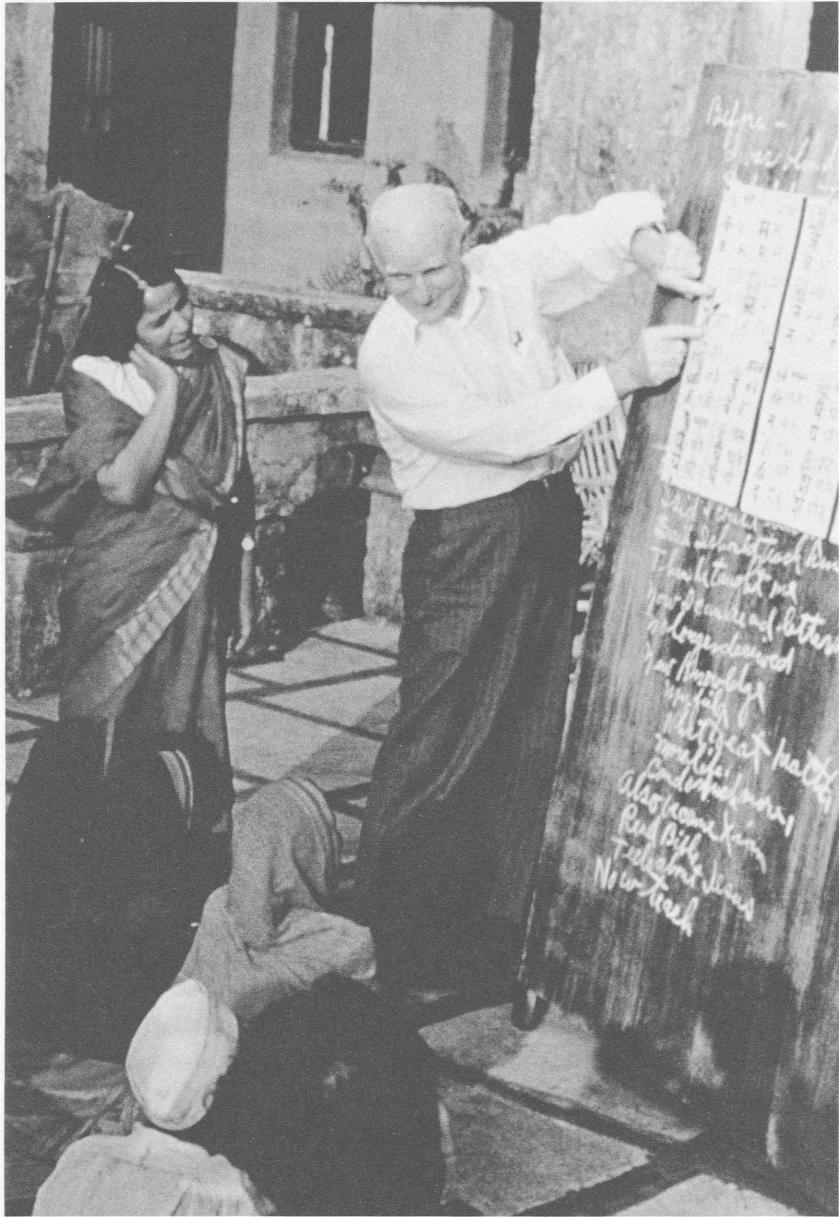
Between 1935 and 1939, Laubach made four literacy tours through India. In each village he visited, he spent a week or two developing primers with the help of local literacy workers, linguists, an artist, and a writer who could prepare text in simple language. Although he did not know all the languages he prepared lessons in, by using an interpreter he was able to learn enough about the structure of each language to recommend a suitable approach.

In between these visits he directed forty literacy conferences at which he learned about instruction methods being used by other educators throughout the country and, with them, formulated new methods. Many variations and combinations of the “key word method” and the “story method” were in common use. The key word method began by dividing the components of written words into their phonetic symbols before teaching whole words. In contrast, the story method first presented words in sentences that combined to tell a story. The phonetic symbols in that case would be taught incidentally.

Laubach was greatly influenced by Professor S. R. Bhagwat's innovative demonstrations of the resemblance between the shapes of letters and of familiar objects. Laubach himself developed the technique of teaching by using charts based on this idea. In such a chart, a picture of a snake in the shape of an *s* might be used, followed by the word *snake*.

Because Laubach considered literacy to be a national concern, he dili-

6. Ibid., 67.



Laubach teaching. (Photos in this article courtesy of Syracuse University Library.)

gently sought the interest of important national leaders. In 1935, for example, he paid a visit to Gandhi to show him a recently completed reading chart in the Marathi language. This is Laubach's account of their meeting:

He was sitting on the floor and I sat down cross-legged in front of him and unrolled the Marathi chart. He took a look at it for a moment, then looked up and said to my amazement: "I doubt whether India should become literate." "You are the first person I ever heard say that," I said, hardly believing my ears. "What do you mean?" "The literature you publish in the West [said Gandhi] is not fit for India to read. Look at what you are writing and selling us on any railway stand. . . . I gave my son a Western education, sent him to England to finish his college work. He learned to drink whiskey and be lazy, and now he will have nothing to do with his father. I am worried about what Western education will do for all India. . . . Many of the greatest benefactors of the human race have been illiterate—Mohammed, for example." . . . "Mr. Gandhi," I said, "you are right about all these points. But on the other hand, millions of us admire you and have read your books with great blessings. If you had not written these books and if we had not learned to read, we should have never heard of you." Mr. Gandhi dropped his head and said meekly: "I think I should have done a little good." . . . "I do believe in literacy for India," he said at last. "Indeed I have probably been instrumental in teaching thirty thousand indirectly myself. But far and away the largest question for India is to feed her hungry multitudes." "That," I said, "is exactly why India needs to become literate. A few educated leaders cannot lift the masses above hunger until they can read and so can learn how to lift themselves. All over the world illiterates have been victims of educated scoundrels who keep them in debt all their lives, and literacy is the only road I see to their emancipation."⁷

Interestingly, four years later Gandhi wrote:

I am converted, and now believe that literacy should be required for the franchise. If each one of us will teach one illiterate, we can make India literate in no time!⁸

7. *Ibid.*, 48.

8. Cited in Karen R. Norton, ed., *The Frank C. Laubach Heritage Collection: Man of Prayer* (Syracuse: New Readers Press, 1990), 17.

In 1937 Laubach also visited Jawaharlal Nehru, who afterwards wrote to him:

I am greatly interested in the literacy movement which is gathering momentum in India. With your great experience in the liquidation of illiteracy, this movement should derive great profit by your cooperation. I hope that the Provincial Governments in India, who are pushing this literacy campaign, will take full advantage of your expert knowledge and experience. . . .⁹

Enthusiasm from such quarters gave respectability to Laubach's programs and helped create a climate conducive to literacy efforts throughout the country. He himself kept a high profile, making public speeches about the importance of literacy. During the 1930s, his chief contribution to India was "to goad her on to efforts tireless and unsatisfied, until at last the solution was found".¹⁰

The sociopolitical developments in India between 1937 and 1939 also favored Laubach's work. In seven provinces of British India, the Indian National Congress Party had come into power with the top priority of eradicating illiteracy.¹¹ Since most of the Congress leaders were already familiar with the literacy work of Laubach, they extended full cooperation to him. He received both political patronage and official support and had the satisfaction of witnessing the success of his efforts. However, he saw them as the foundation of a much more comprehensive literacy program, which he had begun to plan.

Unfortunately, the outbreak of World War II and the downfall of the Congress Ministries in 1939 interrupted Laubach's work and kept him out of the country. Although many Indian missionaries continued to promote literacy, the attention of the Indian leadership focused on the struggle for independence, and literacy programs were allowed to dwindle to insignificance during the 1940s.

SECOND PHASE: 1948 TO 1955

With the emergence of India as an independent democracy, literacy

9. Cited in Shah, *Foundations*, 92.

10. "Report on Adventures in the Campaign for Literacy in India (1936-37)", p. 8, Box 246, Laubach Collection, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University (hereafter cited as the Laubach Collection).

11. On the Congress ideology and the Congress Party's role in the literacy campaign, see S. Y. Shah, "Study of Mass Literacy Campaign in Bihar, 1938-89", *Journal of Education and Social Change* 3, no. 1 (1989): 6-7.

became an important concern of the government of India. Since as early as 1937 the Congress leadership under Mahatma Gandhi had made it a priority, literacy was taken up with renewed vigor when the Congress Party came to power after the independence. As the Indian leaders were already familiar with the work of Laubach, in March 1949 they invited him to help the government of India conduct a nationwide literacy campaign. Sadly, for lack of funds and a suitable infrastructure, the campaign never took place.

In the course of his three-week visit to Madras, Calcutta, Nagpur, Delhi, and Amritsar, Laubach addressed twelve adult education conferences and helped several regional literacy teams to revise their earlier primers in Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, and Hindi. In addition, he trained fifty people in the preparation of post-literacy materials and worked out a plan for a weekly digest for the neoliterate. His public speeches at that time, filled with the patriotic and Christian exhortations common to his day, inspired the public to a new enthusiasm for literacy work:

In the bosom of India are resources sufficient to change poverty into abundance if we can learn how to utilise these resources for the welfare of mankind. . . . I believe that there is enough patriotism now in India for every person who has learned to read to teach somebody else at home at a convenient hour. If the literate people will regard themselves as soldiers in a vast campaign against India's enemy number one, you can get India taught. . . . The greatest interest of the Indian Government to liquidate illiteracy presents the Christians . . . an opportunity to reveal their passion to help other people.¹²

Between 1952 and 1953 Laubach worked as a literacy consultant for India's national Village Development Project, which was funded by the Ford Foundation and the United States Agency for International Development. The nation was divided into blocks, each of which contained 100 villages. Each block had a resource center with technical experts to advise villagers on practical matters including agriculture, health, and literacy. For this project, Laubach guided Indian adult educators in the development of literacy materials and methods, imparted training to literacy workers, and developed a five-year plan for making India literate.¹³ According to this plan, a Central Literacy Office within India's

12. Speech delivered on 26 March 1949, Box 119, Laubach Collection.

13. See *How It Can Be Done: A Suggested Plan for a Nationwide Attack on Illiteracy in India* (Maryland: Koinonia Foundation, 1953).



New readers with circulating “tin can” libraries. In 1953 the literacy center at Allahabad appealed to America for money. Twenty-five dollars would buy a tin trunk containing a Coleman lamp and 100 simple books. Thousands of American people and churches financed these libraries for villages where people were learning to read. The Arents Library holds samples of these portable libraries.

Ministry of Education would coordinate literacy efforts throughout the country and provide literacy programs with training and materials. The goal of the plan was to make the whole country literate by 1972.

During this period Laubach also established three centers for literacy journalism (writing for new readers) at Hislop College in Nagpur, Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow, and Agricultural Institute in Allahabad, and helped establish five social education centers in India for training villagers to be literacy workers. One of Laubach’s major contributions was the development, for the neoliterate, of a popular series of readers, *Anand*, *The Wiseman*, about a small farmer and his wife Revati. Laubach wrote about the readers as follows:

The *Anand* graded course teaches only ten new words a day, and repeats them at least five times so that the student memorizes them as sight words. . . . Each chapter teaches the villager

some new secret which will enable him to have better health, raise better crops and live a happier and more useful life. The contents were all suggested by health and agricultural and home economics experts. . . . These are not written in the form of advice; people do not like to read sermons. They are woven into a story about Anand the wise man and his adventures in reading and applying his knowledge. Experience shows that the villagers are intensely fascinated with these books. . . . They say, "If Anand could do that, I can too."¹⁴

The *Anand Second Reader* had forty chapters, with titles such as the following:

Anand's Wife and Her Neighbour
Anand Reads About Itch and Flies
Anand Makes a Latrine
Anand Learns to Grow Better Crops
Anand Gets Seeds from the Government
Anand Reads How to Make Sore Eyes Well
Revati Learns What to Feed a Baby
Revati Reads How to Make Tomato Chatni
Revati's Daughter Has a New Baby
Anand Buys a New Plough
Anand Plants Fruit Trees
Importance of Vaccination
Anand Reads About a Safe Well
Anand Reads About Malaria
Anand Reads How to Kill Mosquitos
Anand Learns How to Raise Better Chickens
Anand Reads About Leprosy
Anand Reads That India is a Republic.¹⁵

THIRD PHASE: 1956 TO 1970

Laubach had clearly distinguished his role as an official literacy expert from his activities as a Christian evangelist. However, because a vocal group of Indians had begun to brand all missionaries and Americans as anti-India, when Laubach wished to return to the country to resume his literacy activities, some of his Indian colleagues discouraged him.¹⁶ Nev-

14. Shah, *Foundations*, 223.

15. *Ibid.*, 231.

16. Welthy Fisher to Laubach, 15 March 1956, Box 5, Laubach Collection.

ertheless, he was eager to follow up his work in India. In 1956, he made a short visit and discussed, with leaders of the South Indian Adult Education Association, starting a new training center in South India on the pattern of the center in Allahabad called Lucknow Literacy House.¹⁷

By the mid-1950s, the new government policy of encouraging Indian nationals to take over missionary work within the country dissuaded Laubach from becoming too involved with adult education in India. At the same time, Laubach himself established a nongovernment organization, Laubach Literacy and Mission Fund, and directed his efforts toward other parts of the world. Nevertheless, he continued to provide professional and financial support to Indian adult educators and adult education institutions from outside. When Dr. A. K. John, an Indian adult educator trained in the United States, set up an adult education center in Kerala in 1958, Laubach extended financial support to him through the Laubach Literacy Fund, which continues its support even today.¹⁸ In subsequent years, Laubach Literacy collaborated with the Bengal Social Service League in the preparation of literacy materials and sponsored training of literacy teachers in Calcutta.¹⁹ Laubach was also instrumental in providing a grant (U.S. \$10,000) to the building fund of the Indian Adult Education Association and in helping a number of Indians to acquire training in literacy journalism at Syracuse University.²⁰

During the 1960s Laubach made his last two trips to India, primarily to provide professional support to Dr. A. K. John's social education center and to the Bengal Social Service League. Moreover, he met with the top officials of the government of India to discuss the expansion of Indian adult education programs.

LAUBACH'S ABIDING INTEREST IN INDIA

Although Laubach's involvement with adult education in India declined over the years, his concern for that country's problems continued till his death in 1970. A variety of factors sustained his interest, including his great admiration for several Indians, especially Mahatma Gandhi. He wrote:

I believe that Jesus Christ left his heart in Gandhi and in Gand-

17. Laubach to Paul Means, 11 February 1956, Box 5, Laubach Collection.

18. See "Project Overseas: India", Box 247, Laubach Collection. See also Boxes 9, 79, 277, 330, 358, 413.

19. "Report on India", Box 215, and "India: General", Box 246, Laubach Collection.

20. See Laubach's correspondence with S. C. Dutta and others, Boxes 80, 82, 84, Laubach Collection.

hian followers as truly as Christ in the best Christian missionaries. It seems to me that we ought to love and work with those self sacrificing people.²¹

Rabindranath Tagore's poetry was written in the common spoken language of Bengali, a fact that helped it become accepted as a written language. Fascinated both by Tagore's educational philosophy and his spirit, Laubach wrote in his diary:

God! What is man's best gift to mankind? To be a beautiful soul.
. . . That is what I learned as I looked upon the face of Tagore and listened to him. . . His beautiful face reminds me of Moses.²²

Wherever he came across dedicated missionaries and literacy workers, he was inspired. The work of Vinoba Bhave with the poor and landless workers greatly appealed to Laubach. In the early 1950s, Bhave walked 10,000 miles throughout India asking large landholders to give up some of their land. In this way he acquired four million acres for the poor.²³ Laubach devoted a full chapter to Gandhi and Bhave in his famous book *The World Is Learning Compassion*.

Laubach also recognized India's political importance. Citing India's size and strategic location, he cautioned the United States Government that "we dare not lose India if we expect to help Asia live in peace".²⁴ He believed that if America did not help the newly emerging democratic countries like India to solve the critical problems of illiteracy and poverty, they might opt for communism.²⁵ Remembering that India's two communist neighbors, China and Russia, had eradicated illiteracy, Laubach was eager to prove that another significant country like India could achieve literacy in a "democratic and non-coercive manner".²⁶ He wrote:

There are two races in which everyone . . . is a contestant. The first race is between literacy and the world's growing popula-

21. *World Literacy Newsletter* 6, no. 2 (7 March 1952).

22. Frank C. Laubach, *Learning the Vocabulary of God: A Spiritual Diary* (Nashville, Tenn.: The Upper Room, 1956), 9.

23. Norton, *Heritage Collection: One Burning Heart*, 21.

24. Laubach speech of 11 June 1953, Box 139, Lit Lit no. 402, Laubach Collection. See also Laubach to Thomas B. Stanley, 21 July 1963, Box 3.

25. See Laubach address of 27 September 1957, Box 113, Laubach Essays 2, pp. 8-10, Laubach Collection.

26. Dr. P. N. Kirpal (Former Secretary, Ministry of Education, Government of India) audiotape interview with author, 30 January 1989, New Delhi, India.

tion. . . . Literacy is losing the race with population. . . . But there is another race which we are losing. . . . This is the race with communist mass education.²⁷

Laubach did not try to make India Christian. Following a hectic schedule of travel, literacy workshops, and conferences, it would have been difficult for him to engage in actual religious proselytization, which requires sustained efforts and close contact with the masses. He was too restless and busy to have stayed in one place for long. But, more importantly, he wanted people to think of Christianity in terms of loving service rather than doctrine: "We do not want to be thought of as enemies of any other religion but as lovers of men".²⁸ To him literacy was an avenue of service to God. It would seem that his concepts of Christianity and literacy were linked, that they reflected a broader concern for values like love, individual freedom, and service to humanity.

LAUBACH'S ACHIEVEMENT

Laubach enjoyed giving instruction to illiterate adults, and he often stated that he was prepared to forego his food in order to teach them as it gave him more satisfaction. He emphasized the spirit above the technique:

The teacher needs something besides technical perfection, he needs a warm heart. He must call upon all the resources of refinement and courtesy. He must make the experience of learning thrillingly delightful. There is never a frown, nor a rebuke, nor a yawn, nor a gesture of impatience. . . . Of all things, what the humble, ignorant people of the world want most is to have some hitherto undiscovered ability revealed in them. If you find an uncut diamond in a man, he will die for you.²⁹

In addition to good will, considerable thought and preparation went into Laubach's teaching. Indeed, the materials were tested and refined until they were clear enough for nonreaders both to learn and to teach to someone else. He also carefully observed and took into account the ways in which adults learn differently from children:

Children do little synthetic reasoning and do not lean upon judgement to assist their memories. Adults reason constantly,

27. Frank C. Laubach and Robert S. Laubach, "Are We Losing Both Races in Adult Literacy?" Laubach Collection, Box 113, p. 1.

28. See "Laubach Memorabilia, 1979," p. 3, Laubach Collection, Box 126.

29. Shah, *Foundations*, 99-100.



In this graduation ceremony, Laubach awards a diploma to a young woman who has completed her primer.

and lean upon their powers of synthetic reasoning to assist memory. Our experience shows daily that adults can be taught letters and syllables through various memory devices, and when they know these, they can pronounce all the words they have used in their spoken vocabularies. Most children cannot do this....

Not only can the teaching of adults be much swifter and easier than the teaching of children, but it must be so. Children are compelled to attend school. But in most countries adults only study voluntarily. They must be captured and kept by a sense of achievement. If they fail to progress rapidly, or if they find the course too hard, they will drop out of the class....

The subject matter of a lesson must not only remain within the vocabulary of the adult and consist of grown-up material. The lesson must also be built so that the adult student can take the lead as soon as possible, for he does not like to follow long. There must be the fewest possible words on the part of the teacher and

the greatest possible activity on the part of the student. Nothing so annoys an adult as for the teacher to get in his way.³⁰

With each new reader giving instruction to at least one other person, the rate of literacy increased exponentially. The Indian census revealed that between 1911 and 1931 there had been five million new literates. However, as a result of the literacy campaigns that occurred between 1931 and 1951, there were thirty-six million new literates. Ninety percent of them had used methods and materials prepared by Laubach and his team.³¹

The work of Frank Laubach is continued today by Laubach Literacy International, which has its headquarters in Syracuse. The organization sponsors literacy and community development programs in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and North America. The adult literacy programs help individuals and communities solve problems of family health, income, sanitation, housing, and the environment. Such programs currently exist in 17 countries and benefit some 200,000 individuals.

Laubach was one of the most innovative and enterprising, as well as practical, twentieth-century educators of adults: a prolific writer, efficient trainer of literacy workers, and successful builder of literacy organizations. He had tremendous faith in the intrinsic power of literacy to solve the problems of hunger and poverty; in championing this cause, he tapped religious, philanthropic, and secular resources.

Literacy for self-reliance, literacy for equality, literacy for dignity seem to be the three cardinal points of Laubach's adult education philosophy. In a deeply serious manner, he pursued his mission till the end of his life. When he died, there was an incomplete manuscript on his typewriter, which read in part: "We cannot feed all the hungry people of the world. But we can teach them to feed themselves."³²

Note: This is a revised and enlarged version of a paper presented at the Second Visiting Scholar Conference on the History of Adult Education, held in March 1990 at Syracuse University. Grateful acknowledgments are due to the Syracuse University Kellogg Project, which funded the study, and to Dr. Robert S. Laubach, son of Dr. Frank Laubach, who kindly granted permission to quote extensively from his father's papers.

30. Shah, *Foundations*, 182–184.

31. Norton, *The Heritage Collection: Teacher*, 211.

32. Robert S. Laubach, *The Vision Lives On*, (Syracuse: New Readers Press, 1984), 45.