

BRAZIL CONDUCTS

A LITERACY DRIVE

Project Supported by U. S.
Gains in Northeast

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NATAL, Brazil, May 29 — Maria Pequena de Souza's eyes filled with tears when she saw what she had written on the paper before her.

Scrawled across the sheet, heedless of the orderly blue lines, was the word "belota" (tassel). Mrs. de Souza, 32 years old and the mother of six children, cried with emotion. It was the first word she had written in her life.

Little more than a month later, Mrs. de Souza wrote a letter to President João Goulart. The spelling was bad, and the grammar was colloquial, but her words conveyed a clear picture of the anguish of the poor in Brazil's backward northeast region.

"I beg you, sir, for scholarships for my children, because I can't educate them. I work day and night washing by day and ironing at night, so they shall not want. Their father, with six children at home, gets 300 cruzeiros (50 cents) for a day's service. How are we to get by?" Mrs. de Souza wrote.

Literacy in 40 Hours

Mrs. de Souza learned to read and write in only 40 hours of group instruction through an adult literacy project, supported by the Alliance for Progress, in this state of Rio Grande do Norte.

The Brazilian northeast, a nine-state region containing 23,000,000 people, probably has 8,000,000 adult illiterates such as Mrs. de Souza was before she took the course. The Alliance for Progress target is to wipe out this illiteracy by 1970.

No other program in the United States-aided effort to improve economic and social conditions in the northeast has the potential for political reform of the literacy campaign.

"We are not just trying to teach people to read and write. We intend through the literacy program to make these people capable of being citizens," said Philip Schwab, education coordinator of the United States Agency for International Development in Recife, the Alliance for Progress headquarters for the northeast.

Political Message Injected

The literacy course contains a civic, even political message. As they learn to read, the adults are told that "the vote is the arm of the people," "education is for both the rich and the poor" and "agrarian reform is an urgent need."

Francisca de Andrade, a laundress who learned to read and write with Mrs. de Souza, showed in a letter to President Goulart how she had assimilated the political ideas in the course.

"I no longer am of the masses, I belong to the people, and I can stand up for my rights. Mr. President, we need many things, such as agrarian reform, a school, and I want your excellency to put the laws of the constitution to work," she wrote.

Rio Grande do Norte, which is leading in the literacy campaign, is a relatively little state with a population of just over a million people. The state's plan is to teach 100,000 adults to read and write by the end of Gov. Aluisio Alves's term in 1966.

Idea of University Group

The literacy campaign got started here through the efforts of a group of university students and young professors. They obtained the support of Francisco Calazans Fernandez, the State Secretary of Education, and the program was included in the \$3,000,000 United States aid grant for education in Rio Grande do Norte.

The first project was started in Angicos, a typical municipality of the interior, where 75 per cent of the 9,540 inhabitants work in the cotton fields or on salt flats. The course began with 380 adult illiterates.

"When the first rains came in February, we lost half the men, who left to work in the fields, but some sent their children to complete the course," said Carlo Lira, a professor of philosophy, who was a course coordinator.

After 36 hours of literacy and civic-orientation classes, 150 adults completed the course, and 135 were considered literate on the basis of written tests and letters written to President Goulart. The students were also graded on political awareness.

Program is Expanded

The course was rated a success and is now being given in the Quintas neighborhood of this state capital. It will be extended to three interior cities in a few weeks.

The audio-visual method for the course was devised by Prof. Paulo Freire of the University of Recife. Commonly used words are chosen that can be pictured on a slide. The first word that Senhora de Souza wrote, "belota," means a tassel that adorns the riding crops used by local horsemen.

Once the word has been fixed graphically for the students by slides, it is broken into its phonetic parts, and the students build words phonetically. Then they go on to write words.