

Alice Thorner (1917–2005)

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My first meeting with the Thorners, Alice and Daniel (1915–74), goes back to the autumn of 1968: I had just joined the CNRS, having returned from five years in India, and had been appointed to the Centre d'Études de l'Inde, the research centre of Section VI of the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE), founded and directed by Louis Dumont (1911–98), where they were based. But as I was in the Nepalese and Indian Himalaya for most of the next three years, I did not really start to spend time with them till the autumn of 1971, when I came back to live in Paris permanently.

Two events struck me especially that year. The first was international in scope. In March East Pakistan had begun its fight to separate from West Pakistan, which was exploiting it, and become an independent nation called Bangladesh. It brought down upon itself appalling repression from Pakistan. So the Thorners, who were practically the only specialists in the field in France, set about explaining the drama; they were key members of the Comité Français de Soutien au Bangladesh, whose honorary president was Louis Dumont, with as secretary Catherine Bavay, the Centre d'Études de l'Inde documentalist (later to become my wife). Indira Gandhi was in Paris from 7 to 12 November 1971 with the aim of getting the French government's backing for an armed intervention in Bangladesh, which was due to be triggered at the end of the month: on that occasion the Thorners, who knew her personally, invited her to visit the Centre d'Études de l'Inde, which had just moved into the fourth floor at 54 Boulevard Raspail. It was the first meeting between an Indian prime minister and the Centre's researchers.

The second event was more personal. I was about to publish my first article in English on the Muslims of Nepal in the new series *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, edited in Delhi by T. N. Madan as part of a special issue (no. 6, 1972) on the Muslim communities of South Asia. For the first time I had written it straight into English and needed to have it corrected. I rang the Thorners to ask for their assistance: immediately they invited me to come to their home with my paper to talk about it. That

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was the first of my many visits over 34 years to the house at 9 Rue Guy-de-la-Brosse, which always warmly welcomed specialists in the Indian subcontinent from all over the world.

As those years and conversations came and went I managed to piece together Alice's previous career, which had always been linked to Daniel's. They had met whilst sticking up anti-fascist posters on the campus of New York's Columbia University: Daniel was studying history and Alice psychology. From then on their lives were to be marked by a twofold commitment: an intellectual devotion to Indian studies and a political one to the struggle against social oppression. Daniel had written a thesis on British investments in India's railways and navy: in the course of his research in the British archives in 1939–40 he had met Indian nationalist leaders. From 1944 to 1946 he lived in India for the first time as part of an American mission providing Indian railways with technical assistance; Alice joined him for the last three months as a journalist, and so they witnessed the final days of colonial India.

They were to be more closely associated with building an independent India. Indeed Daniel's American career at Pennsylvania University was a short one: appointed in 1948 to an assistant professorship on the South Asia study programme set up by the Sanskrit specialist Norman Brown, he was found to be 'suspect' during McCarthy's 'communist' witch-hunt period because he had refused to testify against his colleague and friend, the Sinologist Owen Lattimore. Thenceforth *persona non grata* in the United States, with his passport confiscated, he was forced to live in India with his family from 1952 to 1960 under Nehru's protection; he was based in Bombay. As Alice wrote (Thorner, 1991a), 'that "punishment" was in fact a reward': Daniel took the opportunity to specialize in the agrarian history of India and carry out surveys in the villages; Alice backed him up in Bombay working on labour statistics. The work resulted in a book they wrote together (Thorner and Thorner, 1962).

In 1960 it was France, with the intervention of Charles Bettelheim and Louis Dumont, that gave Daniel the chance to pick up his university career within Section VI of EPHE, founded and headed by Fernand Braudel. There he was appointed to a chair in Asian economic history which he held until his untimely death from liver cancer in 1974. The Thorner family settled in France permanently, living first in Issy-les-Moulineaux then moving for good into Paris and no. 9 Rue Guy-de-la-Brosse. Throughout those years Daniel and Alice worked at the Centre d'Études de l'Inde, which had been founded in 1955 by Louis Dumont, then holder of the chair in the sociology of India, and which was incorporated into the CNRS in 1967. They continued to travel regularly to India, Pakistan and later Bangladesh. Their house was always open and was an unrivalled meeting point for French, European, American and South Asian researchers, who were brought together by a common curiosity about the Indian subcontinent.

In 1970 Louis Dumont resigned from the Centre d'Études de l'Inde and was replaced by Madeleine Biardeau. This gave Daniel and Alice the opportunity to play an enhanced role. The steps they took to set up a multidisciplinary seminar group that brought the Centre's researchers together on Saturday mornings were particularly appreciated. For the first time researchers had a place in common to exchange views and pursue ideas, separate from the subject seminars led by professors. The papers given at those seminars provided the material for the first three issues of

Purushârtha (Éditions de l'EHESS), started by Francis Zimmermann: at that time it was a journal before becoming a collection. The seminar provided lasting momentum for interdisciplinary collaborations at the Centre, which are still reflected in the themed issues of *Purushârtha*. The final act of Daniel's career, with Alice's watchful assistance, was to organize the modern section of the 29th International Congress of Orientalists in Paris in 1973. It was marked by a huge reception (given in Violette Graff's apartment), where we had the good fortune to meet eminent figures such as Norman Brown: I still recall a conversation I had with him then about the stupidity of American policy in the Bangladesh affair.

After Daniel passed away, Alice – who continued to go to the Indian subcontinent every year – took over his role. She helped to ensure closer links between French researchers and those from other countries, for instance in the context of the European Conferences of Modern Studies on South Asia, which were organized by European countries in turn every two or three years from 1968 on as part of an informal association based in Cambridge. Alice had been involved from the outset. She had passed on the wish, expressed by those who took part in the fourth conference (Sussex 1974), to see France staging such a meeting. She persuaded the Centre d'Études de l'Inde to take on the responsibility and send a large group of researchers to the fifth conference (Leiden 1976) to invite the delegates to come to Paris in two years' time. Together with Alice I was in charge of organizing the conference; Catherine Gaborieau played an active part in managing the logistics. The meeting took place from 8 to 13 July in Sèvres in the magnificent setting of the Centre International d'Études Pédagogiques – which is in fact the old 18th-century porcelain factory. The CNRS gave a substantial grant and published the conference proceedings (Gaborieau and Thorner, 1979) – a first in the association's history. UNESCO, which had been contacted via Jacques Pouchepadass, also gave a decent subsidy which paid the travel costs of ten representatives from the Indian subcontinent. Altogether there were 143 participants: 41 French, 60 from the rest of western Europe, 6 from eastern Europe, 8 Americans and 26 delegates from the Indian subcontinent. In total 74 papers were given covering the whole range of the human and social sciences. The conference established the international reputation of the Centre d'Études de l'Inde. Collaborating in this way with Alice I was able to discover the extent of her network of contacts in the four corners of the earth: she always knew personally the specialist who could give a paper or lead a workshop on this or that precise topic.

Alice also played an active part in the internal work of the Centre, for instance in the discussions or publications of the different teams within it. I will mention three contributions in particular. She published an article on poverty in India (Thorner, 1977). She put at the disposal of the team studying migration, headed by Philippe Sagant, data she had collected in India when she was working on statistics (Thorner, 1978). She inspired the research on social classes in India led by Jacques Pouchepadass and produced a substantial article for it, in which she showed a remarkable familiarity with progressive intellectual circles in India (Thorner, 1982).

In the course of her regular visits to India she kept up long-term collaborative relations, for example in the context of three longstanding projects: a more general one on women was the subject of a 'Review of Women Studies' from 1985, which she

co-edited in the *Bombay Economic & Political Weekly* (an anthology of these accounts has been published in Thorner and Krishnaraj, 2000); the second, with Neera Desai, dealt particularly with working-class women and yielded several articles (especially Thorner, 1991b; Thorner and Ranadive, 1992; Thorner and Desai, 1993); the third on the city of Bombay with Sujata Patel resulted in the publication of two volumes (Patel and Thorner, 1995). Right to the end Alice retained an active place in India's intellectual landscape: she was always welcome in Bombay, where she contributed regularly to the *EPW*, and in Delhi where she received visitors at the Indian International Centre, still helping to strengthen relationships between French and Indian intellectuals. A Festschrift was dedicated to her in 2000 (Bagshi, Patel and Raj, 2002). In Paris her house was always a place for meetings and exchanges for researchers from all over the world and every generation. Alice was ever most attentive to young researchers and their families. Nothing symbolized better that solicitude than the institution, in the last 20 years of her life, of an annual garden party to which her colleagues were invited to come with their children and grandchildren on a Sunday in spring. In this way she helped to develop in our environment a social life that went far beyond intellectual exchanges and will ensure that Alice's memory never fades.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

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