

Daniel Thorner

1915–1974

Daniel Thorner died recently. It was a shock to those who knew him, because it was so unexpected. Apparently no one, except his wife Alice, had known he was seriously ill.

His death leaves a void. Not so much because of his work, since by now the work he had started over thirty years back was being followed up by others, but because of his integrity, his ability to recognize “humbug,” his awareness of the human and social context within which economic change operates, and his concern for people, whether Indian peasants or young scholars who came to him for advice.

He was one of the first American scholars to work on the Indian economy or on Indian economic history, far before such work became common. He started as a graduate student at Columbia in the History Department in the 1930's, then served in India during the war. His thesis, “Investment in Empire,” was on the conditions of British railway and steamship investment in India, in 1950. This is as near to a definitive picture of the political economy of that British investment in the middle of the nineteenth century as we are likely to get. He joined the University of Pennsylvania South Asia Regional Studies Program to teach Indian economic history.

He returned to India in 1952 to carry on research on India's changing agrarian structure. As a result of the excesses of the McCarthy period in the United States, he decided to stay there, rather than to come back to the United States. Out of that stay came three books on Indian agriculture, which together constitute a path-breaking body of work in its approach and its results. He describes his method in the introduction to the first book, *The Agrarian Prospect in India*, published in 1956.

From [the published] materials I could not puzzle out a satisfactory picture of the structure of land ownership or of the patterns of cultivation.

The decision which I somewhat reluctantly reached was that, for the time being, I would have to put aside the books, periodicals and documents with which I was accustomed to working. I would have to desert the libraries and proceed into the villages to see for myself what agrarian relationships actually existed, and how they operated. That is just what I have been doing since 1952: going to one village after another in all States and regions of India, and asking questions directly of the villagers as to who owns the land, who works it, what is the product, and who gets what shares of that product.

His two later books, both published after he left India, are a report *Agricultural Cooperatives in India* and a collection of papers on agriculture and economic history, *Land and Labour in India*. Like the first book these volumes, if treating of agriculture, were based on extended visits to, and conversations with, the peasants; and they were focused on examining the social structure of the villages, and determining who gained and who lost. A chapter title that occurs regularly in his books is “The weak and the strong.” He was always aware of the need for action to protect and strengthen the weak; and if necessary, for action to limit the power of the strong to oppress the weak and to spread the gains from new institutions and investments.

In his examination of India's economic history, he consistently dealt with fundamental issues of what had occurred; and he never hesitated to question the statistics

and published reports, when he thought the method was poor or the data unreliable. Clearly he became controversial; as the obituary in the *Economic and Political Weekly* (July 6, 1974) stated "it was not a tranquil existence. . . . And just as there was no dearth of men, in Bombay, in Delhi, or in Calcutta, who would give continual expression to their deeply felt malice toward him, there were many others who could never forsake him. Daniel Thorner grew on you."

After almost ten years in India, in part for economic reasons and in part out of a desire to return to a university, he accepted an appointment at the Sorbonne. During this last period of his life he published the two volumes referred to above. He also edited the works of Harold H. Mann, whose approach toward research on agricultural change and whose point of view influenced his own work strongly; and he also edited *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, by A. V. Chayanov. Thorner was not satisfied with what orthodox economic theory had to offer in explaining behavior of peasants in a country such as India, and he thought that Chayanov offered a useful approach. This translation and Thorner's introduction brought to the attention of English speaking scholars an important Russian economist; and, as in Thorner's work in other areas, it provided a lead to other economists to delve further into the analysis of peasant economic behavior in an economy that differs so sharply from a developed capitalist structure.

Thorner visited South Asia often in connection with his work. He was in Dacca in 1971 when the Pakistani army moved against the intellectuals in that city; and according to reports from mutual friends there at the time, he played an important role in assisting the escape of some of those intellectuals. This was done quietly, with no fanfare and no rewards.

During his last years there were illnesses in his family that took much of his time and energy. Perhaps this is the point to say that Alice, his wife, was also a professional collaborator, who advised on all of his work, and was a coauthor on much that he wrote on India.

Thorner wrote an introduction to the writings of Harold Mann:

With [his] stubborn fact-mindedness Dr. Mann combined a constant awareness of the larger human framework within which agricultural problems arose. All his work on Indian villages and cities is imbued with his deep concern for the welfare of the peasants and townsmen . . . within [the context] of an independent nation.

Dr. Mann was never afraid to issue the findings of his studies nor to point out their relevance to the broader issues of social justice and political freedom. No matter how unpalatable his results might be to the powers of the day, Dr. Mann spoke his mind and said what he thought had to be said. He paid for this—honors and distinctions went elsewhere—but he felt it was worth the price.

What Daniel Thorner wrote about Harold Mann was equally true for himself.

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