It was in Pune, in Maharashtra, where he had been living since 1972, that Guy Poitevin breathed his last, before the doctors could diagnose the disease that caused his death. He was born in a family of peasants in Mayenne. Being a good student, the Church took charge of his education and he graduated in philosophy and theology (Paris and Rome) and as an ordained priest, he taught philosophy in a seminary in Western France. He visited India in 1967 and spent a month in Pune and the surrounding villages. On his return to France, he joined Langues'O (School of Oriental Languages) to study Sanskrit and in the following year, he took up Marathi. After several short visits, he finally settled down in Pune in 1972 and married Hema Rairkar, an economist and feminist belonging to a Brahmin family (her father is a doctor who works for the poor), and took Indian citizenship in 1979. He became the head of the Centre for Cooperative Research in Social Sciences which he set up in 1980. His doctoral thesis entitled “Aspirations étudiantes, la logique du pauvre” (Students' Aspirations, the Logic of Poverty), written under the supervision of Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe, was defended at EHESS (School of Social Sciences, University of Paris). The thesis already displayed the distinctive traits of the Poitevin Method – a subtle mix of field studies (based mainly on long conversations and surveys), an etymological analysis of the terms used, the interpretation of more or less modernised myths and a comparison with western culture. Guy Poitevin was not just an armchair Indologist – he could not bring himself to ignore the present-day India fraught with numerous contradictions and disparities. Nor was he a sociologist obsessed with reproducing what he has observed in the field because he was always keen to know more about the mythology hidden behind a particular attitude or action. He was no ordinary intellectual, all the more so because of his commitment to the cause of the untouchables. A renowned specialist in Dalit literature, he was not satisfied with merely talking about it; instead he made great efforts to make it known to the world at large. He translated a number of works by untouchables (Maharashtra. Paysans et intouchables de l'Inde occidentale [Maharashtra. Peasants and Untouchables of Western India], Preface by Gilles Lapouge, Lieu Commun, 1987; Parole de femmes intouchables [Untouchable Women Speak Up], Coté-femmes, 1991; Ma caste criminelle [My Criminal Caste], by Jayraj Rajput, L'Harmattan, 1996) or wrote introductions to them (Ma vie d'intouchable [My Life as an Intouchable] by Daya Pawar, La Découverte, 1990). Together with his wife, Hema Rairkar, he undertook the task of recording, elucidating and analysing the songs improvised by women in a traditional framework as they grind grain for the day's meals in the early morning. Almost 60,000 songs compiled and studied in this manner (Les chants de la meule [Grindmill Songs], editions Kailash, 1997) form a valuable corpus on the popular oral culture of Maharashtra, the dreams and concerns of women who express their joys and sorrows through these songs, the notion of bhakti or devotion in Vedantic Hinduism, the manner in which modernity is perceived, accepted or opposed, the relations between couples and within the family in general. With support from various charitable institutions, he ran a village school for poor girls, trained rural leaders to protect villagers from the manipulations of politicians and other persons in power, helped women's groups in slums to fight against conjugal violence, etc. Was he a social worker? Yes, in a way. But he strictly followed the principle of depending on his own strength. He only saw the alienating aspect of developmental aid and believed that the best solution was the one found by the person facing the problem. No charity business for him! A militant certainly, but also a scholar as evidenced by his book Sortir de la sujétion (Freedom from Bondage) published by L'Harmattan (Paris) in 2001, which, unfortunately, went unnoticed in France. The book sums up his struggles and describes the rise of an oppressed people in Indian society through the stories of their lives that he studies in minute detail. It is a work that denounces and rectifies the simplistic sociological explanations found in many studies on castes in India, including that of Louis Dumont, but it highlights above all the uniqueness of the subject in modern India. He did not tire of hammering into the numerous visitors who came to see him in Pune the message that India is not all spirituality, non-violence, castes and yoga but materialism, violence and social inequities – a result of the unimaginable changes brought about by urbanisation and modernisation. What happens to the individual in this troubled society? What does he think of himself? Poitevin elucidates traditional texts with the same insight as Lévinas or Ricoeur and presents through his writings a striking and original view on modern India. Since there are few persons as eclectic as him, I was asked by the Charles-Léopold Mayer Foundation to meet him and Hema Rairkar with the idea of bringing out a book on their efforts to create awareness among the untouchables as well as their research on popular oral culture. Their modesty prevented me from taking up this project, but their warmth made us friends. Guy, my friend, my Indian friend. (Translated from French)
PARIS, OCT. 10. Jacques Derrida, the Algerian-born French intellectual who died on Friday, was one of the most celebrated and notoriously difficult philosophers of the late 20th century.

Derrida was known as the father of deconstruction, the method of inquiry that asserted that all writing was full of confusion and contradiction, and that the author’s intent could not overcome the inherent contradictions of language itself, robbing texts—whether literature, history or philosophy—of truthfulness, absolute meaning and permanence.

The concept was eventually applied to the whole gamut of arts and social sciences, including linguistics, anthropology, political science, even architecture.

While he had a huge following—larger in the United States than in Europe—he was the target of as much anger as admiration. For many Americans, in particular, he was the personification of a French school of thinking they felt was undermining many of the traditional standards of classical education, and one they often associated with divisive political causes.

Literary critics broke texts into isolated passages and phrases to find hidden meanings.

Advocates of feminism, gay rights and Third World causes embraced the method as an instrument to reveal the prejudices and inconsistencies of Plato, Aristotle, Shakespeare, Freud and other “dead white male” icons of Western culture. Architects and designers could claim to take a “deconstructionist” approach to buildings by abandoning traditional symmetry and creating amorphously shaped spaces. The filmmaker Woody Allen titled one of his movies “Deconstructing Harry,” to suggest that his protagonist could best be understood by breaking down and analysing his neurotic contradictions.

A code word for discourse

Toward the end of the 20th century, deconstruction became a code word of intellectual discourse, much as existentialism and structuralism—two other fashionable, slippery philosophies that also emerged from France after World War II—had been before it. Demda and his followers were unwilling—some say unable—to define deconstruction with any precision, so it has remained misunderstood, or interpreted in endlessly contradictory ways. Derrida was a prolific writer, but his 40-plus books on different aspects of deconstruction were no more easily accessible. Even their titles—“Of Grammatology,” “The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond,” and “Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce,” to mention a few prominent examples—could be off-putting to the uninitiated.

Derrida’s credibility was also damaged by a 1987 scandal involving Paul de Man, a Yale University professor who was the most acclaimed exponent of deconstruction in the United States.

Four years after de Man’s death, it was revealed that he had contributed numerous pro-Nazi, anti-Semitic articles to a newspaper in Belgium, where he was born, while it was under German occupation during World War II. In defending his dead colleague, Derrida, a Jew, was understood by some to be condoning de Man’s anti-Semitism.

A devoted following

Nonetheless, during the 1970s and 1980s, Derrida’s writings and lectures gained him a huge following in major American universities—in the end, he proved far more influential in the United States than in France. Derrida also became far more accessible to the media.

He sat still for photos and gave interviews that stripped away his formerly mysterious aura to reveal the mundane details of his personal life. Late in his career, Derrida was asked, as he had been so often, what deconstruction was. “Why don’t you ask a physicist or a mathematician about difficulty?” he replied, frostily, to Dinitia Smith, a Times reporter, in 1998.

“Deconstruction requires work. If deconstruction is so obscure, why are the audiences in my lectures in the thousands? They fee! they understand enough to understand more.” Asked later in the same interview to at least define deconstruction, Derrida said: “It is impossible to respond. I can only do something which will leave me unsatisfied.” — New York Times News Service

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