

# Ground reality

Martha Alter Chen is a champion of forgotten workers around the world

By Patricia M. Carey

**LUNCHING IN A HARVARD**

Square restaurant, Martha Alter Chen '65 comes across as a typical American professor, with her thick white hair, glasses and an academic's precise use of language. But her mild-mannered appearance is protective coloration for a self-described economic anthropologist whose life and work are embedded in another culture.

"My gut experience is a Third World reality," she says. "I feel out-of-place in the U.S."

Chen, 69, is a lecturer in public policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and the international coordinator of a global research

and policy action network called WIEGO, for Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing.

The daughter and granddaughter of Presbyterian missionaries from New England, Chen — known as Marty — grew up in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. With other missionary children, she and her two brothers attended school in Mussoorie, a Himalayan hill station



MARTHA STEWART

MARTHA ALTER CHEN '65

where the family still has a home. She remembers trekking in the Himalayan foothills, riding her bicycle in and around the towns where her parents were posted, and as a teenager traveling by train alone.

"It was an independent, adventurous kind of life," she says.

Not surprisingly, when she returned to the U.S. to enroll at Connecticut College, she experienced culture shock, but she soon regained her equilibrium. (See Passage from India on page 35.)

After graduating with a degree in English, she earned a doctorate in South Asian studies at the University of Pennsylvania and married physician Lincoln Chen, who, as a doctor during the Vietnam War, was working for the National Institutes of Health

(NIH). At a dinner party one evening, Marty learned that the NIH had a research project in East Pakistan and urged him to apply.

Marty, Lincoln and their infant son Greg arrived in Dhaka (then known as Dacca) in July 1970. In November, a cyclone and tidal wave hit the coast in one of the

**A LEGACY OF COMMITMENT**

A mother and daughter have shaped the lives of others on two continents

deadliest natural disasters of the 20th century. Chen and three other women started a cyclone relief operation.

Political tension between East and West Pakistan was building. In March 1971, the military-controlled national government sent troops into East Pakistan, which had just won a majority in the country's first democratic elections.

Cold War politics kept the U.S. government silent even as U.S. diplomats in Dhaka sent frantic cables detailing a "reign of terror" in which thousands of Bengalis, especially Hindus, were slaughtered, including many university faculty and students.

"There weren't many foreigners in East Pakistan at that time," Chen says. "We fanned out across the city and documented the killings and wrote a white paper that was submitted to the U.S. Congress."

The steps of a university building were crusted with the blood of professors who had been shot and left to die. At one street in the old city known for its Hindu artisans, the army had positioned tanks at either end and blasted the street. To this day, Chen has not forgotten the smell and sight of the smoldering bodies.

At the end of March, the Americans in Dhaka were evacuated to Karachi in West Pakistan, where they were met by U.S. embassy staff. "They told us everything was

fine and offered us tranquilizers," Chen says. "We didn't take them."

From Karachi, they were sent to Tehran, where the CIA debriefed only the men. Once they reached the U.S., Chen and her husband joined others in mounting a "Friends of Bangladesh" political campaign against U.S. support to Pakistan and, after Bangladesh gained independence, for U.S. recognition of Bangladesh. During this time, Chen's second child, daughter Alexis, was born in Bethesda, Md.

After East Pakistan became Bangladesh, the Chens returned. The remaining funds from the cyclone relief effort were used to create a relief organization for Bengali refugees returning from India. That organization, the Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee (BRAC), is now the largest non-governmental organization in the world.

In 1974, famine struck Bangladesh. The government introduced a food-for-work program but excluded women from participating, arguing that male relatives would provide for them. Chen and her colleagues formed a committee, met with the World Food Programme and collected data at 11 sites showing that only one-third of the women were married. As a result, a dedicated food-for-work program for women was established.

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**Passage from India: the college years**

**WHEN MARTY ALTER** arrived at Connecticut College — her mother's alma mater — in 1961, she was 17 years old, fluent in Hindustani and disappointed not to be included in the foreign student orientation. "I didn't know how to use a laundromat or a vending machine," she recalls. "I felt like a country cousin. I was trying to fit in, to feel like an American, even though I didn't really feel like one."

She remembers being "a little shy and diffident," but she soon found friends, including Suzanne Leach Charity '65, whose mother had been a classmate of Chen's mother,

Barbara Beach Alter '42.

She also met Madhu Sethi Jain '66, now a well-known Indian journalist. Jain remembers being astonished when the fair-haired, blue-eyed Chen approached her on campus and spoke to her in Hindi.

"Growing up in India with her family, and with strong ties to the place, she was as much of an Indian as she was an American," said Jain, who shared a love of Indian food and music with her friend.

Chen started out as a math major, but switched to English. When a favorite English professor retired, "the students dressed as Shakespear-

ean characters and occupied the faculty dining room," she recalls. Once, she and her roommate returned from a weekend at Yale to find that other students had stuffed their room full of newspaper. "I felt that was a sign of acceptance," she says. "We just dived into that pile of paper."

In Chen's life work, Jain sees the influence of her friend's unusual upbringing. "Perhaps the fact that she comes from a missionary background has given her a vocation — to help others, especially unskilled workers in developing societies," Jain says. "Her background has made her very disciplined. She has great people skills and remains calm through crisis."

TOP: CHEN, IN THE MID-1980S, WITH ANTHROPOLOGIST GAURI MISHRA, ONE OF THE FOUNDERS OF A SELF-EMPLOYED WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION

During the second half of the 1970s, Chen worked with BRAC on women's economic empowerment. She traveled to remote villages, where she promoted literacy and political awareness, often hosting meetings in houses with mud floors. She and Bangladeshi colleagues trained women in fish culture and animal husbandry and helped revive traditional crafts to generate income.

At the time, Bangladesh had a strong culture of purdah, or seclusion, for women. "We were able to change mindsets and empower women," Chen says.

One village woman told her, "Our minds were rusted and now they shine."

During the 1980s, Chen worked in India for Oxfam America, supporting 60 non-governmental organizations, advising in the field and convening national policy dialogues — all with the goal of empowering poor working women.

Since joining Harvard in 1987, Chen says she has worked to build a bridge between "ground reality and mainstream economic discourse."

She has published numerous articles, monographs and 10 scholarly books, based on meticulous fieldwork and analysis, including an in-depth account of the everyday reality, often harsh, of widows in rural India. But her favorite book remains the one she wrote about her work with BRAC in the late 1970s, "A Quiet Revolution: Women in Transition in Rural Bangladesh."

She and her husband Lincoln live in Massachusetts and travel half the year. Their son Greg lives in Bangladesh, where he works in microfinance. Daughter Alexis, who trained as a classical Indian dancer, lives in Massachusetts, but recently toured India with a fusion/modern dance production. The Chens have six grandchildren — three in the U.S. and three in Bangladesh.



IN 2011, THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA HONORED CHEN FOR HER WORK.

poverty and economic development.

When Chen talks about her parents, James and Barbara Beach Alter '42, she emphasizes that their goal as missionaries was not to proselytize. "My parents weren't out to convert Indians," Chen says. "They were there to bear witness."

In her own way, Chen is also bearing witness — not to a religious tradition, but to the lived reality of women in South Asia. The mission of WIEGO, which she co-founded, is to gain "voice, visibility and validity" for workers worldwide who labor in the so-called informal economy.

The informal economy encompasses many self-employed workers, as well as wage earners who are not "officially" employed. The sector includes millions of domestic workers, home-based producers, street vendors, waste pickers, small farmers and agricultural day laborers.

In developing countries, well over half of all workers are informally employed. In some countries, the figure may be as high as 90 percent, Chen says. Lacking legal rights and benefits, these workers are often maltreated and underpaid, and they are particularly vulnerable to economic downturns.

To make the case for these forgotten workers, Chen focuses on the empirical research needed to document their economic role and win them a seat at the policy-making table. It's an uphill battle, but Chen seems to relish the challenge. Under her placid demeanor, she has inherited her share of missionary zeal.

"I am a crusader," Chen says. ■

In 2011, the government of India honored Chen with a prestigious Padma Shri award for her work on employment, poverty and gender. Last year, the government of Bangladesh bestowed on her a Friends of Bangladesh Liberation War honor.

Her defining characteristic is her "commitment to improving the wellbeing of poor women through analysis and advocacy," says Ravi Kanbur, a Cornell University professor of economics and one of the foremost global experts on

**One village woman told Chen: "Our minds were rusted and now they shine."**

## Bearing witness

*Barbara Beach Alter reflects on a life of service*

*By Beth Hamilton*



BARRY AND JIM ALTER IN SRINAGAR, KASHMIR, IN THE 1950S

**FOR BARBARA BEACH ALTER '42 P'65,** becoming a missionary was both a natural outcome for a minister's daughter and a somewhat unlikely calling for a woman who wanted no part in evangelical proselytizing.

However, the 35 years "Barry" Alter spent as a missionary in India turned out to be the ideal way to fulfill both her commitment to Christianity and to "secular humanism."

Now 92 and a resident of an assisted living facility in Massachusetts, Alter is still the same vivacious, sharp-minded woman who landed in Karachi — at that time it was still part of India — on Oct. 27, 1945.

Alter's father, David Nelson Beach Jr., was a New England minister who led a number of churches, including Center Church in New Haven. Her grandfather was president of the Bangor Theological Society in Maine, and her great-uncle was a missionary in China in the late 1800s.

This lineage shaped Alter's faith, but also set up an intellectual conflict. As an 18-year-old philosophy major at Connecticut College, she struggled to reconcile her Christian beliefs with a broader understanding of the world.

"I ultimately decided theology is a poem that doesn't define God, that can't define God," she says.

After college, she married James Alter, a social activist and Yale Divinity School graduate who was jailed in 1940 for his pacifist convictions. The couple was eager to set out for India, where Jim had grown up in a Presbyterian missionary family, but they had to wait until the end of World War II. Meanwhile, they tackled anti-poverty work in Tennessee, where the first of their three children, Martha, was born. (See profile of Martha Alter Chen '65, page 34.)

Once the wartime ban on travel ended and they went to India, the family "did whatever the church needed of us," says Alter, who learned to speak Hindi and Urdu. She describes their time in India

as living "in the midst" of others both physically and spiritually.

Jim established the Christian Retreat and Study Center in Rajpur, but the Alters did not want to impose their religious traditions, such as Western hymns, on those who attended the center.

"We ran the study center like an ashram. You washed your own dishes, you waited on your own table," Alter says.

Martha and her brothers, John and Thomas, studied at the Woodstock School; three generations of Alters had attended the interdenominational boarding school in the

foothills of the Himalayas.

(Today, John is chaplain at a private school in Virginia, and Tom is a well-known Bollywood actor. Recently, the whole family gathered in Mussoori to celebrate the wedding of Tom's son, an Indian sportswriter who covers cricket.)

The family returned to the United States in the early 1980s, but Jim's health was faltering. He died in 1983, and his family buried his ashes in India.

Newly widowed, Alter wanted to be useful. She became a church visitor for the Center Church in New Haven, worked in a sewing store, cared for her elderly parents and volunteered for United Way.

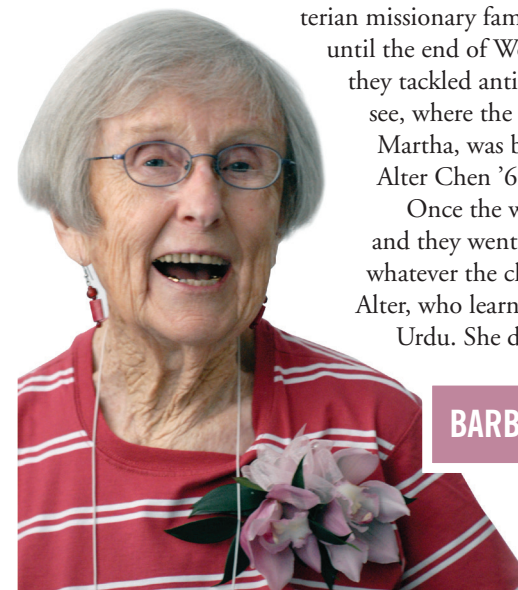
In 1992, Cathy Corman, a new mother of triplets, needed someone to lend a hand. She sought help from a volunteer program for seniors, and the program's director suggested Alter. Corman was skeptical when she was told that Alter had been a Christian missionary.

But Alter came highly recommended, so the new mother decided to give her a try.

"In walked this white-haired, upright 72-year-old," Corman recalls. "She promptly took one baby from my arms. ... It was just instant love between the two of us."

A freelance journalist with a doctorate in American studies, Corman has traveled to India with Alter and is producing a documentary titled "In the Midst" that examines the lives of Alter and other liberal Presbyterian missionaries. ■

**A LEGACY OF COMMITMENT**



**BARBARA BEACH ALTER '42 P'65**

AT LEFT, BARRY ALTER AT HER 65TH REUNION IN 2007, WHERE SHE RECEIVED THE HARRIET BUESCHER LAWRENCE '34 PRIZE FOR SERVICE TO SOCIETY.