

*verrier elwin
and india's
north-eastern
borderlands*

Nari K. Rustomji

Elwin Memorial Lectures

**Verrier Elwin and
India's North - Eastern Borderlands**

Nari K. Rustomji

Verrier Elwin
and India's
North - Eastern Borderlands



NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY PUBLICATIONS
SHILLONG

© North-Eastern Hill University Publications, 1988

VERRIER ELWIN AND
INDIA'S NORTH-EASTERN BORDERLANDS

Published by M. C. Gabriel, for
North-Eastern Hill University Publications, Shillong

Printed by Don Bosco Press, Shillong - 793 003

INDIA

Foreword

The name of Verrier Elwin is so intimately connected with tribal life in India and the North-East in particular, that you cannot think of one without thinking of the other. His work in the North-East was no doubt pioneering, but much more noteworthy were his concern for and dedication to tribal welfare. Since I believe in a special significance of our tribal culture and people, it is my particular delight to introduce this slim volume of lectures about him which were delivered in a few months of my joining as the Vice-Chancellor of North-Eastern Hill University, under the Verrier Elwin Memorial Lectures by Elwin's good friend Mr. Nari Rustomji. I am also pleased that before people who had known him personally pass on without leaving a record of this remarkable man we have been able to preserve in these lectures something of a personal memoir about him. Perhaps decades later scholars from among the tribals will look for authentic memories of this man and reconstruct for themselves the qualities and greatness of his work. For it is true that all his work was inspired and illuminated by what he himself described so aptly as the 'Philosophy of Love.' This quality of his life and work is brought out in these lectures and it is my very pleasant task, now that lectures appear in print, to recommend them to the general public.

Shillong,
March 28, 1988.

R. K. MISHRA
Vice-Chancellor
North-Eastern Hill University

Contents

Foreword	v
Introduction	1
Lecture 1	
<i>The most inspired Chronicler of India's Tribal People</i>	7
Lecture 2	
<i>These riches of the Spirit are their Power</i>	27
Lecture 3	
<i>He has always been to me what Mentor was to Telemachus</i>	47
Lecture 4	
<i>One of the greatest Romantics of Anthropology</i>	63

Introduction

Pericles, in his renowned funeral oration, had observed that “the whole world is the sepulchre of famous men.” It was not my intention, when invited to present the Verrier Elwin Memorial Lectures, to deliver a funeral oration. That would have been furthest from the liking of Verrier Elwin, who, though his philosophy was essentially a philosophy of love and compassion, was a man of modest and humorous temperament whose joy was in bringing joy and good cheer into the lives of his fellow creatures. But though modest in himself, he was a man with a burning faith in his convictions and he would have been happy in the thought that the embers of his philosophy were once more being fanned into life.

Despite the deep respect in which Elwin was held by the highest in the land, including Mahatma Gandhi, Vallabhai Patel and Jawaharlal Nehru, he was yet much misunderstood and much maligned by many who had an entirely perverted concept of his ideas. It is surprising that there should still be people who believe that his main aim was to keep the tribal people imprisoned in a vast Zoological Game Reserve ! Protection yes, but not the protection of prison bars. The protection he was seeking for the tribal people was the assurance that would come to them from an awareness of their rights as human beings, from respect for their culture and way of life from their fellow citizens, from inbuilt safeguards in the Constitution of

the country. It was the achievement of these high aims that was, in essence, Verrier Elwin's monument to posterity.

In being misunderstood, Verrier Elwin was also no less maligned. It has been represented that in seeking a place in the sun for the tribal people, he was creating divisions in the country and thwarting their integration into the mainstream of India's culture. There are many who believe that, in the endeavour to safeguard the land rights of the tribal people, Government had cleared the path for the Chinese invasion of 1962. Their case is that the settlement of "martial races" in the thinly populated regions of India's north-eastern frontiers would have constituted India's safest defence against external aggression. They little realise that land is the very life-blood of the tribal people, their most precious possession in the world, and that, if they had been robbed of their land, the country would never have been forgiven nor ever again trusted. The loyalty of the tribal people of Nefa (now Arunachal Pradesh) both during and after the Chinese invasion is the most shining vindication of Elwin's policy of respect for tribal land and tribal institutions. All this may seem to be too obvious for mention, save that we have to be reminded from time to time of the words of Max Mueller, once quoted by Mahatma Gandhi, that truth needs to be repeated as long as there are men who disbelieve it.

There may not be many who will have the leisure to study Elwin's books or even to review but cursorily the aspects of his life and activities presented in these four lectures. Let us recapitulate for their benefit therefore Verrier Elwin's conclusions, summarised in his own words,

comprising his thinking on tribal policy as outlined in his last and definitive work on a philosophy for the tribal people * :-

Success in the very delicate task of steering a middle way between leaving too much alone and interfering too officiously and imposing too heavily on the life of the people will depend on an appreciation of the fundamental ideas set out by the Prime Minister. As an aid to this, administrators of all the tribal areas throughout India might well adopt the following touchstones for any scheme for development, welfare, relief and expansion: the sentences within quotation marks are from Mr. Nehru's own speeches and notings.

1. Will the scheme help the tribesmen 'to grow according to their own genius and tradition ?'
2. Or will its result be merely 'to shape them according to our own image or likeness and impose on them our particular way of living ?'
3. Will it tend to make of the tribesmen 'a second-rate copy of ourselves ?'
4. Will it 'uproot the tribal people from their surrounding's and ,make them grow soft and thus lose some of their fine qualities ?'
5. Is it open to the criticism that 'it is grossly presumptuous on our part to approach the tribesmen with an

* A Philosophy for NEFA: Shillong 1960 (Pages 285-288)

air of superiority or to tell them what to do or not to do ?'

6. Will it involve too rapid a process of acculturation or, in other words, are we trying to go too fast ?
7. Is there any danger that we are overwhelming the tribes by too many projects, each good in itself, but in the aggregate imposing too heavy a burden ?
8. Will it impair or destroy in any way the self-reliance of the people ?
9. Is it really, on a long term basis, for the ultimate good of the tribesmen, or is it simply something that will make a good show in the press or an official report ?
10. Will it, in the case of NEFA, help to integrate the tribal people with Greater Assam and with India as a whole ?

NEFA offers a unique opportunity to every member of the Administration, for it is attempting an exciting and unusual experiment which, if successful, will write a significant page in the history of civilization's dealings with primitive people. Elsewhere in the world, colonists have often gone into tribal areas for what they can get; the Government of India has gone into NEFA for what it can give. Whenever a new project is considered or policy proposed, the one criterion is whether it will be for the benefit of the tribal people.

The keynote of the Administration's policy indeed is this : the tribesmen first, the tribesmen last, the tribesmen all the time.

The fundamental policy and approach which I have tried to describe in this book was laid down as far back as 1953 by Mr. N.K. Rustomji, during his first term as Adviser to the Governor. We have much, he says, to learn from the hillmen, as they have from us. 'Much of the beauty of living still survives in these remote and distant hills, where dance and song are a vital part of everyday living, where people speak and think freely, without fear or restraint. Our workers must ensure, therefore, that, in their enthusiasm and in their zeal, the good that is inherent in the institutions of the hill people is not tainted or substituted by practices that may be "modern" and "advanced", but are totally unsuited to the hillman's economy and way of thinking. The hillman has, essentially, a clean, direct and healthy outlook; he is free, happily, from the morbid complexes inhibited by the unnatural life of the city folk, whose every activity is linked with the machines made by man, but divorced from the works of God – the beauty of nature, fresh sunlight, and free, spontaneous laughter.

The song and the dance of the hills are simple; they are the very expressions of the spirit, as are the patterns of the cloth they weave. Their industry is, necessarily, a home-industry; for lack of communications has not permitted them, and will not, for some time to come, allow them to find a market for their produce in the outside world. But they sing and dance and weave their homely designs for their own pleasure, the pleasure of their family members and the pleasure of their fellow-villagers – in a sense, the truest of artistic pleasures.

The greatest disservice will be done, therefore, if in an excess of missionary zeal, our workers destroy the fresh creative urge that lives, strong and vital, within the denizens of the hills. For if we wish to serve, we must show that we have respect for the hillmen and their institutions, their language and their song; and, in showing such respect, we shall secure their confidence in the work that lies ahead. It is for this reason that it is enjoined upon every worker in the hills to make it his first task to familiarise himself with the language of the areas within which he serves, to take an interest in and come to understand the customs and usages of the people amongst whom he finds himself and to share fully in their life, not as a stranger from without, but as one amongst the people themselves.'

The tribal people of India offer us a very special challenge. Their simplicity, which is most lovable; their art, which often gives them the dignity of princes but is so easily destroyed; their courtesy and hospitality, discipline and self-reliance; their ability to work hard and co-operatively; their occasional bewilderment before the advance of an unfamiliar world, and yet their welcome and friendliness to that world; these things win the heart and call for the very best in those who try to serve them. Nothing can be too good for them, but with what care that good has to be shared !

LECTURE

1



*The Most Inspired Chronicler
of India's Tribal People*

C. VON FURER HAIMENDORF

I FEEL greatly honoured to have been invited to deliver the Verrier Elwin Memorial Lectures. The Vice-Chancellor of the North-Eastern Hill University was kind enough to request me to preside over the lectures delivered in 1984 under the Elwin Memorial Endowment and I confess to my musing whether I might myself be invited some time to pay tribute to one of my dearest friends. But it is not merely on account of our close friendship that I welcome this opportunity to speak about Verrier Elwin. It is because I feel that it is India's solemn obligation to keep his memory alive.

It was only the other day that a young officer of the Indian Administrative Service called on me in Bombay. He was a senior functionary of the central Board of Sericulture and his work had taken him to Assam and the north-eastern States. He had been advised to contact me for further briefing on the problems of the frontier, and during the course of our discussions regarding textile designs, I referred him to Verrier Elwin's beautifully illustrated *Art of the North-East Frontier*. He had heard neither of the book nor of Verrier Elwin. And yet he was a keen and intelligent young man, who had taken the initiative to seek me out in my home in Bombay. All I.A.S. officers are deputed after selection to a training course at which they are briefed on the major problems of the country and on the reading matter pertaining to them. Elwin died in 1964 and this officer had attended the training course in 1969. It seemed incredible to me that,

within five years of Elwin's death, so little importance appeared to be attached to Elwin and his work amongst the tribal people that a probationer of India's top administrative service should have been totally ignorant of his name and of his philosophy.

Such ignorance seemed all the more deplorable when so much is noised abroad about the country's concern for the development and welfare of the tribal people. There are specific provisions in India's Constitution for safeguarding the interests of India's tribes and protecting them from the more developed sections of the community. And yet the one man – of European and not of Indian extraction, mind you – who had dedicated his life to working for the tribal people in their remote hills and forests and had been awarded the high honour of a Padma Bhushan during his life, was virtually forgotten within five years of his death. The neglect of Elwin and his work is all the more unfortunate in that it indirectly reflects upon the country's apathy to the philosophy that was his mission. The centre of his philosophy was that, despite differences in culture, language, dress and social habits, the tribal people deserved to be held in the highest respect and that the past attitude of arrogance towards them was based on completely wrong and outmoded assumptions. If the country as a whole were more genuinely and firmly committed to such a stand, it would perhaps have evidenced greater respect for its author and his message in keeping his memory alive. If then I have chosen Verrier Elwin as the subject of my talks, it is not only because he was a very dear friend but more so because I shared with him the philosophy of his life's mission and in the hope that the high-lighting of his contribution to the deeper and truer

understanding of the tribal people might be a step towards their smoother and happier integration within the country.

If we are to fully appreciate the significance of Verrier Elwin's work amongst the tribal people of India's north-eastern borderlands, it is necessary to have some ideas of his background and earlier activities. For we tend to forget that it was only in the last ten years of his life that he became deeply involved in the tribes of the north-east and that the prime of his life had been spent working amongst and carrying out research on the tribes of Central India. So great, however, was the impact of his work in the north-east that it overshadowed the far longer period of his earlier and more strenuous pioneering years. Let us, therefore, recall briefly the main features of his life in England and in Central India prior to his finally settling down in Shillong, the then (in 1954) headquarters of undivided Assam which comprised not only the much diminished Assam State of today but also the adjoining hill areas since constituted into the separate States and Union Territories of Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh.

Verrier Elwin's father, like Verrier, had read at Merton College in Oxford, and, like Verrier again, had entered the church. After serving for some time as a curate, he proceeded as a missionary to West Africa, where he was appointed Principal of Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone and later as Bishop. He was subsequently appointed Bishop of Bristol, but died of yellow fever at the young age of 38 before he could take up his new office. It was in circumstances of extreme hardship that his mother could bring up her three small children, of whom Verrier, the eldest, was only seven at the time of his father's death.

Elwin's family had had long connections with India both on his father's and his mother's side. His maternal grand-father had joined the East India Company and helped to build the road to the attractive hill-station of Murree in the Punjab, where his mother was born. A maternal uncle had been posted to the Bengal Lancers and held commands in Sind-Rajputana and Mhow, finally retiring from the Army as a Lieutenant-General. On his father's side, two of his uncles were in the I.C.S., and two sons of the younger uncle also served until Independence in the Punjab and Madras cadres of the service. With this as his family background, Elwin might well have considered following his uncles' and cousins' footsteps and competing for entry into the I.C.S. or, like his father, dedicating himself to missionary work in the East. He was, however, essentially a scholar by temperament, a man of literature and poetry. He was farthest removed from the practical man of affairs, who might be required, as a Civil Servant, to order firing on a riotous crowd, or, as a soldier, to engage in bayoneting insurgents in the jungle. As a student of English literature, he won brilliant academic awards at Oxford, including a University Scholarship for Shakespearian studies and a University prize for an essay on the Poetry of Revolution, a significant foreshadower of future events. After finishing his theology finals, he was offered the Vice-Principalship of Wycliffe Hall, and it was here that, beside giving lectures and tutorials and performing the routine duties of an Anglican clergyman, he developed his studies in mysticism and his practice of religion to a greater degree than he had ever attempted before. He found himself, however, turning to Catholicism, but the Anglo-Catholicism that had poetry and beauty as

well as mysticism of a kind which the evangelical party in the Church of England could not provide. He felt, in good conscience, that it would be wrong to continue in any institution which represented the spearhead of opposition to the Anglo-Catholic movement and eventually resigned his Vice-Principalship. It was open to him now to take up an academic career in his own University. He loved Oxford and there were possibilities of Fellowships in three different colleges. But a life of comfort and ease, even the search for truth and the dignity of a life of scholarship, did not satisfy him. His nature was not of the calculating sort and he was not impelled by the more ordinary ambitions. He explains in his autobiography the main impulses that led him to devote his life to the service of the underprivileged in India.

“The Catholic religion lays stress on a spiritual ideal which is known as reparation. Christ made reparation for the sins of the world. The saints through their prayers and sufferings make reparation for their own sins and those of others. During my later years in Oxford this became translated into the desire to make reparation to the poor for the way more privileged people had behaved to them. Now in relation to India I remembered how my family had made its money, such as it was, out of India, and my countrymen had gone to India to exploit it and to rule.

I thought, therefore, that I might go to India as an act of reparation, that from my family somebody should go to give instead of to get, to serve with the poorest people instead of ruling them, to become one with the country that we had helped to dominate and

subdue. This idea became sufficiently important to break up my Oxford career and was the driving force that carried me through many difficult years in India."

Having decided on his mission to dedicate himself to India, Elwin set about absorbing himself in her history and culture and familiarising himself with the teachings of her leaders, particularly her spiritual thinkers including Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi. He was greatly attracted by Hindu mysticism, and it was this streak in him of religion and philosophy that drew him to join together with some of his friends in settling for some time at the Christa Seva Sangh Ashram in Pune. The founder of this settlement was Father Jack Winslow, who, after working for some years as a missionary along conventional lines in Western India, had come to feel that the message of Christ might reach the hearts of the people more meaningfully if Christianity were to be presented as more truly oriental in character. It was to explore the possibilities of the re-orientalisation of the Christian religion that the Christa Seva Sangh was founded. Although there was no commitment on Elwin's part at this stage about taking vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience, the life-style at the ashram was simple, almost monastic, and was, for Elwin, a useful introduction to Indian conditions at the grass-root level. It was during the time of his initiation at Pune that Elwin happened to attend the Annual Conference of the Bombay Branch of the Inter-Religious fellowship. This was a body, mostly of intellectuals, that met periodically in Bombay for non-denominational prayers and had decided to call adherents of all religions to Mahatma Gandhi's Ashram at Sabarmati for its Annual Convention.

It was here that Elwin was finally and irretrievably won over to India and her sublimest symbol, the Mahatma. He was overwhelmed by what he describes as the "beauty and inner spiritual power that transformed his frail body and filled the entire place with kindness and love. The impact of these few days at Sabarmati was extraordinary. It was as if I had suddenly been reborn as an Indian on Indian soil. Everything fell into place so naturally that I did not, I think, realise at first how very serious was the new attitude I adopted or what the consequences would be."

This is not the place to speak at length of Elwin's involvement in the national movement. Suffice it to say that it was so strong and his devotion to and reverence for the Mahatma so intense that his enthusiasm for the limited objectives of the Christa Seva Sangha gradually waned. He decided that he should leave the Sangha and live in the poorest of villages where he would be in closest contact with the people. His first impulse was to work amongst the untouchables in Gujarat, but he was dissuaded from this by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, who felt that the untouchables were not Elwin's problem; they were the sin of the Hindus and it was for the Hindus to make reparation to them. There was, besides, already a superfluity of social workers and missionaries in Gujarat and Elwin would be better advised to work amongst the tribal people of the Central Provinces, who had hitherto been almost entirely neglected by national workers and missionaries.

Elwin had been entrusted by the Mahatma and Sardar Patel to carry out a number of missions and enquiries on behalf of the Congress which brought him into ill odour with the British authorities. After leaving the Christa Seva Sangha, he settled down for a time in Karanjia a village in

the Mandla District of the Central Provinces, where, apart from social work amongst the Gonds, he engaged himself in writing about the problems of India as he saw them, as also expressing his views regarding the circumstances when a Government should, on principles generally accepted by the Church, be resisted. It was his conviction that such circumstances existed in India and that it was a Christian's duty to stand up for the rights of a people against a foreign and unnatural Government which, as he put it, "had begun in usurpation, continued in usurpation and must end as soon as possible." It was during a visit to England during this period, partly to arouse people to the seriousness of the situation and partly to see his mother who was very ill, that there came the next turning point in the direction of Elwin's life. The British authorities took the opportunity to refuse to renew his passport for re-entry to India unless he signed an undertaking that he would confine himself entirely to work amongst the Gonds. He must further take no part whatsoever in Civil Disobedience or in any other political movement, including the writing of articles against the Government. Though there were friends, including C.F. Andrews, who felt he should not sign such an undertaking, Elwin had no doubt that, as he had already started his work amongst the tribal people, he must continue with it. He signed the undertaking and was happy to be assured, on his return to India, that Gandhiji also approved his decision.

For the next twenty years, Elwin devoted himself to a life of utmost simplicity and frugality in the remote villages of tribal communities, mainly Gonds. The pattern was to establish an ashram settlement where the way of life would be based in Franciscan and Gandhian ideas. The workers recruited included Christians, Muslims, Hindus, as well as

a few of the local tribal people, each member being allowed complete freedom to follow his own religion, but with regular prayers on the Sabarmati model. They were organised as a small society, originally called the Gond Seva Mandal and, later, in 1949, the Tribal Welfare and Research Unit.

Elwin's right-hand man in this enterprise was Shamrao Hivale, who had earlier been his colleague in the Christa Seva Sangha in Pune and initiated him into Indian ways. As Elwin has himself noted, it was difficult for an European in those days to find his way about outside the narrow circles of the Sahibs and he could have done little without Shamrao's unfailing guidance and support. The Christa Seva Sangha had fulfilled Shamrao's dream of visiting England by deputing him to attend a theological seminary at Mirfield, and, on his return to India, he happily agreed to join Elwin in his work amongst the Gonds.

The aim was that the ashram should look exactly like part of the local village, with everything built in the Gond style. The houses were of mud and thatch and the walls covered with Gond decorations. It was different only in the sense that it demonstrated what a village might be like with some slight unobtrusive guidance. The huts were clean and well-ventilated, with flowers, a vegetable patch and fruit trees all around and there were pits for refuse and manure and sheds for poultry and cattle. The Gond visitor felt completely at home at the ashram but could pick up a tip or two to improve his own environment on return to his village. There was a small museum and modest study room where Elwin could carry out his research and write in peace. The chapel of St. Francis, used by Christian members, was a little mud building, rather like a Gond shrine, set

amidst a garden of flowers, and in front was a flat place where morning and evening prayers were held. Nearby was a dispensary to which villagers came from a radius of forty miles, and a kitchen, dining-room, store-house and vegetable garden. Finally came the school and hostel, with a carpenter's shop and tailoring department. Some little distance beyond, past a gate which no one might pass without permission, was the Leper Refuge, where about fifteen lepers received treatment in a simple but beautiful little home with a garden tended by themselves in which they took great pride.

Around the centre, in remote valleys, were eight branch ashrams within a radius of as many miles. Each had its school, dispensary and library, and the workers gathered together once every week at the headquarters in Karanjia, when model classes were given and the plan of work for the coming week was decided. After some years, the ashram settlement was shifted to another area so that the benefits might be extended more widely. From Karanjia Elwin moved in 1936 to a new village twelve miles away at Sanhrwachhapar, and then, after four years, his final home in Central India at Patangarh. It was during these twenty years in the remote hills and forests of Central India that Elwin devoted himself to the study of the tribes and brought out the numerous monographs on their life, social customs, culture and religion that came to be regarded as the definitive works on their subject.

It is to be borne in mind, however, that Elwin was not a professional anthropologist by conventional standards of training. He was essentially a scholar and his interest in human beings began with literature. "My first teachers", he has observed, "were Jane Austin and Swift. What a

wealth of sociological information and analysis can be found in *Pride and Prejudice* or *Gulliver's Travels*! And later, my studies in theology developed my interest in Man." His services were enlisted for some years by the Anthropological Survey of India with his headquarters at Benares and, later, at Calcutta. He was not however happy in the somewhat rigid atmosphere of the Department and longed to return to the more relaxed pace of the village, which he in fact did on termination of his contract. But although not an anthropologist in the professional sense, Elwin had read a great deal of anthropology during his prolonged sojourn in the tribal areas of Central India. Anthropology is a vast subject, the science of Man as a whole. As he has stated, "We need different kinds of people to study it. We need the scholar trained in pre-history, archaeology, the exact measurement of physical characters, biology, statistics. But we also need some who come from a humanist background."

Elwin's main interest was in the practical application of anthropology and this arose from his intense and affectionate interest in the people he was studying, his desire for their progress and welfare and his regard for them as human beings rather than as laboratory specimens. "For me, anthropology meant my whole life. My method was to settle down among the people, live with them, share their life as far as an outsider could, and generally 'do several books together. My Baiga book took me seven years. *The Agaria* ten. I spent ten years on my first collection of folktales and fourteen on the folktales of Chattisgarh. Knowledge of the people then gradually sank in until it was part of me. And with knowledge came the desire to help."

It is unfortunate that Elwin did not receive the full recognition due to him from professional anthropological circles. But the most cursory glance at his books will reveal the enormous effort he put into them, an effort that could only have been inspired not so much by mere scientific interest as by a burning passion for the subjects of his study. I lay stress on this, as, in the final analysis, it was love that was the main motivating factor in Elwin's life, love and compassion.

Many years later, in 1961, Elwin was invited to deliver the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Memorial Lectures in New Delhi. We had by this time become very close in friendship and consulted each other practically daily on any venture of importance upon which we might embark. It is not surprising that the subject he chose for his lectures was "The Philosophy of Love" and many were the hours we spent in pleasant dialogue on the theme. His thoughts on "Love and the Tribes" are of particular relevance to our subject, for he observes that love has reverence for the object of its love and recalls Plato's suggestion that unless some measure of perfection can be attributed to this object, we will not be inclined to love it. Elwin does not imply that the tribal people are perfect, but what he does suggest is that they have a great many qualities that can excite our respect. The general tendency is to high-light their evil practices and attempt to devise the means to reform them. Elwin's point is that, compared to the reforms required in modern society, there is comparatively little in the best tribal life that requires turning upside down. It is love that can recognise and foster many things of beauty in the tribal outlook and way of living, and it is love that approaches tribal religion with the same

respect that it gives to the great historical religions. It is love that will keep people from creating a sense of inferiority by mocking their religion, social institutions, dress or recreation.

Elwin's twenty years and more amongst the tribes of Central India were the best possible groundwork for helping in laying down the principles that were to be the foundation of India's policies in the north-eastern borderlands and other predominantly tribal areas. Much of his thinking can be traced to his earlier training in the Christa Seva Sangha, where the emphasis had been to spread the gospel of Christ in a form more readily acceptable to the oriental mind. This was in fact the heart of his message, to work through the people's own institutions, in a spirit of love and respect, and not presume to pontificate to them by imposing upon them a way of life utterly alien to their traditions and inherent mores.

I have mentioned earlier the distressing negligence of Elwin's work and writings after his death. Practically all his books are out of print and no longer available for the general public. The one book, however, that was at least reprinted during his lifetime is his lively and vivid account, in diary form, of his work among the Gonds. *Leaves from the Jungle* covers the early four years, 1932-1935, spent mainly at Karanjia, and is a handy companion for the reader who would not be equipped to digest his weightier monographs even if he could have access to them. Elwin however attributes the original success of the book to "the humour of contrast", as he puts it, "the idea of a clergyman, only recently away from Oxford, having some unusual experiences". But even after the novelty of the situation has worn off and discounting the facetiousness of many of

the episodes described, the book is a wonderfully evocative document, richly illustrating Elwin's mud-hut philosophy that freedom of spirit is the most precious of possessions and simplicity of heart man's greatest treasure.

As moving an account, however, of Elwin's ashram and work is depicted in the letters written home by his sister Eldyth, who spent some months with her brother during his years at Patangarh. Eldyth had, like her brother, dedicated herself to service, but to service as a Secretary to the Church Missionary Society. Elwin had had several brushes with the church and had, in 1935, written to the Metropolitan in Calcutta to announce his decision to be no longer a member of the Church of England either as a priest or a communicant. Despite the deep resentment he felt at the quite unchristian like attempts of the Church to pressurise him to forsake his loyalty to Gandhiji and his mission to free India from British rule, he wrote that he left the Church of his baptism without a trace of bitterness and hostility, with nothing but love and reverence for the great tradition in which he had grown up. It was only to be expected that his defection was not generally approved by the more conventional missionary organisations in India. It is all the more significant, therefore, that his sister, an office bearer of the Church Missionary Society, could write with such sympathy and empathy of the ashram's aims and activities. Her descriptions of village life match Elwin's in poetry and attention to detail and summarise well the spirit of Elwin's *Leaves from the Jungle* :

“The Leper Home is close at hand and is a most beautiful place. Banana trees and flowers grow be-

tween the small white houses, which are very cosy, especially in the evenings with their little fires. There is the school and dispensary, where Shamrao stands radiating love and hope as he injects one after the other. They come crowding up on their poor swollen feet and as he talks to them and jokes with them, smiles split their distorted faces. The little leper children run to him, five tiny lovely children. A beautiful boy had just developed the disease and had his first injection while his father wept aloud. In such a place there is visible tragedy, but at least they are cared for, they have food and clothing, cows and doves and friends.

For all round us there is that flame of pain, that burns brightly in almost all whom we meet. Disease sunk in them in abysmal hopelessness, cold striking like a piercing arrow with a numbness that a strip of cotton cloth does little to cure; and hunger is a stalking horse with thin arms and legs and wasted bodies. One sees this in the bazaar which gathers all over the ashram hill: the women who are really young look old and wrinkled, almost all are thin. The 'stalls' are tiny little heaps of beans and chillies, a few dried fish, some sweets and tobacco, some bangles and strips of cloth. But for all that, it is a very social occasion and people come from miles around to buy or sell and meet friends.

I long to be able to make you see this village and its poor but loving courteous villagers, who refuse to, 'improve', but who lodge in your heart. To show you Verrier and Shamrao with all that there is to

discourage them, ceaselessly returning good for evil and dispensing friendship with both hands.

There were many sick: pneumonia had followed measles. Crowds came to the dispensary, Shamrao gazing over a selection of patients, all with strange and unknown diseases, cried 'I wish the masses didn't suffer so!' And how difficult to know what to do even when the disease was diagnosed. We did what we could. There was one family where everyone went sick. The father, a magician, went thin as a bone with a terrible cough. The elder boy, deaf and dumb, became jaundiced and faded to a skeleton. The lovely daughter of about fourteen developed heart trouble, the little boys got bad fever and terrible pustulated itch. and the baby, a plump and merry little fellow, with a piece of the backbone of a snake round his neck to protect him from ill, looked like a famine waif, pitiful beyond words. The poor mother was desperate, and went from magician to magician for help, instead of coming to us. We went to them, however, and found them all sitting in a little inner room filled with smoke from the open fire. The skeleton boy was dragged out into the light for us to see, but we could do nothing for him and could only feel glad when he died. The others responded to Shamrao's injections, except for the baby, who, in spite of tinned milk, was too weak to survive. They had been terribly poor and undernourished all their lives."

But lest we should end on an unhappy and dismal note, let us bear in mind that tribal people, where they are

free, are capable of idealising their life, and it was for this freedom that Elwin gave his years in service to them. The rustic simplicity of a Gond folk-song is perhaps the fittest epilogue to the chapter of life that Elwin spent amongst the tribes of Central India while he was in the prime of his vigour :

“In all the world a village is the place for happiness.
In every house are ploughs and bullocks,
And everyone goes farming.

When the villagers are working in the fields,
It looks like a festival.

With the consent of all, the fields are sown;
They are fenced with thorns to keep the jackals away.
Slowly, steadily, the rain fills all the tanks
and wells and hollows,

While the clouds thunder through the air and
frighten us out of our wits.

Some sing Dadaria : some dance the Saila : those
who are grazing cattle play on the bamboo flute.

After the ploughing, the fields are thick with mud,
but the women dance as they sow the rice.

Friends play, throwing mud at one another.

Some are smoking; some are chewing *pan*: some who
are idle sit gaping at the workers; while others sing.
In all the world a village is the place for happiness.”

LECTURE **2**



*These Riches of the Spirit
are their Power*

THE TRUE TREASURE.

WE have discussed in our first talk the circumstances under which Elwin felt compelled to come to India as an act of reparation for the wrongs suffered by her people as a result of British rule. He did not realise at the time that, though it seemed as though he was leaving for ever the life of scholarship and plunging into an unknown world, he was in actual fact embarking upon an enterprise that would offer him infinitely wider opportunities of research than anything that might be available in the Bodleian and other prestigious institutions of Oxford. He could never have imagined that prolonged years of field-work amongst endlessly varied human beings in the remotest hills and forests of India would win him a D. Sc. for his researches from the academics of the University from which he had voluntarily exiled himself.

I propose in my talk today to discuss not so much Elwin's philosophy as Elwin the individual, Elwin as a family man, Elwin as a friend, his interests outside anthropology and the tribes, his character in the round warts and all. Let us be clear at the outset, Elwin was no saint and he would have ridiculed any suggestion that he had any pretensions as such. He was the most human of all beings and it was because of his essential humanity that he had such a deep understanding of the basic conflicts and emotions of people at varying stages of cultural and material development. If we are to understand his ultimate philosophy as propounded in his last years amongst India's north-eastern tribes, we must first know something of the

man, the background of his upbringing and the circumstances that shaped his thinking and attitudes during his probationership in the years before he embarked upon his mission to India as well as his stay amongst the tribal people of Central India.

As we have observed, Elwin's father was a Bishop and his family was of good, solid stock. But his father's early death imposed a heavy burden on his mother and the family was obliged to live in tightened circumstances and with very few comforts. His mother did the cooking, cleaning and washing and the children had also to work very hard – only once could they afford a servant and that too for only a short period. But this was all in the day's work and they took it in their stride. I make mention of their sparse and austere mode of life, as it helps to explain the comparative ease with which Elwin later succeeded in adjusting himself to the very rudimentary style of life in an Indian tribal village. Elwin was in many ways a Buddhist by temperament. He enjoyed the so-called "good things" of life; he liked his food and his liquor, and he was attracted by women. But he was not enchained or obsessed by his desires. He did not believe in mortifying the flesh as in the case of certain Hindu sects. He had liberal views on sex in all its manifestations, and writes with frankness and without reserve of a boy whom he loved in his youth. "We read Rosetti's Italian poems in the original as a romantic way of learning the language; he went to Cambridge and I once stayed with him in King's College after I had gone to Oxford: the luminous beauty of the surroundings and the joy of simply being with him kept me mentally intoxicated for months." Elwin was no prude, and it was in fact his humanity, his

susceptibility to the human frailties that we are all subject to, that endeared him to his friends. His Buddhist learnings were evidence in his not normally being compulsively attached to his desires. Being human, there were exceptions, and he writes feelingly of his one overwhelming experience of love which could not be fulfilled. But it was an experience that cleansed and uplifted him, that heightened all his sensibilities.

I have spoken already of his bent towards religion and mysticism and of his inner urge to make reparation for wrongs committed against the underprivileged, more particularly by the British against their Indian subjects. What I have not yet mentioned, however, is what was perhaps the greatest love of his life, the love that sustained him in the long years of solitude in the hills and forests amidst people of an entirely different culture, the love that cheered him in the moments of despair and frustration from which no man is utterly free, the love that lay embedded in poetry and the beauty of words. And it is significant that it was Wordsworth who was his greatest joy. Ever as a young boy in school, he would wander into the woods and fields, and, sitting in the peace of the countryside, absorb the gentle message of the poet. To quote his own words, "I lived in a sort of trance of delight. I lived in two worlds which could not be reconciled. Orthodox evangelicalism stood strangely beside the mystical pantheism of Wordsworth, and at that time and for several years afterwards, I did not know which was the real thing for me." He goes on to add. "We were poor and had to grow up the hard way. The result has been that later, since I had learnt not to expect anything, I was often agreeably surprised, and even now, when anything

nice happens to me, I feel grateful to life for being so pleasant after all.”

Simplicity of living, a streak of mysticism, a passion for poetry, particularly nature poetry, and the beauty of words, these were some of the ingredients that equipped Elwin for his life's mission amongst the tribes of India. But it was not only poetry and the beauty of words that were his inspiration. The poet in him saw beauty in the colourful patterns of a tribal weave, beauty in the simple handicrafts of unlettered artisans and hunters of heads, beauty in the carved wooden pillars of a thatched village hall, and, most of all, beauty in a life of simplicity uncluttered by the mad rush for status symbols and garish paraphernalia that are often more a burden than a joy.

It had been the general practice of the Englishman in India to create a little England for himself wherever his work might place him. Whether in the great cities of Bombay or Calcutta or the remotest hill stations of Shillong or Darjeeling in the Himalayas, he would soon provide himself with a golf-course and race-course to while away his hours of leisure during the day-time. And for the long evenings there was the bridge and billiards room in the Club, and, of course, the bar, where he would associate with his own kind and share over his peg of whisky in the gossip of the day. Elwin's life, on the other hand, was not merely *in* the village but *of* the village. He did not float like the lotus upon the placid waters of the pool, he was of the pool itself. For week upon week he might not meet a fellow Englishman or indeed any person of his own culture and background, whereas the conventional Britisher, whether in the Civil Service, Army or industry, would pine constantly for a get-together with his own

kind. In the early days of Company's rule, when communications with the home country were tedious and time-consuming, it was not unusual for Englishmen to keep native wives, for there were not many English women prepared to brave the isolation and rigours of living in a country from which they would return to their own homes only rarely, if at all. But after Suez and the easing of communications, the Englishman found less difficulty in finding a wife from his own country to make an English home for him in even the remotest and wildest of regions, and the pattern and style of living became progressively more Anglicised.

It was soon after he had settled in Patangarh, in Central India, that Elwin married a Gond girl, Kosi, who came from a village near Karanjia and bore him a son. She accompanied him on many of his early tours and he acknowledges the help he received from her in obtaining information regarding the experience of young girls living in the *ghotul* or dormitory for the unmarried young of the village. Kosi had friends amongst the *motiari*, as the girls of the *ghotul* were called and was able to extract from them details of unique experiences which they would not have been prepared to divulge to a party of men. She made a valuable contribution therefore to Elwin's major work, *The Muria and their Ghotul*, published in 1947. The marriage was not however a happy marriage and was dissolved after a few years. It might have been expected that Elwin would have hesitated to embark again upon a marriage with a tribal girl of a completely different cultural background. But the fates were kind to him in his second marriage with Lila, a Pardhan girl who lived in Patangarh itself.

It was in the delightful hill-station of Shillong that Elwin moved from Patangarh, in 1954, for the final chapter of his life. It is in a spirit almost of ecstasy that Elwin recalls his life in his new home "Lila is the centre of this home; key of the house; store of happiness; Heaven's best girl to all of us. In Congreve's words, she is the moon and I the man in the moon. I am still slightly lunatic about her. In fact, I love her even more today than when I first met her." He is appreciative of the surprise of people at the happiness together of two persons so different in background, education and temperament, and while acknowledging that it might have been amusing to have a wife with whom he could argue about Toynbee's theory of history, he holds her rare capacity for understanding as far more precious. No less ardent and touching was his affection for his sons, Kumar, Wasant, Nakhul and Ashok. "To be happy at home is the ultimate result of all ambition", as he quotes in his autobiography from the learned Doctor Johnson.

I am laying some stress on the circumstances of Elwin's marriage, as there are implications touching upon his essential philosophy. Elwin was no armchair philosopher, sporting airy-fairy theories about "how to behave with tribal people." He had affection and respect for tribal people not merely in theory but in his innermost soul, to the extent that marriage with a tribal was for him the most natural thing in the world. And he was no strait-laced Puritan either. He unashamedly admits his immense enjoyment of sex. "Sex is good and lovely; all the extravagant phrases that the poets have ever used for it have not exhausted its beauty and delight." And it was a matter of pride for him that he should have been specifically

mentioned as an authority on the sexual behaviour of the human female in the Kinsey Report.

Elwin's feeling for and sensibility to beauty revealed itself in a number of directions. His special interest was literature and, in particular, poetry. At Oxford, he competed for the Newdigate prize and came fifth out of a large field. In his researches into tribal communities, he was attracted both by their myths as also by the charm and simplicity of their folk-songs. He had a natural facility for translating, retaining both the substance and spirit of the original without superimposing ideas foreign to the culture of an alien civilization. It is the folk-tales and folk-songs of a people that expose their heart, and it is unfortunate that his translations of the folk-tales of Mahakoshal and folk-songs of Chhatisgarh, as well as the folk-songs of the Maikal hills and *Songs of the Forests*, written jointly with Shamrao Hivale, were all out of print by the time of his death. Though there has been much talk about paying more attention to the study and promotion of tribal culture, it is indicative of the lack of public response and interest that the books of the highest authority on the subject are not easily available to the public, save in a limited number of specialist libraries. It was the Tata Trusts, as well as the research grants from Merton College and the Leverhulme Foundation, that assisted Elwin in the financing of his work in Central India. But it was J.P. Patel, whom Elwin affectionately describes as "a Mr. Pickwick of a man", who was mainly instrumental in collecting funds from well-wishers and industrialists in Bombay and elsewhere for sponsoring Elwin's welfare schemes and publishing his books. He was more than friend, philosopher and guide, he was virtually paterfamilias, and was the

one person to take an active interest in the care and support of his family after his death.

Anyone who has read Elwin's books will appreciate how much their value is enhanced by the beautiful photographs that illustrate the text. The sophisticated, practically foolproof camera had not made its appearance in his early years and the taking of even the simplest photographs involved much fuss and preparation. There was moreover the strongest objection amongst most tribes to being photographed for fear that the subject's soul would be removed by the camera. The fixing of the tripod, the manoeuvring for position and final aiming of the aperture as though it were a gun startled the bewildered tribal. In some places, the people supposed that the camera was a sort of X-ray instrument which could see through to their liver, which, from time immemorial, has been regarded as a potent source of supernatural power and witchcraft. It is a tribute to Elwin's tact and ability to win confidence that he was able to allay apprehensions and persuade the tribals, with their fears and superstitions, to allow themselves to be photographed. Colour photography was, of course, out of the question in his earliest efforts, but his essays in black and white photography, whether of people, village life or scenic beauty, convey a feeling and sensitivity that is not often achieved by modern techniques. For his photographs were taken with the eye of the soul.

Elwin has put poetry as the first amongst the things that have influenced him and moulded his life. Each man has his own channel of fulfilment, and, for myself, it has been through music, of all the arts, that I have been able to achieve some measure of spiritual realisation. Elwin has admitted that Western music has, as he puts it, "spoken to

him, but not enough." I have similarly been moved by poetry, but, again, as Elwin puts it, perhaps "not enough." During his last years, when after the day's work was done we relaxed together in each other's homes, we in many ways complemented each other. Elwin talked of poetry and largely widened my horizons, introducing me, amongst much else, to Ben Johnson's love poems of which I had previously been not at all aware. Elwin in his turn was interested to know whether and by what composers the sexual act had been translated into musical terms. I remember recalling and playing for him Stravinsky's Rite of Spring, which suggests an almost primeval atmosphere of tribal rites and barbaric rhythms and in which is included a Dance of the Earth in which all the young men and women together dance ecstatically in worship. As the music becomes increasingly frenzied, the Elders of the tribe bless both Earth and dancers and invoke the Goddess of Spring to provide beautiful crops and fruitfulness for all. I am myself not so much addicted to programme music and have a preference for abstract forms such as in Beethoven's last quartets, which, for me, are the very quintessence of all music. But in the same way as Elwin was not equipped or attuned for the sublimest heights of music, nor was I for the sublimest flights of poetry, but we tried to enlighten each other in our own particular fields. Elwin claimed to enjoy Stravinsky's Rite of Spring, but I cannot be sure whether the enjoyment would have been so intense if he had not been briefed that it was composed as a depiction of tribal rites. Anything associated with the tribes aroused his imagination, which explains, I think, his linking of Stravinsky with Beethoven and Mozart

as amongst the composers of Western music “that spoke to him.”

Verrier's personal letters were poetry itself and joy to receive. His letter to me on the death of my wife, Hilla, is still a treasured possession: “On a Naga tombstone in the Moram area I saw the words – “He was a lovely son – and I thought in their simplicity and dignity they were most touching. The same might be said, with a word altered, of your wife.” And my wife, Avi, could not have been more touched by his recollection of driving past her by night on what was then the narrow and treacherous one-way Shillong–Guwahati road : “It was very strange on my way up from Guwahati on the 26th. We were late and had been warned not to stop anywhere, as we were travelling dangerously against the traffic. That is why I didn't stop our car. But just for a moment, the cars halted side by side and by chance a bright light shone into your's and there, like a vision from another world, you were picked out, just waking up I think. Nothing else was to be seen but you, as if you were framed in a picture. It looked lovely and

The beauty in my heart I bore
Long after it was seen no more.”

The last of his several letters to me was on the birth of my daughter, Rashne, only a few weeks before his death. “Everyone here shares in your pleasure. We miss you in this house very much indeed, for no one will ever take your place.”

Although Elwin loved poetry passionately and although so much of his prose read almost as if it were poetry, the number of poems he wrote and published was

limited to only twenty-eight. This was partly due to his modesty, for some of his “secretions”, as he called them, breathe a wonderfully subtle sensitivity and beauty. His published verses were written in Patangarh and touchingly reflected his feeling for the village and the people. He has picked out two out of the twenty-eight for inclusion in his autobiography, of which the poem *Pity*, a word used, as he explains, as Blake used it, to mean compassion, is deeply moving :

O Pity, walk among our fields,
And touch the drooping ears of corn.
See how the scanty harvest yields
Its pittance from the tortured furrow,
And peasants fear to face the dawn.

And mingle, Pity, with the throng
That crowds the workshop and the mine,
Or in the jail where human wrong
Is punished with a world of sorrow,
Or where the broken-hearted pine.

And, Pity, come to visit homes
In villages remote, unblest,
Where death's sad step so quickly comes.
Regard that child with fever broken,
That mother with a cancered breast.

But first, make man's own spirit wise.
For only by the human hand,
And only through our human eyes,
Can Pity heal our desolation,
And spread compassion through the land.

A jolly poem in quite a different strain, *The Drummer Dances with His Love*, is based on a charming rustic Pardhan song.

Why will she not, lost in her song,
Join her dark eyes to mine ?
I beat my drum enchantingly
As the dance moves in line.

She comes towards me in the dance
All delicate and fair.
I leap before her and my eyes
Are tangled in her hair.

I press my drum against her breasts,
I swing and leap and press,
But she will never meet my eyes,
Nor any love confess.

The thunder of the drums is harsh
As crows upon the tree,
Or croaking frogs before the rain
Unless she looks at me.

Why will she not, so lost in song,
Join her dark eyes to mine ?
For I am the song she's singing,
The dance that moves in line.

A poem I am myself very fond of is *The True Treasure*, for it expresses so exactly his mud-house philosophy :

They have no treasure as the world counts gain.
Some starving cattle; a small bin of grain;
Torn scraps of dirty cloth; a string of beads;
A mat, a broken bed, a pot of seeds.

A basketful of roots, a little meat,
The bows and arrows and a wooden seat,
Is all their low-roofed hovels boast of store.
Such is the sad accounting of the poor.

They have no treasure ? Let us look again.
See how their courage triumphs over pain;
How patiently they cast the annual seed;
How steadfastly they bear their daily need.

These riches of the spirit are their power.
And then – the beauty like a perfect flower
That blossoms as the lotus from the mud,
The glory of the children in the bud.

See the fine bodies, unimproved by art,
The plum-black hair that twines about the heart,
The eyes that with the grace of fireflies move,
The shining teeth, the breasts that foster love.

Regard the features ravishing and dark,
And the gay song-filled voices. Hark, O hark,
To the sweet koel-music of their words
That dance and wanton with the coloured birds.

The breathing loveliness of human clay,
Though transient, transforms the hardest day.
How can we call then poor, whose wealth unbought
By contrast turns the rich man's gold to naught ?

Of his published poems, I shall conclude with his poem in memory of Sarojini Naidu, not, to my mind, amongst his finest, as admire her though he undoubtedly did, he could not be as moved by the aura of her glittering

personality as he was by the gentler emotions of love, compassion or the tribal scene. The poem is, in the field of poetry, what programme music is in the world of music and less abstract than the others I have quoted :

The joy of all our birds was in her song :
 The skylark shedding music from above,
 The broken cooing of the turtle-dove,
 The bulbul's joy, the koel clear and strong.

To her repute all lovely things belong,
 The beauty of old India's treasure-trove,
 The grace to hold the outcaste in her love,
 And when she turned to fight her country's wrong,

Her voice became a trumpet 'gainst the foe,
 Then caged, her message spanned the hemispheres,
 Conquered an empire, yet had time to show
 Her sympathy with little children's tears;
 For she, to all men in affection knit,
 Transformed her world with kindness and wit.

We have observed, in our first talk, with what feeling Elwin's sister, Eldyth, wrote about village life during her stay in her brother's ashram in Patangarh. It was not until many years later that I came into possession of some of her poems which, to my untutored mind at least, carry much the same feeling of mysticism and beauty as her brother's. "Shed Feet" I have particularly admired and bears out that poetry was the very flesh and blood of the Elwin family :

SHED FEET

I'm clambering out of my chrysalis now,
So that my caterpillar
May advance to butterfly.
My life has been hard work
Pushing my long body up and down,
Devouring green leaves.

While I hibernated, did I think ?
Had I intimations
That these heavy clustering garments,
And all these feet
Would ever let me fly ?

Now the soft wind carries me on wings.
Unknowingly, I'm beautiful !
My work is easy.
Perchance I'm back to that field of cabbages
For fulfilment.

On Elwin's death Eldyth's main concern was the welfare of his family, which she regarded as her own. "I have never met anyone so completely unselfish as Eldyth", writes Elwin of her, "She illustrates one of Gandhi's sayings "True love is boundless like the ocean and, rising and swelling within one, spreads itself out and crossing all boundaries and frontiers envelopes the whole world."

I shall be discussing in my next talk the broad policy advocated by Elwin in respect of the administration of the tribal areas of India's north-eastern borderlands. The

crucial test of this policy came with the Chinese invasion of India in 1962. Elwin was unwell at the time and I remember visiting him in his home to apprise him of the fall of Tawang. Elwin and his wife had visited the great monastery of Tawang near the Chinese frontier a few years previously and he has recorded that his pilgrimage had brought a definite change in his life, a step forward in spiritual realisation. The monastery awoke nostalgic memories of Oxford, with the same casual atmosphere which conceals so much dignity and protocol. Elwin was enraptured by the whole environment and particularly by the courtesy of the Monpa inhabitants. I realised what a shock it would be for him to learn that the Chinese had swept over the frontier in great strength and occupied the entire area, of which he has written: "If there is a Paradise in Nefa, this is it, this is it, this is it." I remember his expression of anguish and distress, almost disbelief. A few weeks later, the Chinese withdrew, and there were many who wondered whether the tribal people could ever again have confidence in our administration that had failed to protect them in their hour of crisis. I visited Tawang immediately after the Chinese withdrawal and was prepared to hear recriminations over the army's failure to resist the Chinese aggression and the administration's dismal withdrawal in the face of enemy attack. It was an unexpected surprise to be greeted with embraces by the Monpa tribals, who were overjoyed that we had returned to resume the administration despite the humiliation of the retreat. They had seen our armed forces physically repulsed, but they had not lost confidence in our inner motivations. Together, we rehoisted the Indian Flag, amidst heart-felt celebrations. On my return to Shillong,

I informed Elwin that the Monpa's welcome to us on our re-entry was the strongest possible justification of the policy of which he had been the main architect. We may have momentarily failed the tribal people, but they were not prepared to fail us in our hour of crisis.

LECTURE 3



*He has always been to me what
Mentor was to Telemachus*

SACHIN ROY.

I have chosen to highlight in these talks Elwin's association with the tribes of India's north-eastern borderlands, as it was during the period of this association, the last ten years of his life, that I came to know him on a personal basis. I have necessarily had to discuss, although only broadly, his earlier years, both in England before his decision to dedicate himself to India, as also his long-residence amongst the tribes of Central India, as these were the years during which his philosophy was taking shape. And I have drawn attention to certain aspects of his personality that, although not directly related to his mission amongst the tribes, had an indirect bearing on his general approach. His love of literature, and of poetry in particular, his aesthetic sensibility, his unbounded compassion, his tolerance of human frailties, his deep feeling for family, above all his passion for beauty in all its manifestations, spiritual as well as physical, these were some of the ingredients that made the man and shaped his philosophy.

I have not discussed in detail or ventured to assess his work amongst the tribes of Central India, as I have not myself had personal experience of the area or of the people. It would have been presumptuous of me, therefore, to pass judgement on the thinking or writings regarding the tribes of Central India of a person for whom work in these areas had been a life's mission. While I had met Elwin briefly in 1952, when he was calling in at Shillong en route to the Naga hills and Manipur, my first

real contact with him was in 1953, when his services had been enlisted by the Government of India for assistance as Consultant for tribal areas along India's north-eastern frontiers. I was myself at the time Adviser to the Governor of Assam for the north-eastern borderlands and was shortly due to proceed to Gangtok on my next posting as Prime Minister of Sikkim. I had held the post of Adviser for six years, having been appointed to it at a very young age, less than thirty, not because of any special merit or expertise as because, with the departure of the British, there were few Indian I.C.S. officers available with any experience of frontier administration. It was, for Government, a case of Hobson's choice. But I was fascinated from the very outset in my work and in the tribal people, and threw myself heart and soul into the business of getting to know as much as possible of the problems of the area and finding ways and means of guiding the tribal people along constructive lines.

I have to confess that Elwin's sudden emergence on the scene as Consultant was not, at first, whole-heartedly welcomed. He had spent the greater part of his working life amongst the tribes of Central India and there was little, it was supposed, he could contribute to help in problems with tribes on the north-eastern frontiers whose cultural, social and political background was so utterly different. While the I.C.S. were, in general, an able lot of officers, they could also be narrow in outlook, and being, in their own estimation at least, know-alls in every subject, contemptuous of other people's virtues and expertise. The frontiers were in those days administered by the Governor of Assam acting in his discretion, that is through his Adviser, and not on the advice of a popularly elected

ministry. The Adviser was a virtual dictator, therefore, not responsible to any legislature, but only remotely to the Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi. China had been comparatively dormant until, in 1950, they started tresspassing into Tibet and continuing to show in her maps extensive tracts of India's territory as falling within China's frontiers. It was only then that New Delhi became actively alerted and decided to take more interest in her north-eastern borderlands. A special Frontier Service was constituted and Elwin was included in the panel set up to select its prospective officers. K.L. Mehta, also of the I.C.S., was appointed as my more than able successor, and I soon moved on to Sikkim.

On my return from Sikkim after five years, I could scarcely recognise my old pastures. Roads and airfields had replaced travel by foot and mule to the district headquarters and the whole tone of the administration had become more sophisticated-not yet computerised, but well on its way! All this was at first the more surprising when one looked back at the simple ashram-type settlements that had been Elwin's style of life in the past twenty to thirty years.

It has to be remembered in this context that Elwin was never appointed as a regular Government servant and his method of functioning was essentially *sui generis*. He advised, but passed no orders. There were strategic needs that had to be attended to in these sensitive border regions, such as the construction of roads to locations selected for defence purposes, and in this there could be no interference. But the administration could certainly be advised of the dangers of discontent, even rebellion amongst the tribal people, if they were forced to undertake road labour

against their will, particularly during such seasons of the agricultural year, for example at sowing and harvest-time, when their presence in the fields was essential. Equally important was the need to impress upon all workers in the Governmental apparatus that the tribal people were not ignorant savages but that their culture was a rich culture that had developed over the generations to fulfil their specific needs. It was an essential and integral part of their lives, a part of their flesh and blood, and if, in our well-intentioned missionary zeal to reform or "uplift" the tribes, major changes were introduced so abruptly as to shake the foundations of their culture, not only would the people's culture die but, with it, also the very spirit of the people, their urges and aspirations and feeling for artistic creation.

The first priority, therefore, was to set up a machinery for collecting data and carrying out research about the area and its people. The tribal areas for which Elwin's services were mainly enlisted were what was then known as the North-East Frontier Agency, or Nefa, since constituted as a Union Territory designated as Arunachal Pradesh. This was the vast area of about 25,000 square miles lying north of the river Brahmaputra and extending northwards upto the international frontier with China. It also included some portions of the Naga hills bordering Burma, which were later transferred to Nagaland on its formation as a State separate from Assam. The British had enforced a policy of strict non-interference in respect of this area, which was lacking in communications and would have been exorbitantly costly to administer without any foreseeable prospect of financial or economic return. Apart from the occasional punitive expedition necessitated by tribal

raids on the plains and an annual showing of the flag upto the international frontier by the Political Officers to vindicate Government's physical possession of the area, the people were left to themselves, with practically no contact with the administration save through a bare network of officers posted along the southern foot-hills.

Elwin soon set about recruiting a team of research officers to gather fundamental data regarding the customs, religion, superstitions, myths and languages of Nefa's multifarious tribes. This was a vast undertaking, as there had been virtually no detailed research on these areas in the past. Under Elwin's over-all guidance, however, a series of monographs was prepared outlining the main features of the major tribes. Considering the speed with which these booklets were prepared, they cannot in justice be regarded as the last word on their subject. We have already noted Elwin's description of the method of preparation of his books on the tribes of Central India. He lived with the people and shared their life. His book on the Agaria, for instance, took him ten years. It would be expecting too much, therefore, to regard these early booklets on the Nefa tribes as comprehensive or definitive. But they served the purpose of focusing attention on the tribes. The mere fact that officers were taking the trouble to make enquiries about their customs and language implied that these matters were important enough to be taken trouble about. The tribes also gained in self-respect when they saw persons in authority interesting themselves in their cultural practices and not summarily brushing them aside as primitive and savage. They began to feel increased pride in themselves and in their institutions when they saw photographs of their families, their villages, their

handicrafts and beautiful weaves interspersed in the text. Many of them had been accustomed to think of themselves as uncivilised in the past, because they could not speak English, Hindi or Assamese. They realised now that their own tribal tongues also had their importance, and that officers were being encouraged to research into their grammar and structure. The entire approach to the tribal scenario was undergoing a radical change.

With their inevitable limitations, however, these monographs achieved their main purpose, to evoke a keener interest in the tribes and their dignity. It is to the credit of Elwin that he selected Research Assistants who were not only professionally competent but also fully in empathy with the tribes and their mores. The philology section of the Research Department was headed by B. Das Shastri, who was so dedicated to his work amongst the tribes that, after retirement, he chose to settle down for some years at Along in the Siang Division in order that his connection with them might not be summarily severed. Sachin Roy, Cultural Research Officer, was another very able officer who had had the advantage of studying under Professor K.P. Chattapadhyya at Calcutta University and, later, of working with Dr. B.S. Guha, the doyen of Indian anthropologists, in the Department of Anthropology. His "Aspects of Padam-Minyong Culture" is the first regular full-scale book describing in a scientific but readable form the customs and ideas of one of the most singular of the Nefa tribes. Elwin's Research Assistants have been the first to acknowledge the guidance and inspiration they received from him. As Sachin Roy quaintly and picturesquely puts it, Elwin "has always been to me what Mentor was to Telemachus", adding that he himself had breathed

in the atmosphere of his scholarship which inspired and sustained him in all his scholastic endeavours.

Although not a professional administrator, Elwin was gifted with the administrator's instinct of knowing how to delegate. It would have been impossible for him to undertake personally the writing of such a multitude of books on each of the Nefa tribes, but the books bear nevertheless the stamp of his guiding genius and are a valuable contribution to the record of the people's culture.

What is the more remarkable, however, is that, apart from instructing his research assistants in the preparation of their monographs, Elwin could have found time and energy to carry out so much independent research of his own. His services were, besides, much sought after as a member of various commissions relating to the welfare of the tribes, including the Chairmanship of a high-level Committee set up by the Home Ministry to evaluate the Special Multipurpose Tribal Blocks throughout the country. The Constitution of India also provides for the appointment of a Commission at the end of ten years from its commencement to report on the administration of the tribal areas. Elwin was included as a Member of this Commission, which toured for ten months throughout the country and submitted a voluminous report of nearly 800 pages.

U.N. Dhebar, Chairman of the Commission, quite rightly felt that the report should be shortened for general readership and Elwin was requested to produce a popular version, which he entitled *A New Deal for Tribal India*. This was issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs as an official publication in a typically unimaginative Governmental format. If the original voluminous report had been considered, as Elwin puts it, "perhaps a little formidable

in these busy days when many people regard the reading of a paper-back novel as an achievement," I doubt whether even the precis of 140 pages has attracted a wide readership, its outward presentation being as drab and dull as a census report. But every page bears the stamp of Elwin's personality and style, and, as the report is so little known or read, I feel it would be fitting to quote some pertinent extracts, which are as relevant to conditions today as they were when the report was originally published nearly twenty-five years ago.

In introducing the problems facing the country in relation to the tribals, the report notes that "It is the special characteristic of Indian society that it has always aimed at advance without disturbing the essential harmony of society and at integration without imposition. Indian society is, therefore, a great living human institution which has realised that diversity is not inimical to unity, but that on the contrary its variety enriches its unity. The problem of problems is not to disturb the harmony of tribal life but simultaneously to work for its advance; not to impose anything on the tribes but simultaneously to work for their integration as members and part of the Indian family."

In the discussion of the immense variety in the tribal population, it is pointed out that "Tribal religion varies as much as tribal social custom or tribal law. Some of the tribes are Buddhist and have been so for centuries. Some have become Christians in comparatively recent times. Others worship Hindu gods and follow a simplified form of the Hindu religion. Yet again, others still follow the faith of their ancestors. These latter generally believe in one Supreme Being with many subordinate deities and in a great number of spirits of Nature, of river, hill and

forest, ghosts and other unseen spirits who affect human life at every point. Many of these are regarded as malevolent and have to be appeased by ceremonies, festivals and sacrifices; others are kindly and helpful. In most tribes there are traditional priests and even priestesses who act on behalf of the village community. Tribal religion is by no means to be dismissed as a superstition. It has given to millions strength in adversity, joy when things go well, relief from anxiety and consolation in the hour of death."

The view of his own Committee on Multipurpose Tribal Blocks is epitomised as follows :—

"Some of the tribal areas have already made, and we hope that soon they all will make, sensational progress in material prosperity. Yet this prosperity may be positively dangerous unless there is a simultaneous ethical and spiritual renaissance. It is unhappily true that when a tribal enters our world of today, he all too often loses the fine qualities that formerly distinguished him. India is a secular State and it would be improper for official or even voluntary organizations that receive support from Government to promote any particular religion or ideology. But the tribal people themselves have ideals which in their own way are good and beautiful. We must cherish these and help them to grow so that there will be no loss of those imponderable treasures that gives dignity to the life of man."

The report stresses that difficulty in persuading the tribal people to accept medical treatment is that they have a well-developed system of diagnosis and cure of their

own : "The usual theory of disease in tribal society is that it is caused by hostile spirits, the ghosts of the dead, or the breach of some taboo. What is spiritually caused, therefore, must be spiritually cured, and this is the main reason why the people in the interior prefer to go to their own doctors rather than to ours. There is no doubt that this theory of disease is a deterrent to many who would otherwise come to dispensaries and hospitals for treatment and it is natural that the doctors should regard the tribal priest as a dangerous professional rival. But this surely is not necessary. A pious invalid will send for both the priest and the physician. The priest will pray for him, the physician will give him a pill. The theory is that God answers the priest's prayer by making the pill more efficacious : the physician is the instrument through which the divine compassion works."

Very relevant is the assessment in the New Deal of the enterprise of Christian missionaries. While acknowledging that they were amongst the first to inspire the tribal people with the idea of progress and to awaken them to a sense of their rights, the report deprecates their over-insistence on proselytising, which has always been abhorrent to the tolerant Indian mind : "In many places the effect of their teaching has been to break up families and divide villages. One may see a village, which at one time worked and lived as a single unit, now split into a Christian hamlet and a non-Christian hamlet. In one tribal village no fewer than five different Missions were carrying on propaganda, opening separate schools and teaching different forms of Christianity. The effect on the simple tribal mind can easily be imagined. The attitude of some missionaries has been completely destructive of the tribal

culture. To them everything which is not Christian is 'heathen' and some of the finest aspects of tribal life have been abandoned. Dance and songs, even the weaving of lovely textiles and the traditional tribal institutions have perished before their intolerance. The tribals have been taught to despise their past and as a result a strong inferiority complex has been created."

Another little known book, completed only two months before Elwin's death, *Democracy in Nefa*, merits mention amidst his extensive writings, as it highlights the supreme importance he attached to indigenous self-governing institutions, such as Tribal Councils. The main thrust of Elwin's policy was that, consistent with the need for development, there should be the least possible interference in the traditional life of the people, and he has very pertinently drawn attention to the traditional speech recited by the leaders of the *Kobang* or Adi Council in Siang at the beginning of their meetings:

"Oh villagers and brethren, let us strengthen our customs and our council, let us improve our regulations; let us make the laws straight and equal for all. Let the leaders who can speak best stand up and speak out for our betterment; let them speak out in a bold voice unabashed and undaunted like a cock crowing. Let our laws be uniform; let our customs be the same for all. Let us not decide differently for different persons; let us be guided by reason and see that justice is done and a compromise reached that is acceptable to both the parties. Let us keep nothing pending, let us decide while the dispute is fresh, lest small disputes grow big and continue for a long time.

Let the fine be levied reasonably. Let it be commensurate with the guilt and be just. Poverty should have compassion and justice be tempered with mercy. We have met in this sacred place of justice; we have come together for a council-meeting and let us speak in one voice and decide on one verdict. Here are the iron pots and brass pots brought by the accuser and the accused; here stand the *mithun*. So let us decide and mete out justice so that all these go to him who is in the right."

Sachin Roy, in his *Aspects of Padam Mining Culture*, has pointed out the parallel between the above Adi invocation and the famous Vedic hymn praying for unanimity in a council (Samiti) :

"Assemble, speak together: let your minds be all of one accord. As ancient Gods unanimous sit down to their appointed share. The place is common, common the assembly, common the mind, so be their thoughts united.

A common purpose do I lay before you, and worship with your general oblation.

One and the same be your resolve, and be your minds of one accord.

United be the thoughts of all that all may agree."

I have called attention to the parallel between the above two passages as illustration of another of Elwin's observations in the New Deal, that, though the tendency is to stress the exotic character of the tribes, their central problems are those of all mankind. "The great human

problems of life, love and death are common to us all." Our Courts of Justice may well take a leaf from the Adi exhortation which, in all its brevity, comprises the very quintessence of ideal justice.

We have dealt in today's discussions with what we may term as Elwin's "technical" activities relating to his responsibilities as Government's Adviser for Tribal Affairs. Apart from the *New Deal and Democracy in Nefa*, even the monographs on the individual tribes prepared by his assistants under his guidance are technical in the sense that they were intended, partly, to educate our own officers on the customs, language and way of life of the specific tribes with which they were dealing. These books savour, therefore, both in their content and presentation, of a certain didacticism and may not readily appeal to the general reader. Elwin was aware, however, of the need to capture the imagination of the public at large if the tribes were to receive the attention they deserved for their advancement. His *Philosophy of Nefa, Art of the North-East Frontier* and his autobiography, the *Tribal World of Verrier Elwin*, came under the category of books that, while pertinent to the administration of the tribes of north-eastern India, have a wider bearing on the problem of tribes throughout the world. I shall reserve their discussion, therefore, amongst the topics I shall be dealing with in my concluding talk.

LECTURE **4**



*One of the Greatest
Romantics of Anthropology*

C. VON HAIMENDORF.

WE have dealt in our previous talks on Elwin's upbringing in England, the impulse that led him to dedicate himself to the people of India by way of reparation for the wrongs and injustices committed upon them by the British, his work amongst the tribals of Central India, and, finally, his role as a scholar semi-administrator amongst the tribes of India's north-eastern frontiers. In this, my final talk, I propose discussing not so much his activities with reference to particular tribes or Commissions appointed to report on specific issues as the broad policy that evolved out of his own personal experience of living and working amongst the tribal people, whether in Central or north-eastern India, but more particularly the latter.

We have seen already how Elwin built up a team of Research Assistants to prepare monographs on the individual tribes of Nefa. He felt it necessary, however, to create a wider interest in the tribes as a whole – for who from amongst the general public could be much interested in the Akas or the Pailibos, whose names were even unknown? – and set himself to compile a record of the very vivid accounts by visitors to these areas in the 19th century, whether they were administrators, soldiers, tea-planters, explorers or missionaries. This was the book, *India's North-East Frontier in the Nineteenth Century*, that I received from him on my return from Sikkim to Shillong in 1959, the first of the many gift parcels he continued, unfailingly, to present me with until his death. There was a touching and inspiring inscription :

"My dear Nari,

This is the very first copy of a book which is being published by the Oxford Press this week, and I would like you to have it on the occasion of your taking over as Adviser today.

It comes to you with much affection and our hopes, prayers and blessings for the next few years and always.

Your ever,

12-7-59

VERRIER "

I was not to know then that the subsequent, companion volume, *The Nagas in the Nineteenth Century*, would remain unfinished at his death and that I was myself destined to complete editing the manuscript for publication. We had in fact worked at this latter volume together and it had been a joyful collaboration.

Elwin's Introduction to each of these two books is in itself instructive and revealing. The European traveller in the nineteenth century was under no illusions about the Noble Savage, and, even as late as 1911, the wife of an officer attached to the Abor Expedition could be found expressing herself in puns of rather dubious taste "It is such a bore that my husband has to go off on that silly Abor Expedition to fight those stupid aborigines with their queer, aboreal habits." It was E.T. Dalton, Elwin points out, who foreshadowed "the new attitude of respect, interest and affection that in the main governs the relations of literates and pre-literates in the modern world." The Apa Tanis are shown to be honourable warriors, not inflicting injury on non-combatants. "They may well claim a

hearing”, observes Dalton, “as the most humane of belligerents at the next International Congress.” On the other side of the coin is revealed the typically imperialistic attitude of the pious, self-righteous Sir James Johnstone who, in his *Experiences in Manipur and the Naga Hills* (1896) urges “the advisability of establishing a regular system of education, including religious instructions, under a competent clergyman of the Church of England. I pointed out that the Nagas had no religion; that they were highly intelligent and capable of receiving civilisation; that with it they would want a religion, and that we might as well give them our own and make them in this way a source of strength, but thus mutually attaching them to us.”

We come full circle with Elwin’s extract from Col. T.H. Lewin’s *Fly in the Wheel* written as long ago as in 1869 but so exactly anticipating the attitude of modern India.

“This I say, let us not govern these hills for ourselves, but administer the country for the well-being and happiness of the people dwelling therein. What is wanted here is not measures, but a man. Place over them an officer gifted with the power of rule, not a mere cog in the great wheel of Government, but one tolerant of the failings of his fellow-creatures and yet prompt to see and recognise in them the touch of nature that makes the whole world kin, apt to enter into new trains of thought and to modify and to adopt ideas, but cautious in offending national prejudice. Under a guidance like this, let the people by slow degree civilise themselves. With education open to them and yet moving under their own laws and customs, they will turn out not debased and miniature epitomes of Englishmen, but a new and noble type of God’s creatures.”

In his Introduction to *The Nagas in the Nineteenth Century*, Elwin observes that it is the small details that are so delightful and fascinating, the description for instance of the Christmas Day in 1844, when Major Butler's surveyor came into camp in the Naga hills completely exhausted. Butler notes that he was "a very abstemious man and was always boasting of the inexpressible delight he experienced in satisfying his thirst from every limpid stream and eating sweet biscuits." Butler revived him nevertheless with a pint of warm porter "whereon he rallied instantly" and, in later years, found a glass of brandy more refreshing than the waters of a stream.

Both the above books cover every aspect of the area and of the people and are an invaluable guide to conditions prevailing in the nineteenth century. It is a sad reflection on the general lack of interest on the part of the public in the tribes and their problems that they are both out of print. But apart from research into the history, geographical explorations, forest and animal life, geology and other physical features of the north-eastern tribes, Elwin carried out extensive studies on their myths and legends. His *Myths of the North-East Frontier of India* (1958) makes available nearly four-hundred tales throwing light on the thought and poetic imagination of Nefa's tribes. His task was rendered doubly difficult, as many of the tribes do not give up their secrets readily. In the Khamlang Valley of Subansiri, for instance, only priests are permitted to tell stories, and for nearly the whole of Elwin's visit there, no priest was to be found. Most of the stories were collected during Elwin's long tours in the frontier mountains between 1954 and 1957. These remote areas had had practically no contact with the outside world save through the

occasional explorer or Government officer, so that the motifs common to such tales in other parts of Central India are mostly absent. The tales are original and genuine products of tribal creativity and imagination. They are told on a variety of occasions, some repeated at ceremonies such as at a funeral or harvest-thanksgiving, some chanted during the dance or told round the hearth, while others were passed down from shaman to shaman as a kind of traditional wisdom. Myths, it has been said, are primitive history expressed in poetic terms and some of the tales are certainly enriched with a deep vein of poetic imagination. The Nefa stories of the creation of the world have, Elwin observes, "an almost Miltonic grandeur of conception." Earth and sky are lovers and, when they make love, all nature springs into being. But they have necessarily to be separated or there would otherwise be no room for their offspring to subsist. Earth longs, however, to rejoin her husband, the sky, but as she raises herself to do so, the sun and moon unexpectedly appear and she feels ashamed to rise further. And so the portion of the Earth which was moving upwards to meet her lord becomes fixed for ever as the great Himalayas. This is but one of the many charming tales that bear out Elwin's conclusion that "Imagination, which is the light of the finest and most cultured minds, illuminates also the hard lives of the people of the hills."

Elwin's *Myths of the North-East Frontier of India* was but the fore-runner of yet another collection of stories, *A New Book of Tribal Fiction*. Whereas the tales of the former were mostly myths in the technical sense of the word and mainly concerned with the origin of things, the latter may more properly be classified as fairy-stories.

Elwin was neither an anthropologist or a folklorist in the purely technical or exclusive sense, but had always been impressed by the light thrown by stories, legends and myths on the customs and thinking of tribal people. Apart from the value and interest of the stories themselves, he has prefaced each chapter of his book with a brief Tour Diary to give, in a natural and unforced manner, a vignette of the people and countryside of the remote hills through which he slowly meandereed during the course of collecting his stories.

Elwin had already, during his stay amongst the tribes of Central India, written in scholarly detail of the Ghotul, or dormitory, of the Murias. The tribes of the north-east also have analogous institutions, such as the Rasheng, which organises and disciplines the unmarried girls of an Adi village. This is a hut used by the girls only at night, where they spin, weave and dance until they go to bed. It is also visited by boys who are seeking girls to marry, and, in the words of the anthropologist, Dr. B.S. Guha, "helps the growth of a spirit of comradeship among men and women and a life of healthy relaxation which provides the outlet for the release of tensions and repressed forces which otherwise would have developed into factionalism and marred the development of a healthy tribal life." Knowledge of the functioning and aims of the institution is essentially necessary, as it plays a focal part in so many of the stories recorded by Elwin which cannot be understood in all their implications without such knowledge.

Elwin has particularly noted the difference between the Buddhist and non-Buddhist stories, the former being generally more sophisticated, having had perhaps an

ultimate literary origin. The attitude to women in the Buddhist stories is also often unfavourable. This may of course be a psychological device adopted by Buddhists whereby through meditating on the unpleasant or transitory character of worldly things, they may attain freedom from attachment. As women are one of the most powerful temptations for the God-fearing Buddhist, they are depicted in many of these folk-tales as just not worth man's attention. Typical is the story of the credulous merchant, Motik Gyelpo, whose wife professes to love him so much that she will never let him out of her sight. This is how Elwin relates the tale : "When Motik goes to visit a neighbouring Raja, she forces him to make a clay image so that she will have him always with her, and he says: 'A woman who really loves her husband can never make love to others.' Yet within a few hours of his departure she has seduced a rather unwilling friend. A little later in the same story the Raja, who also believes in his wife's virtue, is betrayed by her with a mad man and when the merchant discovers it, he claims: 'How astonishing it is! But this is the nature of women. They only pretend to be loyal to their husbands while in actual fact they betray them.' The Raja and the merchant accordingly agree to live together as brothers and never to have anything to do with women, deciding that it is because women have more desire than men that they are never satisfied and have to go to others. But in the end desire is too strong and they remarry, sharing a wife between them. Yet she too betrays them with a young and handsome servant. After this the friends leave their home and now 'their aim in life is only to worship God and do good to other people.' Elwin pertinently draws a parallel with D.H. Lawrence and the Gamekeeper motif in these

stories, where the women are generally unfaithful with lovers of a definitely lower social status.

The *Book of Tribal Fiction* can be entertainingly dipped into at any point. The tales are grouped tribe-wise and are given attractive titles. Their great value to the research scholar is the elaborate index of fifty pages which enables the reader to track down in a moment references to the most remote and obscure of subjects. There can have been few books, however, upon which so much pains have been expended for so limited a readership. For though both the *Myths of the North-East Frontier* and the *Book of Tribal Fiction* contain such fascinating material, their outward format, being Government publications, is that of a dull Government hand-out and the text is unrelieved by the sensitive photographs that are so much the charm of Elwin's other works.

And herein lies Elwin's main disability. He suffered from the virtue of his qualities. His modesty and retiring nature came in the way of his exploiting his opportunities and capabilities to the full. He was not a practical man of affairs and had no sense of business. Had not Government come to his family's rescue at the time of his death, they would have been left in utter destitution.

Elwin, as we have noted, was a devoted admirer of Mahatma Gandhi. It was the Mahatma's example that reinforced his own attitude of humility and simple living. Gandhi had equal admiration for Elwin and reposed such confidence in his sincerity that he entrusted him with the most delicate of political missions in the struggle for India's independence. Elwin however thought of Gandhi more as a father and wrote to him even about his personal

problems, as, for instance, when he was contemplating marriage in 1933. Gandhi's reply from Yervada jail was characteristic of his deep affection for Elwin. "My dearest son", he wrote, "Son you have become of your own choice. I have accepted the responsible position. And son you shall remain to the end of time. The tie between you and me is much thicker and tougher than blood. It is the burning love of Truth at any cost. Therefore, whatever you will do will not disappoint me."

Elwin's relations with Jawaharlal Nehru were also close, but not on such an intimate, mystical level. Nehru shared Elwin's cultural background, and, for all his patriotism for India, was essentially western in spirit. Like Elwin, he was a lover of literature and also participated unabashedly in the commoner joys of life. Harrow, Trinity and his father, Motilal, had cast their upper-class mould around him rather more relentlessly than had Oxford on the son of a colonial Bishop. I doubt whether Nehru would have found happiness for long in Elwin's ascetic ashram at Patangarh. Nehru found inspiration however in the poetry of Elwin's writings on the tribes, and gave his blessing to the book that was to become the bible of every frontier officer. It is amazing that Nehru, amidst his multifarious preoccupations, could have found time to study and write a Foreword to Elwin's *A Philosophy for Nefas*, as rewarding and refreshing a book as could ever have been written on the problems of India's frontier tribes and an approach to their solution. Elwin goes back in history to writers from the earliest ages and the most diverse of civilisations who have given their thoughts on the subject of man in his more primeval stages. We are told of the story in Valmiki's Ramayana where Rama, while searching

for Sita, meets the aged ascetic Sabari of a tribe of eastern India, who offers fruits for Rama's comfort. Here was a case, as Elwin points out, not of the master doing something for the forest people but the other way round, the forest people doing something for their rulers, an attitude anticipating the friendliness and respect which has come to fruition in more modern times. There is mention of Hesiod and Virgil of the classical period of Greece and Rome, culminating in Cowley's translation of Horace's famous Ode :

“Happy the man whom bounteous Gods allow
 With his own hands Paternal grounds to plough!
 Like the first Golden Mortals happy he
 From Business and the cares of Money free !
 From all the cheats of law he lives secure,
 Nor does th' affronts of Palaces endure.”

It is refreshing to find even Shakespeare as having views on tribal affairs when, in *The Tempest*, he expatiates, albeit poetically, on the relations of the contemporary colonist with the aboriginal peoples of the countries in which he settled. Caliban may be taken for the Indian tribal and Prospero for the colonist or planter. Caliban is the original owner of the island on which Prospero and his daughter have been marooned and his recital of the woes by which he has been wheedled into losing his rights will make many search their consciences :

“This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,
 Which thou tak'st from me.
 When thou cam'st first,
 Thou strok'st me, and made much of me :
 would'st give me

Water with berries in it : and teach me how
To name the bigger light and how the less,
That burn by day and night :
 and then I loved thee,
And showed thee all the qualities of the isle,
The fresh springs, brine-pits,
 barren place and fertile :
Cursed be I that did so !

There were others of course who held a diametrically opposite view. Dickens did not mince his words : “My position is that if we have anything to learn from the Noble Savage, it is what to avoid. His virtues are a fable; his happiness is a delusion; his nobility nonsense.” The great Dr. Samuel Johnson was no less virulent in the expression of his views : “Don’t cant in defence of savages. They have no bodily advantages beyond those of civilised men. They have not better health; and as to care or mental uneasiness, they are not above it, but below it, like bears.”

It is the middle way that is the essence of Elwin’s philosophy and had Nehru’s unreserved support. “I am alarmed,” wrote Nehru, “when I see – not only in this country, but in other great countries too – how anxious people are to shape others according to their own image or likeness, and to impose on them their particular way of living.” He has declared that he is not sure which, the modern or the tribal, is the better way of living. “In some respects I am quite certain their’s is better” and “They possess a variety of cultures and are in many ways certainly not backward.”

“We must cease to think of ourselves as different from the so-called tribal people “he continues” “This is a

vicious idea. It is due to a superiority complex which has no basis in reality. I can say with complete honesty that some of the tribal people have reached a high degree of development, in fact I have found that in some places they are highly educated and disciplined and lead a corporate communal life, which, I think, is far better than the caste-ridden society from which we suffer."

The general principles enunciated in Elwin's *Philosophy* have application not only to the tribes of India but wherever in the world primitive peoples have been overwhelmed by a foreign influx. A recent survey of conditions in Samoa is a warning of what may well become the fate of the tribes of India if such warning is not heeded in time. High-principled though he undoubtedly was, it was after Captain Cook's intrusion that so many ills befell the islands of Polynesia and Melanesia – tuberculosis, small-pox, venereal disease, gunpowder, alcoholism, slavery. It was scarcely sixty years after Cook's arrival in Tahiti that a visitor reported, "In the slovenly and haphazard and diseased inhabitants, it was vain to attempt to recognise the prepossessing figure of the Tahitian as pictured by Cook." A recent report by Gavin Young, who has also, although surreptitiously, visited the Naga hills, warns that "an immediate threat to island cultures and peoples is the steady inflow of western high-rise, junk-food "culture." Tourist hotels disfigure hundreds of island skylines casting their monstrous shadows over the blue lagoons. Reefs and the marine life dependent on them have been dynamited to make way for runways for jumbo jets. Drugs have long since reached those white beaches in the back-packs of young Australians, New Zealanders and Americans. AIDS, too, is there."

Many must have been shocked to hear how the Queen of England was recently insulted by Maoris during her visit to New Zealand. The throwing of eggs and subjecting her to the "traditional" Maori insult of a bare-buttock salute was appalling bad manners and utterly inexcusable. But how many are there who are aware of the long-festering wounds of the past that were responsible for this outrageous outburst. The establishing of trading-stations and missionary institutions in New Zealand in the last century had a devastating impact on the Maoris. A complex tribal system, based on elaborate social rituals, was fractured, and sovereignty was eventually handed to the British in return for so-called "protection". The Maoris were guaranteed possession of their lands, forests and fisheries, but the guarantees were vaguely worded and never honoured. More than two million acres of land were taken from the Maoris and "Maori customary land" is today a relatively insignificant area. What is worse, the Maoris as a group are significantly less affluent in their own land than the rest of the community. The 300,000 surviving Maoris, less than 10 per cent of the population, now regard themselves as the "poor relations." The ecology of their land has also suffered disastrously, with shell-fish beds being increasingly polluted by industrial waste and sewage.

These are the dangers that Elwin, in his *Philosophy*, warns may be in store for India's tribes despite all the safeguards of the Constitution. Our lovely hills and forests have already been cruelly desecrated and their inhabitants despoiled. Elwin realised that unless the hearts of the people at large could be touched, the stark printed word of the Constitution would not suffice to protect the tribes

any more than did treaty safeguards suffice to protect the Maoris from the most savage exploitation by their self-appointed "civilisers."

Jawaharlal Nehru had laid special stress on encouraging the art of the hill tribes. "I am anxious that they should advance, but I am even more anxious that they should not lose their artistry and joy in life and the culture that distinguishes them in many ways." Elwin's *The Art of the North-East Frontier of India* is one of the few Government publications that has been spared the customary drab bureaucratic format. It is the most beautifully produced of all his books, with exquisite photographs, both in colour and in black-and white. Elwin explains the underlying motivation of the work. The impact of modern, westernised civilisation had been, all over the world, to destroy the creative impulse in pre-literate populations, and it was to check such destructive influence upon the hitherto comparatively untouched tribes of India's north-eastern frontiers that this book was undertaken. By encouraging the arts of the tribal people and engendering in them a pride in their own products, it was hoped it would be possible to inspire a renaissance of creative activity throughout the hill areas.

I had mentioned in an earlier talk that there were some in the bureaucracy who were sceptical whether Elwin, with his experience of tribes in Central India, would be able to make much useful contribution in respect of tribes of such a different racial and historical background as in the north-east. It was not long, however, before he won us all over, mainly, I think, by his humility, and, for myself, through our shared love of beauty in all

its various manifestations. I had in fact experimented with somewhat similar ideas during my tenure as Prime Minister of Sikkim, where I tried, as far as possible, to ensure that our development plans should not run counter to the traditional culture of the country. I, however, pointed out to Elwin, on my return to Shillong for a second tenure as Adviser for Nefa, the frightening gap I had noticed between the ideals of the Nefa administration and their practical implementation. "Unless we *feel* our ideas more intensely, unless our officers can be *fired emotionally*, the drabness that we try to avert will inevitably become part of the texture of Nefa and Nefa's people. Everything must, in the last resort, depend upon our field officers. If they have the right ideas and are sufficiently enthused, there is some hope that our "Philosophy" will come to life. Beauty and art are held these days to be rather superfluous luxuries, not very high in the scale of values. Unless, therefore, there is a fire of inspiration from the highest level and it is maintained always at white heat, I am afraid the forces of fullness and ugliness will overwhelm Nefa and then it will be too late to make amends." It was Elwin who kept alive the fire of inspiration and maintained it at white heat until his death. He was the Socratic gad-fly that kept the bureaucracy on its toes by virtue not of any administrative powers, for he was not vested with any such, but by virtue of his selfless example and self-evident care and compassion for the tribal people. Many of his books, particularly his anthropological monographs, were rather too technical to attract a wide readership. His *Philosophy of Nefa* and *Art of the North-Eastern Frontiers* were deliberately written in a simpler strain and were his nearest approach to what might be regarded as works of popular appeal.

It has been observed that Elwin was no man of practical affairs and had not the slightest financial aptitude. He was an ill man in his latter years, however, and he was hoping that his autobiography, *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin*, might become a best-seller and provide his family with the wherewithal to maintain itself after his death. This was, however, a forlorn hope for the book did not fulfil expectations. As his publishers rather foresaw, it found only a comparatively limited readership and its writing caused him considerable confusion. He finished the first draft in 1952, twelve years before his death, and, ten years later, in 1962, he consulted me on the final draft he proposed sending to his publishers. His publishers were in two minds about Elwin's approach, one school of thought being that he was throughout writing with an Indian audience in mind and was unlikely therefore to achieve a very wide readership in the west. He was advised that, if he hoped for a wide readership in England and America, he should write primarily for non-Indians and that most of his readers would in any case be non-Indians. It should be remembered, however, that Elwin had been trying to become an Indian citizen ever since he first came under Gandhi's influence in the early thirties at his ashram in Sabarmati. The final order granting him citizenship was not issued until 1954, but his whole way of life and attitudes had been essentially Indian during his long years amongst the tribal people. A former Governor of Assam had once noted that Europeans tended to suffer a certain lack of balance if stationed for prolonged periods in isolated tribal areas where they were deprived of society of their own culture. While it would not be right to attribute any lack of balance in the case of Elwin, I had myself

often felt that his years of isolation had cut him off to some extent from the general current of thinking and he sometimes found difficulty and embarrassment in finding and accepting his true identity. While he acknowledges in the Preface that he was writing the story of a man who had lived between the two worlds of Britain and India and had found in his own experience that East and West were but alternate beats of the same heart, the heart itself could not fail to be affected by forty years naturalisation in the land of his adoption and to manifest symptoms of his alienation from his original motherland. The advice to address his autobiography to a non-Indian readership was well-meant if he was in search of a wider audience, but did not take sufficient account of his own instinct and feeling of closeness to the people for whom he had worked all his life.

I have been able to discuss in these talks only a small proportion of Elwin's vast literary output. But apart from his printed publications, he kept diaries and carried on correspondence with a number of noted literary figures, such as D.H. Lawrence and Arthur Koestler. In a note written at Guwahati airport when setting off on a flight to Delhi with his wife, he left instructions to me regarding the care of his children and disposal of his assets in the event of an air-crash. "Would you take charge" the note concluded, "of all my Diaries, which are in a cupboard, and either burn them or keep them as a melancholy relic. I can't trust them to anyone else." I was more than touched by his confidence in my discretion and am convinced that much will one day come to light in his diaries which will be invaluable to anthropological and literary research. I have mentioned earlier that the professional anthropolo-

gical fraternity have not as a whole done full justice to Elwin. But there is a shining exception. The obituary on Elwin in *Man* was written by no less eminent an anthropologist than Chritoph von-Furer-Haimendorf, Professor of Asian Anthropology at the London School of Oriental & African Studies. Haimendorf's own researches and books on the tribes of India are of the very highest order, and an encomium from such an internationally respected authority would be the most fitting conclusion to these lectures in memory of a very dear and valued frind-and son – of India.

“No other anthropologist, neither British or Indian, has made as massive a contribution to our knowledge of Indian tribal societies as Verrier Elwin, and books such as *The Muria and their Ghotul* and *The Religion of an Indian Tribe* are sure of a place among the classics of ethnographical literature. Yet Verrier Elwin's impact on his contemporaries can be fully realised only by those who have experienced the warmth of his friendship and the brilliance of his conversation, for in him outstanding artistic and intellectual gifts were combined with compassion and a personality of captivating charm. He was one of the greatest romantics of anthropology and the most inspired chronicler of India's tribal people.”

* *Man* : LXIV : 114 - 115 1964

Furer Haimendorf C. von

Obituary, Verrier Elwin : 1902 - 1964.

