
UNIT 7 VERRIER ELWIN*

Structure

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7.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through his unit, you will be able to:

- outline the life and works of Verrier Elwin;
- discuss Elwin's contribution to the issue of tribal of identity;
- explain Elwin-Ghurye debate on protection and integration of tribal identity ; and
- discuss Elwin's insights on tribal development in post-Independent India.

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Verrier Elwin (1902-1964) was a 'self-made anthropologist' and a public intellectual-cum-reformer of his time; an ethically grounded and committed institution-builder and an iconoclast, who could translate the real voices of the tribal communities to both the academic and administrative discourses in post-independent India. Later, he took Indian citizenship. Elwin made the forests in India his home and treated tribal communities of those habitats like his own kin. He occupied administrative and official positions pertaining to the development of tribal communities distributed in different parts of India and actively contributed to the process of nation-building.

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This unit explores his major contributions to Indian anthropology, his approaches to the study of tribal communities, research methods, and his published corpus which includes a variety of literary expressions and writing styles.

7.2 BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Harry Verrier Holman Elwin was the son of anglican bishop. His father died at a young age. Shamrao Hivale, a colleague and friend of Elwin, provides an interesting documentation of Elwin's student life, which carries an insightful account to understanding the protean possibilities hidden in his persona. Hivale notes that 'Verrier won a lot of prizes in his final year at school, but he could not manage to get a scholarship at St. John's College. In 1921, Elwin went up to Merton as a Commoner without much hope of a great academic career ahead of him. However, he reached Oxford University, where he found his actual potential to enter in varied fields of academics with a wide-ranging sense of inquisitiveness, which reflected in his engagement with different kinds of social circles among friends' (Hivale 1946: 5). Elwin got enrolled in English Literature in his third term in 1921, a discipline that, had yet not evolved into an established subject in the University, and therefore not qualified for scholarship grants. Later he moved on to study theology for two years. (Elwin 1964).

Box 7.1 Elwin's Life in India

He....came back to a remote village of the Gond tribe where he and Hivale opened a school and a dispensary. The place had been recommended to him by the Anglican bishop of the region who added the information that of the last five Europeans to stay in that part of the country, four had died within a year. The work with tribesmen had been recommended by quite a different character. Elwin had decided that he had to be in closer contact with the people than he could be in the Order in Poona, and he consulted with one of the chiefs of the nationalist movement, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, about working among untouchables. Patel dissuaded him; it was for Hindus, he said, to make reparation to the untouchables and there were many social workers and missionaries doing so. He advised Elwin to work among tribal peoples. So he did for the rest of his lifetime. To the religious drive to make reparation, Elwin soon added the urge to make tribal peoples known as real people, rather than tiresome savages, and their cultures as worthy of respect. This was the impetus from which flowed the rich stream of his ethnological writing (there was an earlier, not inconsiderable, output of theological and nationalist writings). As he became increasingly engrossed in his work with tribal villagers, he became less and less comfortable with his role as clergyman and his formal faith. He came to "a dramatic conversion, but in reverse." He renounced his membership in the Church of England both as priest and as communicant. Thenceforth he continued his work on his own, living at the simple village level of subsistence, putting most of the donations that came to him into the welfare work. (Mandelbaum 1965: 448-449)

Elwin was ordained an Anglican priest at Oxford. He came to India as a missionary to join an Anglican Order in Pune. He wanted to become a monk but before he could do that, Elwin was attracted by Gandhi and got involved with the struggle for Independence in India. Over a period of time, his closeness with Gandhi grew. On one occasion, Gandhi told him that he would take Elwin as his son. Elwin stayed in Gandhi's ashram for about four years and got associated with his various projects and mission. After those years of working together, he parted ways from Gandhi on different issues of dissociation, except that of India's right to freedom from the colonial rule. However, Elwin claims that "contact with Gandhi wedded me to India" (Elwin, 1964: vii),

Elwin's participation in political activities in India was viewed seriously by church superiors in his own country. The result was that the government officials refused to allow him to return to India. Finally, however, permission was granted to him but in the condition that he would keep himself away from political activities in India.

Choosing to be with the tribal communities, Elwin was, in a way, refusing his own Christian past and forging a new idea of freedom outside the contours of European modernity. For him, living amongst the tribal people of the forests was an individual form of freedom that had its antecedents in the pre-modern and in the pre-capitalist ways of life.

As resolved to make his home among the Gond tribe, in 1932, Elwin moved with his friend Shamrao Hivale to a remote village in the forests of the Mandla district of the Central Provinces. This was the deciding moment and a crucial turn in his career, where he started seeking fuller immersion in the pain, the suffering, the poverty of the most marginalized people in the forests. He had spent around twenty years in central India, as a one-man army and as a fully committed pressure group for the rights of the tribal people (Elwin 1964; Hivale 1946)

In January 1954, Elwin took Indian citizenship. In the same year, he was appointed as the anthropological adviser to the Indian Government, with special administrative responsibility to work on the hill tribes of the north-east frontier. Moving to Shillong for this administrative project, he served for a decade as the leading campaigner of what he liked to call 'Mr Nehru's gospel for the tribal communities inhabiting those regions. Elwin passed away in February 1964, a greatly esteemed public anthropologist in his adopted land. He received the most prestigious Padma Bhushan and numerous other medals and awards

Historian and writer, Ramachandra Guha sketches Verrier Elwin's multifarious presence in distinct arenas of public discourses in India: "This Englishman, missionary, Gandhian, social worker, activist, bureaucrat and Indian was always and pre-eminently a writer, a man whose richness of personal experience illuminates an oeuvre of truly staggering proportions... Elwin worked in a whole range of genres. He wrote and published poetry, religious tracts, polemical

pamphlets, novels, anthropological monographs, folklore collections, official reports and manuals, reviews, editorials and travelogues. His last work, an autobiography, is generally regarded as the finest of all his books” (Guha 1998: 326).

Elwin was keen on seeing a unity of ideas guiding his life-choices. Arriving in India and visiting Sabarmati for a conference of the Inter-Religious Fellowship in January 1928, he writes: “From the moment of my arrival there I was doomed. For long a sympathetic fellow-traveler, I now became an ardent disciple.... The impact of those 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, realize at first how very serious was the new attitude I adopted or what the consequences would be. As he clarifies, his understanding of India was not entirely that of the exotic other. As he writes, at first I did not see the conflict as between India and Britain but rather as between two different kinds of people. My theme was freedom and this was not confined to India. The prize essay on the poetry of revolution which I wrote at Oxford had shown me how many Europeans, and particularly how many of the English poets, had treasured liberty. Many of the ideas inspiring India’s national movement came originally from the West. Tolstoy and Ruskin had a profound influence on Gandhi. The first result of my contact with him, therefore, was to put me among those Europeans, those Englishmen, to whom colonialism or imperialism was intolerable...” (Elwin 1964: 42).

One of his earliest memories upon arrival in Poona was of the experience of learning Marathi: “We spent most of my language-lessons discussing Hindu mysticism and philosophy with the result that after six months I knew the Marathi or Sanskrit words for most of the higher spiritual states, yogic postures and exercises, but I was quite incapable of ordering lunch at the railway station” (ibid, 41).

His commitment to India was so forceful that he was appointed as the Advisor on Tribal Affairs for the North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA), by Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of Independent India.

7.3 CENTRAL IDEAS

Verrier Elwin is known for his extensive study of tribals. Some of his main writings are focussed on tribal life and identity. His approach and method of research have inspired many anthropologists and sociologists. Let us learn about these now.

7.3.1 Cultural Autonomy of Tribals

In 1932, Elwin moved away from politics towards social work and anthropology after he went to live among the Gonds. Elwin’s long spell of living with tribal

people enabled him to see the world through their eyes. He married a Gond girl in 1940 but they divorced each other in 1949.

Elwin spent a major part of his life among the people he wrote about, the tribal communities in Central and North-East India. His first ethnographies, on the Baiga (1939) and the Agaria (1942), dealt with his own neighborhoods since both the communities were closely connected to the Mandla Gonds where he made his home. Elwin stayed for a long period in Bastar and Orissa for studying the tribal communities. He settled down among the people, lived with them, shared their life as far as an outsider could. He did not depend merely on asking questions, but tried to gather knowledge from the people in great detail.

Elwin believed in the cultural autonomy of tribal life and value system, which is a unique civilizational order according to its own terms and references. On this aspect of cultural uniqueness, Elwin writes "There are many elements in the Gond ethos which should be conserved", their simplicity and freedom, their love of children, the position of their women, 'their simplicity and freedom, their love of children, the position of their women, their independence of spirit, their freedom from many of the usual oriental inhibitions'. The tribal, indeed, 'has a real message for our sophisticated modern world which is threatened with disintegration as a result of its passion for possessions and its lack of love (Elwin 1936):

Elwin's first work of ethnography, *The Baiga*, published in 1939, reflected this perspective of the tribal life which emphasized unique collective identity. This work was a massive monograph about a tribe, whose economy was being ruined by the expropriation of their natural resources and livelihood by the state, and who had been forced to adopt cultivation, which was not preferred by them.

Elwin conducted fieldwork in many villages of the present-day Indian states of Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh and Orissa. Between 1940 and 1942 he lived in Bastar, a large, isolated and thick forest region with a huge volume of tribal population. His monographs were not merely descriptive accounts of 'exotic' communities, they provided rich analysis of tribal lives. Many of his writings reflected tribal autonomy and their civil and political rights.

Check Your Progress 1

1) Why did Elwin come to India? Explain.

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2) State the key features of Elwin’s monographs on tribal life.

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Elwin gathered numerous facts on the tribal life in Central India, their myths, poems and stories that appeared in vivid depiction in his fascinating monographs. *The Agaria* (1942) portrays a melancholic narrative of the decline of a community of charcoal iron-smelters heavily damaged by taxation, factory iron and administrative neglect. In ‘Maria murder and suicide’ (1943), Elwin tried to explore the events of homicide in a tribal society. *The Muria and their ghotul* (1946) presented a unique pattern of socialization among a tribe in Bastar, where their sexual orientation was explored. In more specific terms, the account focused on the life in a dormitory, or ghotul, where boys and girls are trained with the lessons of sexual life (Elwin 1946, Guha 1998,1999).

In *Bondo Highlander* (1952) Elwin made an attempt to understand the personality of a highland Orissa tribe. The study focuses on the contestation and conflict between individualism and collective cooperation among the everyday life of the community. ‘The religion of an Indian tribe’ (1955), another study based in Orissa, is a holistic account of rituals and belief system among the Saora. This ethnographic attempton religion and ritual was considered as 'the most detailed account of an Indian tribal religion that ever flowed from an anthropologist's pen' (Fürer- Haimendorf 1957: 602-3).

Among all these books, it was those on the Baiga and the Muria that invited the most attention and discussion. Both studies reflected the intimate connection between the author and the communities, which resulted from prolonged stay with the people.

Elwin’s most famous pamphlet, ‘The Aborigines’ (Elwin 1943) was a blueprint of his concerns over the rights and safeguards of tribal communities towards their economic security and protection. He strongly advocated for the restoration of their rights over forest resources, protection of tribal land and regulation and control of external interventions in their lives.

Verrier Elwin wrote his sixth book on a tribe titled *The Religion of an Indian Tribe* (1955) in continuation to his earlier ethnographies on ethnographies of the Baiga, the Agaria, the Maria, the Muria and the Bondo. His concern over the material and natural resources of the tribal communities made him to pay close attention on the issues of tribal land alienation, loss of forest resources, and exploitation by the non-tribal money lenders and officials. His interventions in these pertinent issues related to the tribal question prepared him to become an action-oriented anthropologist, rather than to remain an arm-chair scholar. His writings were loaded with political conviction and intellectual commitment towards representing the voices of the marginalized tribal communities and

protecting their fundamental rights and cultural autonomy. All his writings carry the hope that they might help envision, 'or at least delay, the degradation and exploitation of the tribes' (Guha, 1998: 330). Elwin's own remarks on this aspect further attest the emphasis added in his political and ethical quest. He hoped the writings and interventions of anthropologists would aim to protect the tribals from exploitation, interference and repression. Elwin was a strong advocate of preserving and protecting the uniqueness of tribal identity and culture. He was criticized for his political position on the question of tribal identity by his counterparts labelling him as 'isolationist', who stood in the way of integrating the tribal people into the Hindu religious fold.

7.3.2 Issue of Tribal Identity

The controversial position that Elwin occupies among the Indian intellectuals and political activists is well known. Some of them severely condemned his works and standpoint on the tribal question with reference to identity. However, Elwin could also gather many admirers of his works, and among them the most prominent figure was Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India. In 1954, Nehru recommended him to be deputed to the north-eastern region as an advisor on tribal affairs to the Government of India. Elwin continued to write and draft policy documents with a view to protect the interest of the tribal communities. During his tenure in the north-east region, Elwin's two books entitled, 'A philosophy for NEFA' (1957) and 'A new deal for tribal India' (1963), received wide attention among the reading public. Nehru's enunciation of the famous 'tribal panchsheel' carries Verrier Elwin's signature in its content and argument. In order to understand Elwin's engagement in the controversies over tribal identity and the issue of national integration in post Independent India, it will be worthwhile to contextualize the concept of identity and identity-based movements for political and cultural autonomy within the tribal discourse.

Manor (1996) demonstrates the formations of different types of identities in India with reference to ethnic and tribal identity and the tendency of people to give priority to one or another level of identity according to varying social and political situations. These markers include language, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual preferences, caste, tribe, race and so on and so forth. Identity based political articulations are thus attached with a set of core features shared by members of a collectivity. These core markers are different from associational markers like those of the workers and labourers who are defined more by their common interests rather than by certain core and mostly ascribed identity attributes of the groups.

The identification of the members of a group on the basis of sharing common attributes—on the basis of all or some of the attributes—such as language, gender, religion, caste, ethnicity etc. suggests the existence or formation of identity. The mobilization on the basis of these markers is called identity movements (Manor 1996). Identity in general and identity based political articulations in particular have become important features of modern politics.

The identity of a tribal community can be a production from within the community that is internal to the group as a self-image or it can be an imposition from outside, which is external to the group. The idea about 'tribe' that reflects in the names of different tribal communities as well as generic terms like 'aborigins', 'adivasis', and 'Scheduled Tribe (ST)' are some of such propositions either imposed by outsiders or created by the tribal people themselves. Sahay (1977) suggests that a discussion on identity can start with the etymological meanings of the names of individual tribes or the appellations which the tribes use for themselves as tribal self-image. The leaders, legends and traditions associated with the names of particular tribes constitute another significant aspect of the study on identity (Sahay 1977). Here, we need to focus on the question that how the self-image and identity of tribal communities can be traced as the vantage points of political movements and mobilizations.

Identity-based movements among tribal communities in India have been a subject of discussion during the Colonial period onwards. The survey conducted by the Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI) identified a number of movements in central and eastern India; the most important of them being the movement for the formation of a Jharkhand state. There were also social movements among Kurmi and other tribal communities in Chotanagpur seeking towards an autonomous tribal status. There were also movements in western India such as the Bhagat movements among the Bhills and many agrarian movements among different tribal groups as well as political movements for autonomy. Central India reported the continuity of the Bhagat movements and a political movement among the Gonds. (Singh 1982).

According to the ASI survey conducted in the tribal belt in central India, the movements can be categorized into four major streams:

- (i) Movements for political autonomy;
- (ii) Agrarian and forest based movements;
- (iii) Sanskritization processes;
- (iv) Cultural movements based on script and language.

Singh (1982) underlines the different forms in which movements took place among various tribal areas. Movements for political autonomy, agrarian and forest based movements, cultural movements based on script and languages characterize distinct forms in which movements can take place. Sanskritisation process also had an influential role in shaping the movements in particular ways.

The Gonds and Bhils raised their demand for establishing a separate state in the early 1940s. But these movements were not sustained as an organized effort. At the same period, there was a political uprising in Adilabad in 1941, demanding a Gond Raj. In a memorandum submitted to the States Reorganization Commission in the 1950s, the Gond leaders demanded the formation of a separate state for the Adibasis in the tribal areas of Chattisgarh, Rewa region and Vidarbha. (Singh 1982).

Birsa Munda Revolt of 1895-1901 of Singhbhum and Ranchi was the most popular movement against the merchants, traders, land lords, and government officers who were responsible for alienating tribal people from their land, had increased the rental charges, forced physical violence, treated them as lesser humans, and increased interests on their debts. These issues contributed to a massive revolt under the leadership of Birsa Munda, a revolutionary leader among the community. Munda mobilized people against the British government. He was determined to fight against the mighty Britishers and could mobilize the people towards an organized movement for tribal autonomy. However, the movement could not keep its momentum as Birsa Munda was imprisoned and died in the year 1900 (Singh 1982).

Though most of such struggles were intent to address the basic question on rights to land and forest, the issue was not separable from the religious and cultural fabric of the people. Because of this linkage between economy and culture, the denial of the rights to access forest and land eventually connects to the question of community and identity. A reflection of the identity marker present in such struggles can be seen in the effort being made by some communities to regain the tribal status they lost under the spell of Sanskritization movements. The efforts to evolve a script and build up an indigenous literature in tribal language may be seen as part of an organized movement to define and assert tribal identity. This process in Chotanagpur can be traced to the 1920s when the emerging tribal middle classes initiated a movement to gain political autonomy, and strengthen revivalism in tribal literature which sought to preserve and recreate many of the cultural symbols of the past.

The post-Independence period witnessed a different turn in tribal movements in which the question of cultural identity became powerful in certain contexts apart from the issues of land and forest. Tribal communities started mobilizing themselves with the support of civil society organizations raising the issues of identity, civil and political rights. Identification of different tribal communities is also dependent on the multiple modes in which we trace the origin and shifts in their etymological meanings. Sahay notes that several tribes have two sets of names—a popular name by which the tribe is known by its neighbors and a name which the tribe uses to identify itself. Both types of names generally refer to certain characteristics or qualities of a given tribe and there are also some appellations which are resented by the tribes as uncomplimentary. Finally, it may be noted that the tribals as a whole are acquiring a new identity as *adivasi* (original inhabitant) or *vanyajati* (community living in jungle). There are also certain local terms which reflect their identity in relation to the geographical and ecological settings in which they inhabit (Sahay 1977).

All of these categories of understanding identity fit into Indian society and politics in a distinctive way. Most of the tribal communities tend to be geographically isolated from most other people of any description. Some of the tribal groups inhabit underdeveloped areas within states on the plains, but undergo incursions by non-tribals from their regions that are often exploitative in

nature. Adivasis, found in greater or lesser numbers in most Indian states, erode the solidarity of the regional linguistic group, in the process of adapting particular ethnic identities.

While understanding different identity movements towards tribal autonomy, we need to examine the ways in which such movements address the question of nation and the project of national integration. In this context the state becomes as an active contributor to identity based movements through organizing the structures of power and governance which define and then recognize people in terms of certain identities. Roy Burman calls our attention to consider whether the tribal unrest is symptomatic of a deeper challenge posed by tribal India to the contemporary non-tribal social and political systems of the country. One has also to consider whether such a challenge, if it exists, has a global dimension. Burman identifies several parameters in order to locate the nature and character of the tribal unrest and movements for autonomy.

In this backdrop of affairs related to tribal identity, Verrier Elwin's writings on tribal communities in the two decades of pre and post-independent India became crucial for the domains of both anthropology and policy making. In this period--1940s and 1950s--Elwin engaged in critical debates on the question of tribal identity in the form of lively polemics among his critics. Elwin's distancing of himself from the mainstream of Indian nationalism, and his protectionist approach towards the tribal communities earned him the resentment of other sociologists and anthropologists.

The first set of issues that Elwin took up was with anthropologists on the idea of integrating tribal communities to Hindu religion. G.S. Ghurye was the main opponent of Elwin in this debate. Ghurye wanted to treat the tribal communities as part of the Hindu fold and integrate them to the larger Hindu religious identity. He accused Elwin for his position on artificially separating the tribals from the Hindu society; and on 'isolating' the tribal communities in the mountains, forests and other remote regions, where they remained underdeveloped and backward, and separated from the mainstream of society. Ghurye also criticized Elwin for advocating for separating the tribal communities deliberately from the contours of Indian nationalism and the emerging Indian nation, predominantly located in the fold of Hindu religiosity. Elwin argued that the tribal communities always maintained a collective community spirit, different from the Hindu religion in the absence of caste system. They had a close and communicative tradition with nature and relatively equal gender relations.

Elwin's encounter with the social reformers who wished to bring in prohibition and forbid tribal dances, was also part of a controversy as he was accused of being 'anti-reformist'. Elwin opposed this move on prohibition by the social reformers. For him, the ethnocentric tendencies cannot be given room in any activity towards social reform. He strongly argued for the preservation and protection of unique cultural forms which were integral parts and building blocks of the collective lives of tribal cultures.

Elwin vehemently attacked Christian missionaries, on their ideas of religious conversion of tribal communities to Christianity, who believed that the change in religion would bring modernity and development in the tribal world. Elwin equally blamed both the Christian and Hindu reformers for being intolerant of tribal culture, art, rituals and dance, and for disrupting community spirit and hurt new converts by making them ashamed of their traditions' (Elwin 1941, 1943, for a detailed account of these controversies, see Guha 1996). In the latter part of these debates, Elwin had gradually shifted to a middle path between Ghurye's assimilationism and his own notion of isolation of the tribal communities from the rest of India.

Check Your Progress 2

1) What was the main thrust in Elwin's book, *Bodo Highlander*?

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2) Outline Elwin's critique of Christian and Hindu reformers with respect to tribals.

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Box 4.2 Nehru's Tribal Panchsheel

The following are his five fundamental principles for tribal development, which is known as Nehru's *panchsheel*:

- (i) People should develop along the line of their own genius and we should avoid imposing anything on them. We should try to encourage in every way their own traditional arts and culture.
- (ii) Tribal rights to land and forest should be respected.
- (iii) We should try to train and build up a team of their own people to do the work of administration and development. Some technical personnel from outside will no doubt, be needed, especially in the beginning. But we should avoid introducing too many outsiders into tribal territory.
- (iv) We should not over administer these areas or overwhelm them with a multiplicity of schemes. We should rather works through, and not in rivalry to, their own social and cultural institutions.
- (v) We should judge results, not by statistics or the amount of money spent, but by the quality of human character that is evolved.

A recurrent theme in Elwin's accounts is the wreckage of tribal integrity by the violence and abuse caused by the non-tribal outsiders, the state or other external interventions, of their defining institutions and traditions (Padel 1995). Elwin's writings always backed the interests of the tribal communities, especially for the maintenance of the relative autonomy of tribal culture and identity. For him, the state interventions into tribal lives on the problem of development needs to be in tune with the interests of the community and their priorities. His influence on Nehru in the making of the tribal panchsheel was reflected in its content and articulation, in which the voices of the tribal communities were deeply imprinted.

7.3.3 Fieldwork and Methods

This section discusses the approaches and methods through which Verrier Elwin presented his ideas and arguments through a variety of writing forms. Elwin followed unconventional methods and practices in his research on tribal communities in India.

Elwin's caliber in doing fieldwork is incomparable as he was not artificially entering and doing fieldwork in a particular village or forest land. In fact, he lived for long and sustained durations with the communities that he wrote about, becoming one among them. Rather than relying on copy book methods and techniques of anthropological research, Elwin recreated in his writings, the experience of living with the communities, in their own voices and interests

Elwin affirms in his autobiography that "for me anthropology did not mean 'field work': it meant my whole life," or that "the essence of anthropology is love. Without it, nothing is fertile, nothing is true" (Elwin 1964: 142). By making this point, he was seeking to cast the vocational pursuit in terms that transcend the borders and conventions of the professional discourse.

Elwin states in the preface of his autobiography that the earliest lessons of his childhood, reinforced by his subsequent engagement in the English literary classics and Western philosophy, have sustained him in a serene fashion to embrace the literariness of life and culture. This attitude towards an aesthetic sense-making in his writings made him a literary figure, which overshadowed his identity as an anthropologist. His autobiography 'The tribal world of Verrier Elwin' obtained the most prestigious Sahitya Akademi award for the best book in English. The citation mentioned it an 'outstanding contribution to contemporary Indian writing in English', written 'with sincerity, courage and charm, revealing a mind in which Western and Indian idealism were uniquely blended'(Guha 1998: 331). Guha further remarks that Elwin's dearth of conventionally deploying field methods in research spills over into the articulation of ideas in his books, that made him 'a marvelously evocative but undisciplined writer', immersed in the world of metaphors, poetics and polemics, rather than invoking scientific rigor and structured analysis (Guha, 2007: 331)

Commentators allege that Elwin's empathy and sensibility for tribal lives were often overshadowed by a stylistics of language where the aesthetic categories of "poetry" and "beauty" begin to dominate, alongside a discourse on the celebration of "nature". For an anthropologist who "came to anthropology through poetry" (Elwin, 1964:143), it was difficult to bring a scientific rational formulation over and above his aesthetic sensibilities.

Treated strictly as literary outputs, Elwin's two most famous books are *Leaves from the jungle* (1936) and *The tribal world of Verrier Elwin* (1964). In both these works, the author's experience is foregrounded and he becomes a character in the narratives. On the other hand, his ethnographic accounts, representing other cultures and contexts, carry a large store of information and description, presented with less coherence and scientific temper.

Elwin once pronounced that he is a 'devoted disciple' of the Malinowski school of functionalism, however, the application of the theoretical approach was half-hearted as the author in him carried his veiled literary temptations. He was a novelist and a poet, before he became an anthropologist, and returned to literature after he completed his last major study on the Saora and other anthropological tasks assigned with him.

In a newspaper description, Elwin figures as 'not an anthropologist in the academic sense of the term' but a 'man of letters who is fundamentally interested in human beings'. In a British weekly's viewpoint Elwin was considered to be an anthropologist 'by grace' rather than 'by profession', and 'primarily a lover rather than a student of mankind' (Dutta 1956). This uncertain location that Elwin occupied between literature and science is, in some sense, can be read as an attempt of methodological pluralism.

Elwin never tried to represent tribal cultures only in terms of religion and ritual--a reductionist viewpoint, which was characteristic of many of his counterparts. On the contrary his writings exhibited an uncommon interest in representing the material culture of tribal life. This include the detailed description of clothing, housing, utensils, agricultural tools, food materials and cuisine, hunting and fishing implements and so on. It was Verrier Elwin who made women's lives visible for the first time in Indian anthropology, by studying the themes of clothing, food and sexuality. Along with the focus on women and nature, Elwin also explored the topics of crime, disease and art, all hitherto ignored subjects of research in Indian anthropology (Elwin, 1964; Guha 1994).

His unique literary proficiency in translating the life worlds of the tribal people in minuscule ethnographic details, contributed towards the making of thick descriptions in its actual sense of the term. Elwin's simultaneous engagement with different worlds of experience, west and east, literature and science, religiosity and social work, modern and the pre-modern, equipped him to

transcend the conventional boundaries of doing anthropology, and more precisely, practicing it in a more meaningful way.

7.4 IMPORTANT WORKS

Some important works of Verrier Elwin are:

The Baiga (1939)

The Muria and their Ghotul (1946)

Myths of Middle India (1949)

Bondo Highlander (1950)

Tribal Art of Middle India (1951).

Tribal Myths of Orissa (1953)

The religion of an Indian Tribe (1955)

The philosophy of NEFA (1957)

The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin: An Autobiography (1964)

7.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have navigated through the life and works of Verrier Elwin, who spent the major part of his life among various tribal communities in India. The conditions of his life and career made Elwin a privileged interpreter of tribal cultures, with a political conviction and a genuine concern for their rights.

We learnt that Elwin was so deeply involved with life of different tribal communities in India that he would go to the forest with them and even stay with them. He contributed immensely to their lives through his administrative positions.

Elwin's descriptive accounts (in works like 'the Baiga', 'the Muria' and 'the Agaria'), distinguish him from his contemporary scholars in Indian anthropology.

Elwin contributed a lot to our knowledge of India's aboriginal populations. His monographs on such tribes as Baigas, Muria Gonds, Bondos and Saoras will be valued for a long time.

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7.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Verrier Elwin came to India as a missionary to join an Anglican Order in Pune. He wanted to become a monk but before he could do that, he was attracted by Gandhi and got involved with the struggle for Independence in India.
- 2) His monographs were not merely descriptive accounts of 'exotic' communities, they provided rich analysis of tribal lives. Many of his writings reflected tribal autonomy and their civil and political rights.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) In *Bondo Highlander* (1952) Elwin made an attempt to understand the personality of a highland Orissa tribe. The study focuses on the contestation and conflict between individualism and collective cooperation among the everyday life of the community.

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- 2) Elwin vehemently attacked Christian missionaries, on their ideas of religious conversion of tribal communities to Christianity, who believed that the change in religion would bring modernity and development in the tribal world. Elwin equally blamed both the Christian and Hindu reformers for being intolerant of tribal culture, art, rituals and dance, and for disrupting community spirit and hurt 'new converts by making them ashamed of their traditions'



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