



# Verrier Elwin's Tribal World

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## Abstract

The present research paper attempts to study about the various literary contributions of Verrier Elwin in depicting the tribal population of India through his books. Indian tribes have been reflected in ethnographical studies and advisory intervention made by Verrier Elwin. Present study is a qualitative research based on secondary sources. Literature review as well as content and textual analysis methods were used for drawing conclusions. Various historians have highlighted the works of Verrier Elwin in their writings. His books have showcased the aboriginals living in different regions of India. He is believed to be one of the rare European anthropologists to assimilate into non-European society to have a thorough understanding of the tribal people. Present study will investigate into diversified appearances of Indian tribes as reflected in Verrier Elwin's books.

## INTRODUCTION

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This paper presents an analytical study of the contribution of Verrier Elwin (1902–1964) in highlighting the Indian tribes through his literary works and major writings. Elwin, a self-taught ethnographer who made significant contributions to Indian anthropology, was a writer, social worker, and polemicist. The paper explores his body of published work as well as how professional anthropologists have responded to it. It makes the case that Elwin was a scholar who was both outdated and ahead of his time, a character who was both premodern and postmodern. His unsystematic field approaches and lack of interest in structural analysis raised doubts about his work among his peers. In the current developmental movement, when tribal communities are experiencing identity crises more than ever before, a more empathetic evaluation of his books and policy papers is important. Elwin contributed 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. Various historians have highlighted the works of Verrier Elwin in their writings. Ramachandra Guha, a writer and historian, describes Verrier Elwin's varied presence as: "This Englishman, missionary, Gandhian, social worker, activist, bureaucrat, and Indian who was always and preeminently 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

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poetry, religious tracts, polemic 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). Through the 1940s, Elwin published a series of major books on individual tribes. He also wrote many articles in newspapers and magazines on policy matters. His research findings were presented with a grace that is not typically found in academic writing, and his breadth and sheer volume of labor were matched by a clear empathy for his subject.

### **Objectives of the study:**

Other than policy papers, poems, novels, and monographs, Verrier Elwin has written books evolved out of his dedicated research and field surveys on tribal communities of India. These books contain an important account of the ethnographic studies done by Elwin during his long stay in India with the aboriginals. The major objective of the present paper is to study about the various literary contributions of Verrier Elwin in depicting the tribal population of India through his books and thus to investigate the diversified appearances of Indian tribes as reflected in various books authored by Verrier Elwin.

**Research methods used:** Present paper is an outcome of qualitative research based on secondary sources. Literature reviews as well as content and textual analysis methods have been used for drawing conclusions.

### **Biographical Brief of Verrier Elwin:**

Born to a colonial bishop, Verrier Elwin (29 August 1902 – 22 February 1964) grew up in a fervently evangelical household. Elwin was ordained an Anglican priest at Oxford. Having received his education and degree from Oxford, he arrived in India as a missionary in 1927 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. He gave up his duties as a missionary and became a follower of Gandhi in India. Elwin's failure to preach the gospel to the tribes led to his de-licensing by the Church of England in 1936. Elwin met Sardar Vallabhai Patel while he was staying at Gandhi's ashram. Patel was the one who suggested that Elwin work with Indian tribes. After then, Elwin's life took a drastic turn as he emerged as the leading spokesperson for the tribal people of India. 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. Elwin was the first Englishman to become a citizen of the newly independent Indian republic. In 1954, Jawaharlal Nehru appointed him adviser on tribal affairs to the administration of the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). Complying with the advice of Elwin, Nehru formulated the Panchsheel.

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, including the Sahiya Academy, for his autobiography.

### **Major writings:**

Verrier Elwin is known for his extensive study of Indian tribals. Some of his main writings were focused on tribal life and the mundane affairs around them. Many anthropologists and sociologists got inspired by his approach and research methods. Elwin lived a significant portion of his life surrounded by the tribal populations in Central and Northeast India that he wrote about. Due to their strong ties to the Mandla Gonds, where he settled, his early ethnographies on the Baiga (1939) and the Agaria (1942) focused on his own neighborhoods. Elwin spent a lot of time researching the tribal cultures in Bastar and Orissa. He became a member of the community, lived with them, and experienced their way of life as closely as an outsider could. He made a concerted effort to learn as much as he could from the people, not just by asking questions but by becoming a part of their community. Elwin believed in the autonomy and uniqueness of tribes. He 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 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). This view of tribal life, which placed an emphasis on distinct communal identity, was mirrored in Elwin's first ethnographic work, "The Baiga", which was published in 1939. This enormous monograph described a tribe whose economy was in ruins. Natural resources owned by tribes were expropriated against their will. Elwin carried out fieldwork in numerous communities around the modern Indian states of Orissa, Madhya

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Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. From 1940 to 1942, he resided in Bastar, a vast, remote, forested area with a high concentration of indigenous populace. His books were more than just descriptions of "exotic communities; they offered a thorough examination of tribal life. Tribal autonomy and their civic liberties were reflected in several of his works. Elwin collected a wealth of information about Central Indian tribal life, including mythology, poetry, and stories, which he vividly portrayed in his engrossing monographs. A depressing account of the downfall of a community of charcoal iron smelters severely harmed by taxes, industrial iron, and administrative indifference is presented in *The Agaria* (1942). Elwin attempted to investigate murders in a tribal tribe in "Maria Murder and Suicide" (1943). A distinctive pattern of socialization among a tribe in Bastar was examined in *The Muria and their Ghotul* (1946), where their sexual orientation was examined. More precisely, the story concentrated on the living in a ghotul, or hostel, where girls and boys receive sexual life education. (Elwin 1964, Guha 1998). Elwin attempted to comprehend the character of a highland Orissa tribe in *Bondo Highlander* (1952). The study focuses on the struggle and conflict between regular people's individualism and group cooperation amidst community life. Another research, "The religion of an Indian tribe," was published in 1955. Centered in Orissa, it provides a comprehensive description of the customs and beliefs of the Saora. This anthropological investigation on ritual and religion was regarded as "The most thorough description of a tribal religion in India that ever emerged from an anthropologist. (Fürer- Haimendorf 1957). Elwin's most well-known booklet, "The Aborigines" (Elwin 1943), served as a model for his worries about the rights and protections of aboriginal people in relation to their financial stability and safety. He was a fervent supporter of protecting tribal lands, restoring their rights over forest resources, and regulating and controlling outside interference in their daily lives. In addition to his previous ethnographies of the Baiga, Agaria, Maria, Muria, and Bondo, Verrier Elwin produced his sixth book on a tribe, *The Religion of an Indian Tribe* (1955). In these books he paid particular attention to the material and ecological resources of the native communities. He focus on the problems of forest resource decline, tribal land alienation, and exploitation by officials and non-tribal lenders of funds. His actions in these important questions surrounding the tribal issue equipped him to become an action-oriented anthropology instead than continuing to be a

passive academic. His writings were full of political passion and intellectual dedication to upholding the rights and cultural autonomy of oppressed tribal communities and speaking for their voices. Verrier Elwin hopes that all of his works will contribute to the vision of "or at least delay, the degradation and exploitation of the tribes." Elwin's own comments on this topic further support the focus he placed on his ethical and political mission. He hoped that anthropologists' publications and interventions would save the tribal people from oppression, exploitation, and meddling. Elwin was a fervent supporter of safeguarding the distinctiveness of tribal identity and culture. His colleagues denounced him as a "isolationist" for his political stance on the issue of tribal identity, who had hindered tribal people to get integrated among Hindu religion. Elwin kept writing and created policy documents to safeguard the tribal community's interests. Elwin wrote two works when he was living in the northeast titled "A New Deal for Tribal India" and "A Philosophy for NEFA" (1957)." These books attracted a lot of interest from readers. Nehru's enunciation of the famous 'tribal panchsheel' carries Verrier Elwin's signature in its content and argument. Elwin's two most well-known works, "Leaves from the Jungle" (1936) and "The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin" (1964), are only regarded as literary works. The author's experience is highlighted in both of these pieces, and he is incorporated into the stories as a character. However, his ethnographic reports, which depict different cultures and situations, provide a wealth of data and descriptions that are presented with less clarity and a scientific tone. Elwin's life and work are beautifully summed up in his autobiography. *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin* (1964), which was finished before he died but published posthumously. According to Elwin's autobiographical preface, his early education, which was strengthened by his later study of Western philosophy and English literary classics, has calmly allowed him to embrace the literary nature of culture and life. This perspective on aesthetics elevated him to a literary giant, overshadowing his identity in the field of anthropology. 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 as 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).

### **Conclusion:**

Unsustainable exploitation of nature and environmentally damaging cultural practices are the causes of the world's growing economic, social, and ecological crises. Tribes all over the world have suffered the most due to unsustainable practices in the name of development. It severely impacted their ancient culture. Globalization unrestrained interactions between tribal populations. Verrier Elwin was able to hear the faint noises of the present times much before they came on the way of his beloved tribal communities. Elwin never made an effort to portray tribal cultures only in terms of religion and ritual, a reductionist viewpoint that was typical of many of his contemporaries. On the other hand, his poetry showed a special interest in depicting the material culture of tribal life. This contains a detailed description of the clothing, home, tools, farming equipment, food supply, cooking equipment, hunting and fishing equipment, and so on. Women's lives were transformed by Verrier Elwin by its demonstration done by him in Indian anthropology by studying their subjects of clothing, food, and sexuality. Elwin focused on women and the environment, but he also looked at the uncharted topics of art, illness, and crime. His remarkable literary skills allowed for detailed elucidation of the word's actual meaning and to translate the tribal people's worlds into minute anthropological details. Elwin's concurrent exposure to the west and the east, literature and science, religion and social work, the modern and the pre-modern, gave him the tools to help Indian sociologists go beyond the traditional bounds of anthropology—more specifically, to practice it in a more meaningful way. Elwin's empathy and sensitivity for tribal life, according to commentators, were frequently eclipsed by a linguistic stylistics where the aesthetic categories of "poetry" and "beauty" start to predominate, combined with a discussion on honoring "nature." For an individual "who entered the field of anthropology, through poetry, it was challenging to present a scientific rationale" (Elwin, 1964). It can be concluded that in the present era of globalization and climate change, when many Indian tribes are forced to give up their traditional occupations, most of them work as migrants and daily wageworkers in unorganized sectors, Elwin's concerns about tribal issues have gained ceaseless relevance. His books and policy papers keep showing light to the present policymakers, anthropologists, social reformers, nature lovers, and young writers to write what they live and live what they truly love, encompassing the larger good of the world they were

given to live in and the community they were growing within.

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