

Peace & Development in the North-East: Prospects and Constraints



Editor

Dr. Bidyut Bora

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Finding a Middle Path: A Close Reading of Verrier Elwin's *A Philosophy for NEFA*

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1. Introduction:

Verrier Elwin was an Oxford educated Englishman and the son of a missionary who travelled to India in 1927 on a religious mission. But once under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi, he left the Christian Mission to work among the tribal people of central India. His autobiography *The Tribal*

World of Verrier Elwin (1989) reveals his romantic interest in working among the so called 'uneducated' tribal people. The chapter titled 'Philanthropology' in his autobiography combines both philanthropy and anthropology which is revealing, it implies that Elwin's interest in anthropology was guided by sense of duty towards the tribal people of India.

The love inspired by his readings of English romantic poets at Oxford had its own share in making him a self – trained anthropologist who left indelible mark in his field of study – he wrote 26 books, numerous articles, shot over 10,000 black and white photographs and had reels of 16mm film documenting the tribal cultures and ways of life that he encountered first in Central India, and later in the North East part of India. He writes in the mode of confession that his entry into anthropology was accidental, he did not have any formal grounding on the subject and that fact was scoffed at by regular scholars in the

field. But Elwin justified his ground, his heightened sensitivity developed by his readings of English Romantic poets and philosophers from both the East and the West had helped him develop a unique perspective to appreciate and also resolve the many conflicts in the tribal world. It needs also be mentioned that Elwin married into the tribal society and so perhaps it is understandable that his personal angle in addressing the problems of the tribal society comes from a sincere empathetic understanding.

His *Philosophy for NEFA* (1957) gives an insider's perspective on the conflicts faced by the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh (NEFA) and also by the officials of newly independent India assigned with the responsibility of assimilating the isolated tribal people of the region.

2. Objective:

The objective of the paper is to attempt a critical appreciation of Elwin's unique perception at resolving the conflicting position faced by both the tribal groups and the officials of a young country (it was 10th year of India's independence when *A Philosophy for NEFA* was published).

3. Methodology:

The research paper follows the method of 'close reading' of the text – *A Philosophy for NEFA* to understand his philosophical approach to the conflicts resulting from the clash of the two world views – tribal and ancient on the one hand and rational and modern on the other.

4. Discussion:

1.1. Developing a new stance:

Elwin writes that the British administration in the pre – independence times approved of the policy of 'leave them alone' vis a vis the tribes of North East India for three basic reason:

- a. running an administration in the border areas was difficult;
- b. the desire to quarantine the tribal folks;
- c. and also the idea that the tribal people were happy they way they led their lives in isolation.

But by taking the notion of the carefree lives of Rousseau's Noble Savage by the horns, Elwin questions the very foundation of the idea which guided the official approach of maintaining administrative distance. Firstly, the tribal people were not really free – they were an exploited lot: cheated by money – lenders, zaminders and merchants.

Secondly, the idea of the carefree 'noble savage' is a myth – the lives of the tribal folks in NEFA was hard – 'burdened with anxiety ... distracted by war, kidnapping, slavery and cruel punishment' and thirdly, isolation or administrative distance was not really an answer in the modern times, especially in a modern welfare state.

The young man educated in schools "considers himself free of, and, superior to the laws, regulations and customs of his 'backward' parents and relations" (Elwin, 1957, p. 5). This stance leads to conflicts between educated individuals and elders of the tribal society. Elwin gives illustrations of very many anthropological researches conducted in different parts of the world which reveal the dangers 'in upsetting too rapidly the harmony' in the tribal society which has evolved naturally for centuries (Elwin, 1957, p.8)

The path that Elwin proffers as a kind of an answer to the problem is also declared as the stance of the then prime minister – Mr Jawaharlal Nehru. The idea is to build further on the historical and cultural development of the tribal societies; to approach the tribal people with the spirit of affection and not with the sense of superiority complex. The policy advocated by the author is clearly different from that of simple and clear – cut approach of 'assimilation' or 'detrribalization' practised elsewhere. Elwin welcomes the Nehruvian policy of approaching the tribal question as based on anthropological and historical research – that it should be guided by the gospel of friendliness and equality guided by the spirit of reverence. Elwin's writing is replete with beautiful imagery which he uses to drive home his path of following the via – media of the golden mean:

"We see now that the tribal people will be of the greatest service to India if they are able to bring their own peculiar treasures into the common life, not becoming second – rate copies of ourselves." (Elwin, 1957, p. 13)

But the challenge is to bring about a synthesis of the precious tribal values of self – reliance, courage and artistic gifts nurtured for generations and the advantages of modern medicine, agriculture and education along with the very many products of systematic research.

1.2. Proposed Forestpolicy:

The author's long association with the tribal folks gave him the insight into the democratic approach followed in the sharing the forest resources. The following quote will give us a glimpse into the working of his understanding mind:

“When on rare occasions that an officer does for hunting as is successful, it would, therefore, be a courteous and appropriate gesture for him to distribute a good proportion of the game (in my opinion it should be at least half) to the tribesmen in whose forest he has hunted” (Elwin, 1957, p. 20)

As an anthropologist, Elwin is aware of the fact that ‘hunting and fishing is something more than a search for food: it is a religious activity involving strict taboos...’ (p. 19). Therefore, the common sense dictates that sudden government action against these rituals might adversely affect the fledgling relationship between the tribal society and Government.

1.3. Proposed Policy regarding Jhumcultivation:

That jhum cultivation is harmful for the environment is well known, but the administration should not openly declare it as evil for that might have political repercussion – and so the way out is that of the golden mean of allowing both permanent and shifting cultivation side by side till the time the folks realize the best way for them in the new context. He gives instances where the administration instead of outrightly rejecting jhumming teaches improved methods within the traditional framework (p.22).

1.4. Proposed Policy regarding dresshabit:

While discussing the problem of dressing up the tribal members, Elwin reflects upon the views of Tagore, Shaw and Gandhi. The author stating Tagore’s views regarding the sense of aesthetics of proper dressing argues that it would be wrong to look down upon the tribal folks for their primitive dress habits or shame them into wearing dresses simply unsuitable in the climatic condition they live in. He gives a poignant description of dress sense gone wrong: “A Konyak youth is himself a work of art. But take him to school, and at once he strips himself of all his glory, and in a few days this splendid boy, who formerly had the air of a prince, looks like a coolie’ (p.38).

Drawing upon the ideas of George Bernard Shaw and Mahatma Gandhi, the author asserts that scanty dressing does not necessarily imply overt sexuality or immorality. He justifies the little wear of the tribal people of NEFA by quoting Gandhi: ‘Were I living in a forest, I would go without clothes. Nature has clothed mankind in skin...The loftiest beauty of man lies in his nudity’ (p. 41).

That the tribal people would change their dress habits out of their interaction with the outside world is inevitable, but again going back to Tagore, Elwin says that should follow 'the law of necessity and not the law of imitation' (p. 50).

1.5. Creating the right environment for friendly interaction:

One of the greatest hindrances in the path towards reconciliation and assimilation is assertion of the sense of superiority complex on the part of the outsiders in NEFA and the consequent sense of inferiority complex of the tribal folks. Appreciating Nehru's policy towards the tribal groups in India, Elwin asserts that the government plans for the people in the tribal belt should always be marked by 'humility' on the part of the outsider and graced by sincerity. And in this connection, the author lays immense emphasis on learning the local languages on the part of the outsiders for it is a matter of common sense that when one finds a foreigner speaking in one's own language, one feels reassured.

As has been stated earlier in the paper, dress habits have a lot to do with boosting confidence levels of the wearer. Showing disrespect to the wearer for his/her peculiar sartorial habits is sheer meanness, it destroys irreparably the ground to meet in equal terms creating a sense of inferiority complex. Elwin raises the point in view of the fact that the tribal folks take great pride in their dress habits but which are scoffed at by the outsiders from the plains. But sartorial habits are essentially linked with culture, society and geographical locations. However, if required, an adaptation of the local dress to suit newer conditions should always be welcomed. Elwin gives the instance of an excellent blazer designed for high school students in Pashighat – 'It is based on the Adi coat and is hand – woven on the Adi loom, but it is better tailored, the sleeves have been made longer, it has a collar, buttons and two pockets. It remains fully tribal, but is the same time adapted to the school needs' (p. 62).

And of course, a lot depends upon the management on the part of the officer who should bring a lot of sympathetic understanding, knowledge and quick wit while dealing with the tribal folks confronted with novel situations in a new set up. To drive his point home Elwin narrates an episode from his stay at the upper Assam town of Margherita. A Nocte girl once visited the Political Officer's office with the complaint that her money that she intended to buy cloths with had been stolen: instead of giving her aid in cash, the concerned officer gifted her with

a bundle of yarn to weave her own cloth. The clever move, according to Elwin, not only provided for the loss but also boosted her sense of self-respect and dignity in front of an official from the plains.

1.6. The question of architecture:

Elwin's stay with tribal people gave him insights into the little but indispensable details, he observed that in the tribal society everything goes in circles – they seat in circle around the fire or they gather around the lecturer or the preacher in a circle during meetings. But, in stark contrast, the modern buildings are in straight lines and rectangles. Elwin works out a resolution of the conflicts of taste with following suggestions (p.75):

1. Every house built by the government should be raised well off the ground (just as tribal houses are);
2. Every house should have a seating platform either at the end of along the side;
3. And since the lives of the tribal people revolve around fire, so there should be provisions for hearths in modern houses built there just like the traditional houses in the tribal areas.

By making the new constructions similar to the tribal ones, the former can be made less shocking and more accommodative of the tribal customs thus the administration can think of winning the attraction of the tribes.

1.7. The question of Religion:

Elwin notes that the tribal religion has a general belief in a Supreme God (Doini – Pollo or the Sun – Moon God of the Adi for instance) who is just, benevolent and good. Further, the tribal religions are based on elaborate mythologies. Elwin calls it the tribal 'Puranas' which gives a strong sense of history and also gives them a sense of pride in their descent from some mythological great ancestors (p. 81). Therefore, a summary rejection of tribal religious practices would do a great harm to the moral of the tribes. Tribal religion is associated with social ethics and he notes that the great tribal virtues are discipline, devotion to work, generosity, hospitality, truth, and kindness. So, it would simply be stupid to reject tribal beliefs on the ground that these are simplistic. Elwin suggests that officers should do some kind of research of the tribal customs on their own, make attempts at least to understand the tribal beliefs and show due respect to the tribal faiths. Elwin also warns the officers about their choice of words while talking

about tribal faith – words such as ‘superstition’, ‘heathen’, ‘devil dance’ should be ‘banished’. Instead of using a generalized term such as ‘animism’, the officer would do better to speak of ‘Konyak religion’ or ‘Adi religion’ for such actions accord self-respect and a sense of dignity to the followers of the community. Again, quite interestingly, it would do a great service if the officers use the local word for the Supreme Being whenever, they talk about God or during oath taking ceremonies.

Referring to Sir James Frazer’s *Folklore of the Old Testament*, Elwin justifies his stance of according due respect to the tribal faiths as even the established religions of the world have their roots in tribal beginnings. The outsiders need to shed the so-called official burden of ‘uplifting’ / ‘reforming’ the tribal people and should rather work towards creating the right mental climate in which the tribal faith flourishes, albeit in a newer more adaptive way.

1.8. Elwin’s approach to the use of opium and alcohol:

Opium addiction is obviously bad, but whole sale destruction of poppy crop, as was done by the British, might not yield expected results. Elwin is more in favour of using propaganda campaigns and issuing licenses for smoking to gradually weed out opium addiction. Elwin gives interesting anecdotes to show his approach towards the alcohol /rice beer which forms an essential part of tribal life. He suggests that if the outsider is a not averse to drinking wine, s/he may take it by moderation or according to his/her taste; but if he is a teetotaler, he may simply raise it to his lips (without really drinking) thus showing that he has no taboo in his mind (p.110).

5. Conclusion:

Elwin came to India as a missionary with the mission to proselytize, but quite ironically gets transformed himself after coming into contact with Gandhi, Nehru, Tagore, and Buddhist philosophy while maintaining steady connections with Western thinkers and philosophers – prominent among them being Shakespeare, Rousseau, Wordsworth and G B Shaw. He lived among the tribes, fell in love with tribal world, married tribal women and trained himself into becoming a highly respected anthropologist (without having any formal degree of anthropology!). His admiration for the revered Buddhist monks at Tawang Monastery is revealing, he compares them with his masters at Oxford (Elwin, 1989); his interest in Buddhism took him perhaps towards the approach of the middle path and common sense in resolving

the crisis emerging out the clash of cultures – between tribal India and the other India with its established religions, sophisticated culture, structured society and formal educational set -up.

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