

## Dr. Verrier Elwin and Assam\*

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### I

Dr. Henry Verrier Holman Elwin was born on 29<sup>th</sup> August 1902 at Dover, Kent (England). One of the *dramatis personae* of Indian Anthropology, Elwin came to India in 1927 to join the newly formed *Christa Seva Sangha*, an Anglican Order in Pune (Maharashtra). During the period from 1928 to 1931, Elwin was involved in the national movement as an associate of Gandhi who used to call him 'son'. After 1932, Elwin became associated with the tribal peoples of India. He lived nearly 30 years of his life with the tribals of India and during this period he observed their life and undertook research on them. In 1946, he was appointed as Deputy Director, Anthropological Survey of India, Kolkata. In the 1950s Elwin was appointed as Adviser to the Governor of Assam on tribal affairs.

From 1920s to early 1960s, Elwin wrote numerous books on poetry, story, novel, folklore, art, anthropological and applied anthropological issues, autobiographical narratives etc. Elwin was also a good lensman.

### II

The years Verrier Elwin spent in Northeast India from the 1950s until his death on 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1964 were probably the most fruitful and meaningful years of his life. He not only spent the last part of his life in the region, but his academic pursuit, philosophical thoughts, working principles and approaches reached most explicit expressions during this period. His works during this period are a clear testimony of this.

In 1947 he was first invited to visit Northeast India by his friend W.G. Archer who was a high ranking army officer. The friendship between Archer and Elwin had developed during their stay in Orissa. During that time Archer collected some folk songs of that area and got them published in English.

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Their love for folk songs brought them close to one another. Prior to the independence of India, Archer was posted in the Naga Hills.

Elwin's second visit to Northeast India was in 1952. This time he was invited by the former Governor of Assam, Joyramdas Daulat Ram, to prepare a report about the tribes of this region. Accordingly, Elwin visited tribal villages in parts of Dimapur, Kohima and Imphal, and returned to Shillong. This was when he started believing strongly that destiny had sown the seed of his future life in the soils of Northeast India. In his report submitted to the Governor, Elwin wrote: "I may kindly be considered as an individual for whom it would be matter of great pleasure if I could be of some use for the tribals of this region."

Elwin had the experience of encountering criticism from the early period of his coming to India from different quarters due to his characteristic approach to the tribes of India. One of the reasons why he was severely criticized was the reservation policy which he had advocated firmly for the safeguard of the tribals.

### III

Following his appointment as the Adviser to the Governor on Tribal Affairs criticism was leveled against his approaches and activities concerning the tribals. In the emergence of a new 'anti-Elwin' wave, a large number of Assamese intellectuals, socially conscious citizens and politicians played the most significant role. Elwin's approach to tribal issues, more particularly concerning the tribals of NEFA, created a fear in the mind of the Assamese. The reason behind their fear was that Elwin's general policy of advocating tribal reservation would affect the age-old political, social and cultural relations between NEFA and Assam.<sup>1</sup> The view expressed in Assam during that period was that Elwin's 'NEFA policy' would separate NEFA from Assam. It was alleged that Elwin had prepared the blue print of creating an 'anthropological museum' in NEFA and the Assamese would be systematically excluded from it.

It is to be noted here that Elwin was very much aware of the historical links between NEFA and Assam. For instance, he wrote (1964:1):

The history of what is now known as the North-East Frontier Agency ascends for hundreds of years into the mists of tradition and mythology. Of the vast hinterland there are only recent accounts, but a number of ruins in the foothills suggest some contact between the ancient rulers of Assam and the tribesmen

living near the plains. Local tradition regards the country round Sadiya as the ancient Vidarbha (though elsewhere it is identified with Berar) and the archaeological relics of Bhismakangar in Lohit as marking the capital of King Bhishmak, whose daughter Rukmini was carried away by the Lord Krishna himself. The ruins of a fort at Bhalukpung on the right bank of the Bhareli river in Kameng are claimed by the Akas as the original home of their ancestor Bhaluka, grandson of the Raja Bana, who was defeated according to Puranic legend, by Krishna at Tezpur. A Kalita king, Ramchandra, driven from his kingdom in the plains, fled to the Dafla foothills and established there his capital of Mayapore, which is probably to be identified with the ruins on the Ita hill, not far from Doimukh in Subansiri. In the Lohit Division are the ruins for the copper temple Tameshwari, which at one time must have attracted many worshipers, and a place of great sanctity in the beautiful lower reaches of the Lohit River, the Brahmakund, where Parasurama opened a passage through the hills with a single blow of his axe, which is visited every year by thousands of Hindu pilgrims.

Following the Chinese aggression in 1962, the criticism against Elwin became sharper. Such criticisms were even echoed in the Parliament. During that time, the representative of Assam to the Parliament, Hem Barua, raised the question regarding Elwin's book *A Philosophy for NEFA*. He also questioned the justification for keeping a part of India (i.e. NEFA) cut off from the rest of the country. Referring to Elwin as "British Philosopher-Anthropologist", Hem Baruah made critical comments against him. But Baruah's reference to Elwin as "British Philosopher – Anthropologist" was challenged by Oxford-educated parliamentarian and tribal leader Jaipal Sing because by that time Elwin was formally granted Indian citizenship by the Government of India. Jaipal Sing remarked: "Dr. Elwin is more Indian now than Sri Hem Baruah. He is more tribal than Jaipal Sing" (Guha 1999: 277). In this context reference may be made to an obituary by a drama group of Kolkata, the 'Little Theatre' headed by the famous comedian Utpal Dutta, which was published in the daily newspaper *Amrita Bazar Patrika* after the death of Elwin. The obituary stated: "In memory of Dr. Verrier Elwin, the best of Indians" (quoted in Datta 2007).

#### IV

Elwin had deep sense of respect, appreciation and love for Assamese society, culture and Assamese people.<sup>2</sup> Elwin considered himself as an Indian before he was formally granted Indian citizenship by the Government of India prior

to the Chinese aggression of 1962. At the time of receiving the formal citizenship of India, Elwin was at Shillong, the then capital of Assam. The notice granting him Indian citizenship was handed over to him by the Governor of Assam himself. On receipt of Indian citizenship, Elwin (1998: 234-235) wrote:

About this time I became an Indian citizen which I had been trying to be for a long time past, and which I had been de-facto from my early days in Sabarmati. The order was passed by the Assam Government and friends have raised the question whether this made me an Assamese. Actually, of course, when one becomes an Indian citizen of India as a whole. One day I hope it will be possible to become a citizen of the world. Yet this has given me a special affinity with Assam and I have a great liking of the gentle Assamese people. Constitutionally, NEFA is a part of Assam and from my earliest days in Shillong I felt how important it was that the two areas should be in amity with each other and know each other well. The old days of tribal raids on the inoffensive plains and military relations are happily long over, for NEFA atleast, and the fortunes of the Frontier hills are obviously bound up with their immediate neighbours in Assam.

Elwin wrote that the relations between Assam and NEFA had always been harmonious and that there was need for NEFA together with Assam to become a part of pan Indian environment.<sup>3</sup> Hence, Elwin (1964:47) wrote:

The NEFA administration has been accused of isolating the hill people from the people of the plains, the most curious charge being that they are doing this by stressing the national language.

This of course, is nonsense. The Administration is not isolating the tribal people at all. Indeed, if it is to be criticized, it might rather be on the ground that it is bringing them a little too quickly into the main stream of modern life. It is pressing forward everywhere with roads which will make the plains easier of access; it is encouraging both the national language and Assamese to help the tribesman to communicate more readily with the outside world; it takes schoolboys on tours around India...

Elwin has also stated in his book *A Philosophy for NEFA* (1964) the following:

As for the Assamese people, for whom I have great affection, I had included in my book suggestions that every scheme of development process or welfare of NEFA should be submitted to the test whether it would help the tribal people with Assam, and of course, with India as a whole."

Elwin's sense of belonging to Assam and the tribals is also reflected in his stand during the Chinese aggression in 1962. He wrote (1998: 263):

In Shillong there was some alarm and a number of people sent their families away. Friends put a good deal of pressure on Lila to go away with the children but I took the line that we all belonged to the tribal people and Assam, and since it was obviously impossible to be evacuated, we should remain where we were.

Elwin had a deep sense of appreciation for art and more particularly for tribal art. He had high opinion about the sense of art of the Assamese people. He (1964:256) wrote the following about it:

The people of Assam are a beauty-loving artistic people. No one can withhold his admiration for the best traditional products of Assamese art, the splendour of its weaving, the grandeur of its temples and the gaiety and variety of its dances. We should expect, therefore, that the tribes living in close proximity of so artistic a people would benefit from the contact.

## V

Let us now turn to Elwin's personal relations with some prominent Assamese persons. Elwin had close relations with the former Chief Minister of Assam, B.P. Chaliha. Elwin (1964: 283) writes:

When I once asked Mr. B.P. Chaliha, the great-hearted chief minister of Assam, what magic he had used for the solution of the many human and political problems of the Autonomous Districts of his state, he replied, 'A little understanding, a genuine respect, a lot of affection'. This is the real magic that works wonders in human hearts.

Elwin (1998:315) has also expressed the following about the Chief Minister:

The Chief Minister of Assam, Mr. B.P. Chaliha, is a gentle kind man with an exceptional affection for the tribal people. On one occasion before he became chief minister, he visited the Naga Hills and went, without any kind of protection at night to contact some of the rebels in the heart of the forest. On his return he wrote one of the most understanding reports on the Naga problem that I had ever read.

He met a Civil Service Administrator, M.N. Phukan, another Assamese, during the former's second visit to Northeast India in 1952. Elwin's (1998:

227) interaction with Phukan has been mentioned in the following manner with a sense of gratitude:

We drove from Shillong to Dimapur and then, through Kohima, down to Imphal where we found to our dismay that there was only one small dak bungalow which was so crowded that it looked like a bazaar, and no hotel. We went to the Deputy Commissioner, a pleasant person called M.N. Phukan who had a guest-house in his garden, allowed us to stay in it, and arranged all facilities.

He had high opinion about an Assamese bureaucrat, Satyendranath Barkataki, and close friendship developed between them. In his autobiography, Elwin (1998: 242) has stated: "... S. Barkataki whose knowledge of the tribal areas is profound and whose caustic pen is always stimulating." In his autobiography, Elwin (1998: 276) has also mentioned about the efficiency and attractive personality of Uma Sarma, an Assamese, who was an administrative officer in NEFA.

During his stay in Northeast India, Elwin developed close friendship with Dr. Praphulladutta Goswami, prominent educationist, writer and an internationally reputed folklorist of Assam. Dr. Goswami submitted his thesis for D.Phil in Gauhati University in 1955 under the guidance of Dr. Birinchi Kumar Barua. His thesis was on the folklore of Assam. Elwin was one of the examiners of Dr. Goswami's thesis. He highly appreciated Goswami's thesis and offered valuable comments on the same. A portion of his comment was as follows (quoted in Datta 2007): "It reveals considerable reading in the general and international literature of this subject. It shows exceptional powers of organization of comparative material in a clear and readable manner".<sup>4</sup>

The folklore of NEFA and Assam contains many materials indicating unity and closeness between the two regions. During the course of his fieldwork among the tribals, Elwin also collected vast amount of folklore materials on the basis of which he wrote two important books: *Myth of the North East Frontier of India* (1958) and *A New Book of Tribal Fiction* (1970). Many of the folk tales, lores, myths and legends contained in these two books indicate that the people of NEFA and Assam had common ancestors or their ancestors were related to one another.

The relationship between the tribals of NEFA and the people of Assam was also religious. Elwin (1964:4) has stated that the Noctes, who live in

Khonsa area between the Wancho and the Tangsa tribes in the Tirap Frontier Division, had contact with the plains people of Assam for many years. The Noctes were influenced by Vaishnava preachers. Narottam was the Viashnava representative of the Noctes and through him many Noctes embraced Neo-Vaishnavism propagated by Sankardeva between 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>5</sup>

## VI

In Assamese language some articles have been written on Elwin. Datta (2007), for instance, has written an article on Elwin and Northeast India. In this article, Datta, a renowned folklorist, has discussed the works of Elwin primarily in the context of the region. Renowned anthropologist Bhagabati (2003:13-75) has discussed the life, literary and anthropological writings of Elwin. The present author (2006:496-497) has also written a brief note on Elwin. Mahanta (2002) has discussed Elwin's association with the tribals of India.

The Assam Sahitya Sabha, a premier literary organization of the state of Assam, brought out a book in 1958 during the 63<sup>rd</sup> session of the Indian National Congress held at Pragjyotishpur near Guwahati. This book, according to Chaliha (1958), the compiler, is a humble attempt to acquaint and enlighten the delegates, guests, and visitors who assembled at Pragjyotishpur about different aspects of NEFA *vis-à-vis* Assam. In this book, there are references to the views of Elwin about historical, political, socio-cultural and linguistic relations between NEFA and Assam.

Biswajeet Bora, who hails from Assam, has made a documentary film in English on Elwin. The title of the film is *Angel of the Aborigines: Dr. Verrier Elwin*. This film recounts the works and life of Elwin. Mridumoloy (2010) has written in detail about this film. The film, produced by Maya Kholie under the banner of Kholie Enterprises from Arunachal Pradesh, was screened in 2010 in Mumbai and in International Film Festival in Germany held from July 21 to 26, 2010. This film has earned rave reviews. The documentary was also shown in Turkey during the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences conference held in 2010. The film is a large, colourful canvas like the variegated culture of the tribal peoples, replete with traditional dances and songs, which Elwin believed to be the very essence of tribal culture. The film is a mixture of many rare black & white and coloured footage and old photographs of Elwin taken with the

tribals. Both Lila Elwin, his wife and Ashok Elwin, his son, have been of much help in collecting the data and carrying out the research works for this film. Elwin's character has been portrayed by two actors in different stages of his life – Robin Christopher Pratt from England and Gilles Chuyen from France. This 45 minute film has been shot in various locations, including Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra. This documentary has been scripted by Prasenjit Das Gupta, with Utpal Borpujari as consultant. The music of the film has been composed and rendered by Utpal Sharma and cinematography by Bibhu Das, and Shivaji Choudhury is the film's editor.

To conclude, I would like to state what Elwin has once expressed. He mentioned that in India he found sorrow and joy, disappointment and fulfillment but above all, an answer to the prayer: "From the unreal, lead one to real." For Elwin, anthropology was his love and fieldwork was his life (Datta 2002).

## Notes

1. Assamese has been the *lingua franca* among different tribal groups of Arunachal Pradesh. Assamese was also the link language between the tribals of NEFA and the plains people of Assam. Many tribals of NEFA in the 1950s and 1960s were educated in Assamese medium. A few among them have contributed significantly to Assamese language and literature. For example, Lumber Dai, Tanga Taki, and Yeshe Dorje Thangshi are some of the most prolific writers from Arunachal who have written in Assamese and won laurels for their works (Bora 2011:112). Furer-Haimendorf, the famous anthropologist once remarked that the knowledge of Assamese enabled the tribals of NEFA to deal in equal terms with the people of the plains of Assam (Dasgupta 1958:30).
2. While Elwin was in NEFA, once he visited Tezu and a cultural programme was organized there in honour of him. In that cultural programme, a tribal boy wearing a *gamocha* (an Assamese towel) round his neck sang a Hindi song. A NEFA official and few others objected to the wearing of *gamocha* by the tribal boy while singing. However, the row was over at Elwin's intervention, a compromise was affected and the concerned official was made to apologize (Sirpeece 1958:133).
3. Hazarika's (1963) famous Assamese song entitled *Siangore Gallong, Luhitore Khamti* (literally, Gallong of Siang and Khamti of Lohit) describes the age-old bond of unity, friendship, affection and contact and communication that existed between various tribal groups of Arunachal like Gallong, Wancho, Apatani, Monpa, Padam, Idu, Nocte, Sherdukpen, Tangsa, Aka, Bori etc. and the plains people of Assam.

4. Later, the thesis was published in book form (Goswami 1960) by Gauhati University.
5. In this context, it would be pertinent to quote a news item published in the weekly paper *Asomiya* (Sept. 7, 1957) regarding the observance of the birth anniversary of Sankardeva by the Nyishis:

The birth anniversary of Sri Sankardev was observed by the Dafla community in the temple of Basudev founded at the confluence of the rivers Rangapjan and Kachikata in the native village of Sri Madhabdev under the Mouza of Kherajghat in North Lakhimpur. On the tenth of 'Bhada' – is the tithi day in the small hours of the morning the Dafla men and women came from a distance of nine to ten miles to join the morning service and after participating in all the four services of the day, departed for their home in the evening. The deep reverence of the Daflas during the time of singing the name of the Lord (Nam-Kirtan) is appreciable. They raised the slogan of the name of Lord Hari while chanting the name, as they sat to participate in the 'Nam-Kirtan'. Everyone present was glad at the sight of their respect for the preceptor and their unshakable belief in religion. It is here that Sri Aghona Chandra Gam – a Dafla – has constructed one 'Manikut Griha' (the abode of the deity) at a considerable cost together with one 'Karapat' and a pavement connecting the Karapat and the holy place. At the foundation ceremony one big 'Bhawna' was performed and many tribals came to witness the function. In this big Bhawna all got together without differentiation and illustrated a sense of brotherhood.

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