

verrier elwin
and india's
north-eastern
borderlands

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Nari K. Rustomji

The Verrier Elwin Memorial Endowment had been constituted through the generosity of his wife, Mrs. Lila Elwin, to organize annually a series of lectures, preferably on the tribal situation relevant to North-Eastern India, the area in which Verrier Elwin lived and worked during his last years. It had been decided that distinguished scholars in any discipline should be invited to visit the North-Eastern Hill University and deliver three to four lectures in each series.

For the 1986 lectures, the North-Eastern Hill University invited Mr. Nari Rustomji, a recognised authority on the North-Eastern Himalayan regions, including Bhutan and Sikkim.

Rs. 45.00

Nari Rustomji retired from the Indian Civil Service in 1977 after an administrative career of thirty-five years. He had served as Adviser to the Ministry of External Affairs for the north-eastern frontier regions, Prime Minister of Sikkim and Adviser to His Majesty the King of Bhutan.

He has, since his retirement, been engaged in his writings as a Visiting Fellow at Cambridge. His publications include *Enchanted Frontiers – Sikkim, Bhutan and India's North-Eastern Borderlands*, *Bhutan – The Dragon Kingdom in Crisis*, *Imperilled Frontiers – India's North-Eastern Borderlands*, *Sikkim – A Himalayan Tragedy*.

Elwin Memorial Lectures

Verrier Elwin and
India's North - Eastern Borderlands

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Nari K. Rustomji

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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

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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 surroundings 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 !