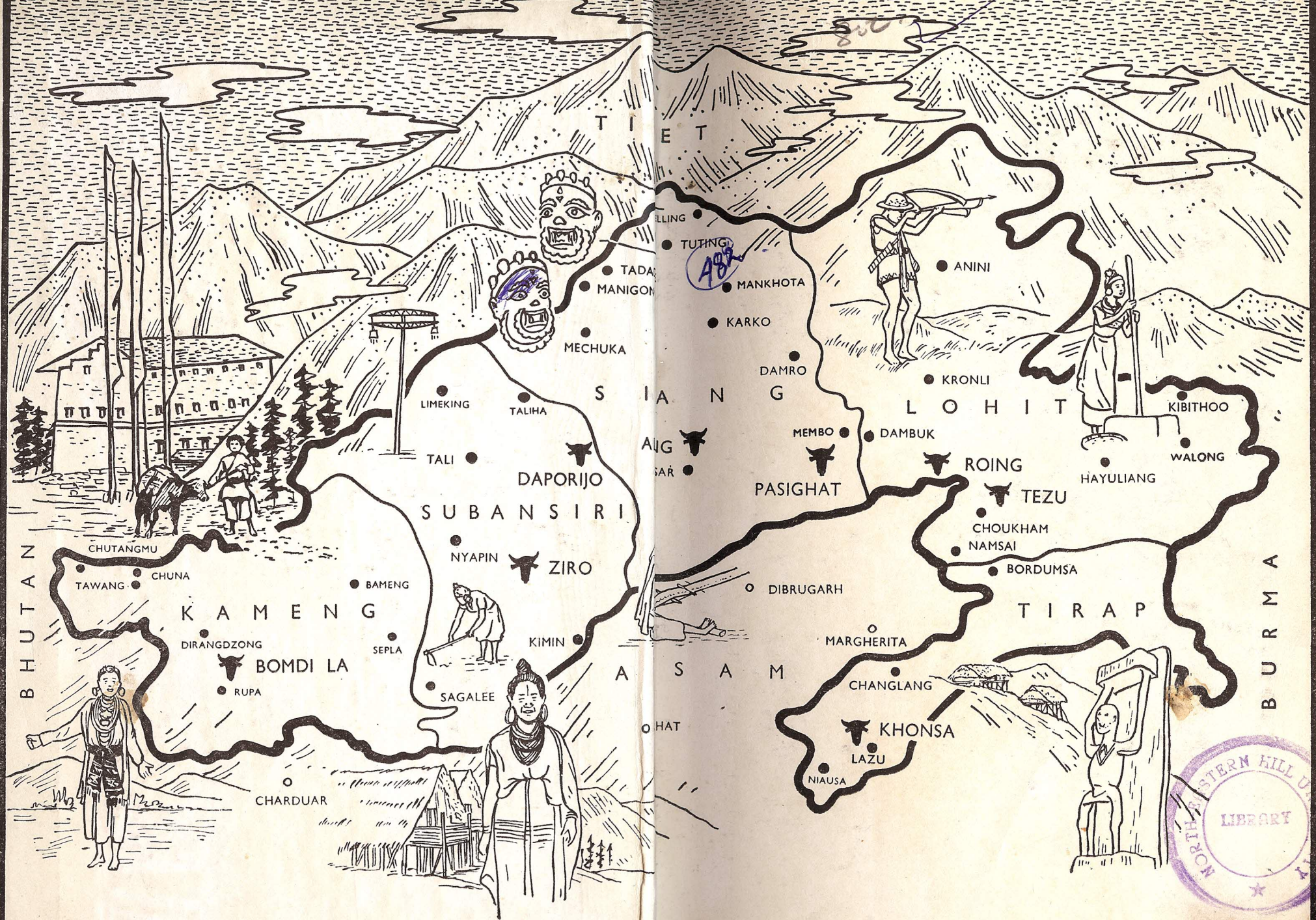


A
PHILOSOPHY
FOR NEFA

VERRIER ELWIN



BHUTAN

BURMA

THE NORTH-EAST FRONTIER AGENCY

A
PHILOSOPHY FOR NEFA

VERRIER ELWIN

With a Foreword
by
THE PRIME MINISTER OF INDIA



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I am alarmed when I see—not only in this country but in other great countries too—how anxious people are to shape others according to their own image or likeness, and to impose on them their particular way to living. We are welcome to our way of living, but why impose it on others? This applies equally to national and international fields. In fact, there would be more peace in the world if people were to desist from imposing their way of living on other people and countries,

I am not at all sure which is the better way of living, the tribal or our own. In some respects I am quite certain theirs is better. Therefore, it is grossly presumptuous on our part to approach them with an air of superiority, to tell them how to behave or what to do and what not to do. There is no point in trying to make of them a second-rate copy of ourselves.

—JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

On the top of all this variety of nature and man in Africa there impinge western civilization and western industrialism. Will their impact level down the variety, reducing the proud diversity of tribes and races to a muddy mixture, their various cultures to a single inferior copy of our own? Or shall we be able to preserve the savour of difference, to fuse our culture and theirs into an autochthonous civilization, to use local difference as the basis for a natural diversity of development?

—JULIAN HUXLEY

An open and flexible mind, which recognizes the need of transformation and faithfully sets itself to apprehend new conditions, is a prerequisite of man's usefulness. But those who take my point of view will try to bring all change into harmony with the fundamentals drawn from the past. If the past to a man is nothing but a dead hand, then in common honesty he must be an advocate of revolution. But if it is regarded as the matrix of present and future, whose potency takes many forms but is not diminished, then he will cherish it scrupulously and labour to read its lessons, and shun the heady short-cuts which end only in blank walls.

—LORD TWEEDSMUIR

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FOREWORD TO THE FIRST EDITION

Some four or five months ago, Dr Verrier Elwin sent me a typescript of this small book and suggested that I might write a foreword to it. It was easy enough to write a few lines, but I did not wish to do so before I had read the typescript. I would have been in any event interested in reading it as the challenge to us from the North-East Frontier Agency fascinates me. I was fully occupied with various activities at the time, and so I put this typescript aside for a leisure hour or two. That leisure did not come. A few days ago there was a gentle reminder from Verrier Elwin and I felt a little ashamed at having kept him waiting for all this time. And so, in spite of numerous other activities and engagements, including election work, I have read through this very interesting little book.

Verrier Elwin has done me the honour of saying that he is a missionary of my views on tribal affairs. As a matter of fact, I have learnt much from him, for he is both an expert on this subject with great experience and a friend of the tribal folk. I have little experience of tribal life and my own views, vague as they were, have developed under the impact of certain circumstances and of Verrier Elwin's own writings. It would, therefore, be more correct to say that I have learnt from him rather than that I have influenced him in any way.

I came across the tribal people first, rather distantly, in various parts of India other than the North-East Frontier. These tribes were the Gonds, the Santals and the Bhils. I was attracted to them and liked them and I had a feeling that we should help them to grow in their own way.

Later, I came in touch with the tribal people of the North-East Frontier of India, more especially of the Hill Districts of Assam. My liking for them grew and with it came respect. I had no sensation of superiority over them. My ideas were not clear at all, but I felt that we should avoid two extreme courses: one was to treat them as anthropological specimens for study and the other was to allow them to be engulfed by the masses of Indian humanity. These reactions were instinctive and not based on any knowledge or experience. Later, in considering various aspects of these problems and in discussing them with those who knew much more

than I did, and more especially with Verrier Elwin, more definite idea took shape in my mind and I began to doubt how far the normal idea of progress was beneficial for these people and, indeed, whether this was progress at all in any real sense of the word. It was true that they could not be left cut off from the world as they were. Political and economic forces impinged upon them and it was not possible or desirable to isolate them. Equally undesirable, it seemed to me, was to allow these forces to function freely and upset their whole life and culture, which had so much of good in them.

The reading of this book has clarified my mind and helped me to have more definite views on the subject. I agree not only with the broad philosophy and approach of Verrier Elwin, but with his specific proposals as to how we should deal with these fellow-countrymen of ours. I hope that our officers and others who have to work with the tribals of NEFA will read carefully what Dr Elwin has written and absorb this philosophy so that they may act in accordance with it. Indeed, I hope that this broad approach will be applied outside the NEFA also to other tribals in India.

I hope the reading of this book will not be confined to our officers, but that it will have a wider audience. Our people all over India should know more about this problem and should develop affection and respect for these fine people. Above all, I hope there will be no attempt made to impose other ways of life on them in a hurry. Let the changes come gradually and be worked out by the tribals themselves.

It is true that the isolated life that our officers live in some of these tribal areas is a strain on them. But they must remember that the problems they deal with are a challenge to us and that they are privileged to be engaged in this great adventure.

New Delhi,
February 16, 1957

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

FOREWORD TO THE SECOND EDITION

It is nearly twenty months since I wrote a foreword to this book of Dr Verrier Elwin. During this period, the question of our policy in the tribal areas has often come up before us. I am convinced now, as I was previously, that that policy should be on the general lines indicated in this book.

We cannot allow matters to drift in the tribal areas or just not take interest in them. In the world of today that is not possible or desirable. At the same time we should avoid over-administering these areas and, in particular, sending too many outsiders into tribal territory.

It is between these two extreme positions that we have to function. Development in various ways there has to be, such as communications, medical facilities, education and better agriculture. These avenues of development should, however, be pursued within the broad framework of the following five fundamental principles:

- (1) People should develop along the lines 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.
- (2) Tribal rights in land and forests should be respected.
- (3) 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.
- (4) We should not over-administer these areas or overwhelm them with a multiplicity of schemes. We should rather work through, and not in rivalry to, their own social and cultural institutions.
- (5) We should judge results, not by statistics or the amount of money spent, but by the quality of human character that is evolved.

New Delhi,
9th October, 1958

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Some time ago Mr K. L. Mehta remarked to me: 'Unless we are clear in our minds about what we are trying to do, unless, in fact, we have a philosophy behind all our activities, we may do more harm than good with the money and labour we spend.' This remark has inspired me to write down what I conceive to be the 'philosophy' which inspires, or should inspire, what we are trying to do in the North-East Frontier Agency of India.

In the two years since this book was first written there has not only been remarkable and exciting progress in implementing this policy, but the philosophy itself, especially as it applies to the tribal councils, tribal jurisprudence, the practice of shifting cultivation (jhuming), the development of arts and crafts and the adaptation of local architectural designs, has been more fully worked out. When I first wrote I was frankly doubtful whether the policy I described would work. During the past two years, guided by the deep wisdom and concern for the common man of Mr S. Fazl Ali, Governor of Assam, it has become clear that it can and does work under the right leadership, and I now have every hope that 'the rich and varied tapestry of NEFA' will not only preserve its lovely traditional colour and pattern, but that its material and techniques will be enriched.

As Adviser for Tribal Affairs, I am not technically a Government servant and this has made it possible for me to study the work of the NEFA Administration with some objectivity. This study has made me very proud of my association with it, and I have described it with an enthusiasm which might be considered inappropriate if I was in a different position. Mr K. L. Mehta, at present Adviser to the Governor of Assam, and I came to NEFA at the same time, and this has meant that for nearly five years I have had the happiness of working with him and enjoying his friendship. It is not too much to say that had he not been here, it would have been impossible to have worked out this philosophy even on paper, still less to implement it in the field. His singularly sensitive mind, so quick to grasp every aspect of a tribal problem; his realistic approach; his adventurous and pioneering spirit; his unusual sympathy and compassion; and his sincere affection for the tribal people and enthusiasm for their cause have made him

the best of counsellors and have put him among those who will be remembered by history as one of the great administrators of the tribal areas.

In the revision of this book I have also been inspired by discussions and even controversies (for to the scientist disagreement is the breath of life) with many of the officers of NEFA, and in particular I would express my gratitude for the help given me by Mr D. M. Sen, the distinguished jurist who is now Legal Adviser, and to Mr P. B. Kar, Director of Forests, in the NEFA Administration.

In his Foreword to the First Edition the Prime Minister expressed the wish that the reading of the book would not be confined to the officers of NEFA but would have a wider audience and that its broad approach would be applied to the other tribal people in India. I have therefore, in this second edition, tried to make my story more intelligible to readers in general by adding an introductory chapter about the people and administrative set-up of NEFA, and have given fuller treatment to many of the subjects I have discussed. There are some twenty million hill and tribal people in India and, though every area has its special problems, I believe that the example of what the Governor of Assam recently described as 'a model tribal administration' might well inspire the psychological approach, the techniques of development and the general 'philosophy' of officials and social workers operating in other parts of the Indian tribal world.

I have called myself a missionary of Mr Nehru's gospel and it is from that point of view that I have approached the many problems facing us. I did not come to tribal India (now exactly twenty-seven years ago) from a school of anthropology, but from Gandhiji's ashram at Sevagram. I have always, I am afraid, been a very bad 'Gandhi man', but I have never forgotten some of the lessons he taught me. One of these was that, in his own words, 'we must approach the poor with the mind of the poor'—so too we must approach the tribesman with the mind of the tribesman. Another was the importance of simplicity: I saw something of Gandhiji's work in the villages of Gujerat where he based everything on the local economy, worked through local institutions, avoided luxurious and unnecessary innovations, and concentrated everything on a few fundamental and essential needs. And yet another lesson was the importance of the individual. The tribal folk are not 'specimens', 'types' or 'cases'; they are

people; they are human beings exactly like ourselves in all fundamental ways. We are part of them and they are part of us; there is no difference. They live under special conditions; they have developed along certain special lines; they have their own outlook and ways of doing things. But the ultimate human needs, aspirations, loves and fears are exactly the same as ours.

With this background, I have tried to apply Mr Nehru's humane and scientific ideals to concrete situations. To do this loyally and intelligently is, I believe, the chief source of hope for the people of NEFA and indeed for all the tribal people of India.

Shillong,
August 29, 1958

VERRIER ELWIN