

Verrier Elwin
Philanthropologist
Selected Writings

edited by Nari Rustomji



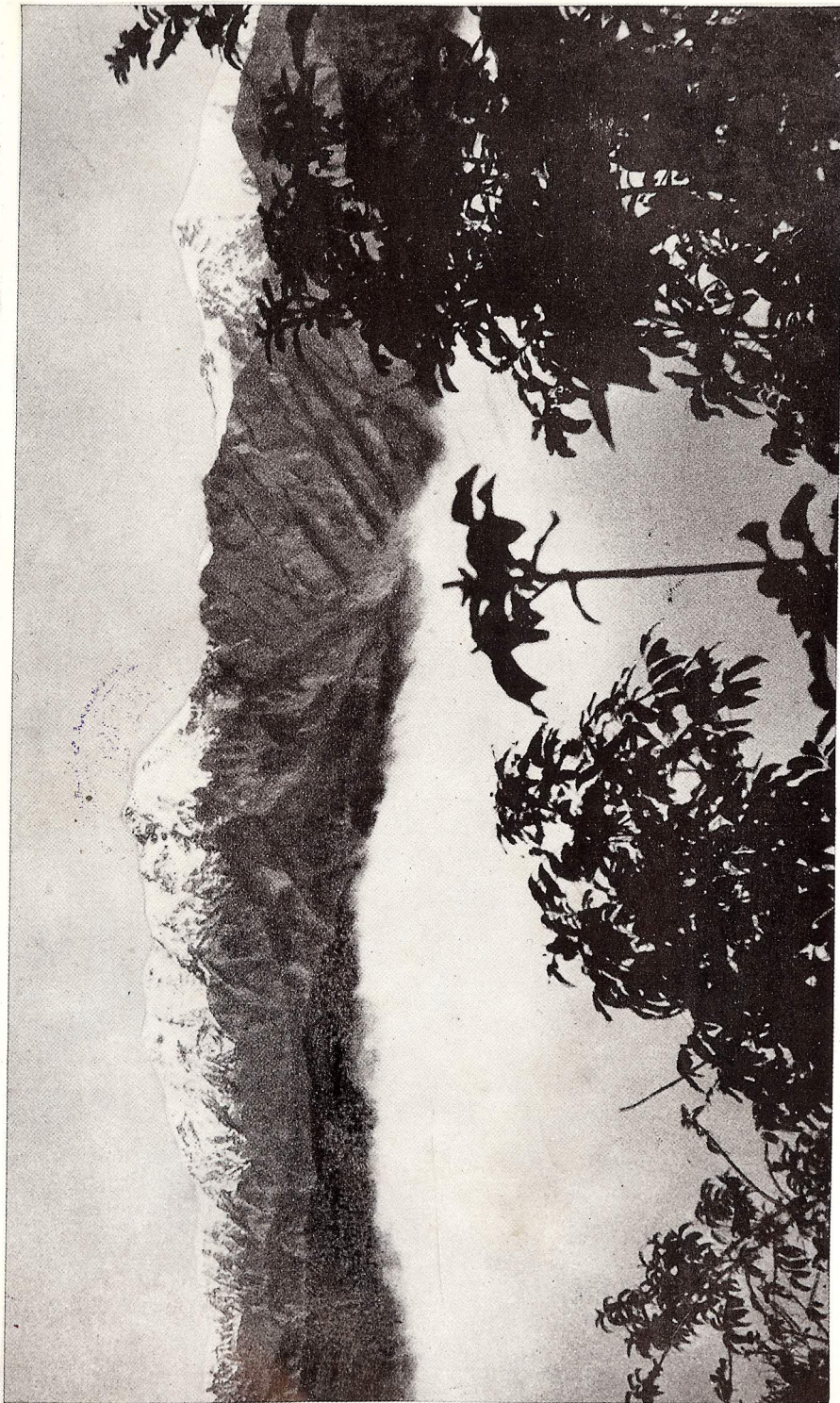
'No other anthropologist, neither British nor Indian, has made as massive a contribution to our knowledge of Indian tribal societies, and books such as *The Muria and their Ghotul* and *The Religion of An Indian Tribe* are sure of a place among classics of anthropological literature. He was one of the greatest romantics of anthropology and the most inspired chronicler of India's tribal people'. This was how Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf described Verrier Elwin and his work.

This volume of eighteen pieces by Elwin gives the reader an insight into his life and work. Most of the writings are anthropological in nature and deal with various aspects of tribal life. The selection includes Elwin's writings on the ghotul life of the Muria, ikon painting, the Nagas and the tribes of the North-East Frontier. The first two pieces are autobiographical and recount how Elwin first came to India, his association with Mahatma Gandhi, and the gradual development of his interest in tribal life. Some of the later pieces include his poetry and children's fiction.

Elwin's lively style of writing, his keen sense of humour and the occasional eccentricities which emerge, all make this volume interesting and highly informative reading not only for specialists in the field but also for the general reader.

Cover photograph of Gadaba girls dancing taken by Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf.

Back cover photograph of Hill Maria chelik in dancing dress taken by Verrier Elwin.



Sanctuary in northern Siang

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TO
VERRIER ELWIN

whose encouragement to me in his
THE ART OF THE NORTH-EAST FRONTIER OF INDIA,
has been an eternal inspiration. 'For Nari, pioneer and explorer in
the worlds of men and ideas, whose desire that the whole of NEFA
should be a work of art has been a great stimulant.'

22 September 1959.

—Verrier Elwin

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Preface

The idea of preparing this Anthology arose from a suggestion offered during the delivery of the Verrier Elwin Memorial Lectures before the North-Eastern Hill University at Shillong in 1985. While deploring the general neglect and lack of interest since his death in 1964 in Elwin's contribution to anthropological studies and his prodigious efforts to bring about a keener awareness of the need to do justice to the tribal people living in the remoteness of India's hills and forests, I had quoted Professor Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf's assessment that 'no other anthropologist, neither British nor Indian, has made as massive a contribution to our knowledge of Indian tribal societies, and books such as *The Muria and Their Ghotul* and *The Religion of an Indian Tribe* are sure of a place among classics of anthropological literature. He was one of the greatest romantics of anthropology and the most inspired chronicler of India's tribal people'. I had pointed out that practically all Elwin's books including the two classics specifically referred to by Haimendorf, were out of print and, for all practical purposes, not available for the general reading public. The University thereupon took the decision to bring out Elwin's works in a uniform edition in its North-Eastern Studies Series. A decision was simultaneously taken to bring out an anthology to prepare the ground for the reprints. The University is to be congratulated for the initiative it is taking in this very worthwhile venture. Many of Elwin's books had been heavily subsidized and were seldom profitable. His wife, Leela Elwin, has been generous enough to place funds with the North-Eastern Hills University to be utilized at the University's discretion to perpetuate his memory. Elwin was, however, so remote and, if one may respectfully add, eccentric an individual that professional anthropologists have all but forgotten him within twenty years of his death. This Anthology and the reprint of his works will, it is hoped, revive interest in one of the most outstanding champions of tribal people.

On being invited to compile the anthology I sought the advice and assistance of Mr R. E. Hawkins who had been in charge of the Oxford University Press in India for the years 1937-70 and was publisher of so many of Elwin's books. Hawkins knew Elwin personally during the last thirty years of his life, and though he has very modestly declined to be named as co-author on the title-page of the book, he has, in fact, been its main architect and it has been on his advice that I have mostly depended in making the selections for this Anthology. This has not been easy as Elwin's output was not only enormous in quantity but of such a high quality that one is hesitant in deciding what can be omitted. It was on Mr Hawkins's suggestion that we decided to restrict our selections to pieces of more considerable length and significance rather than clutter the Anthology with a medley of comparatively irrelevant snippets. The bulk of the Anthology comprises Elwin's writings as an anthropologist and sociologist. But Elwin was a many-sided man and an attempt has been made to reflect also his many-sidedness, as a poet, essayist, art-connoisseur, photographer, scholar-administrator and political worker.

We feel a lengthy Preface is not called for. Elwin's writing is so personal—*le style est l'homme même*—that it is better to let the book be his story. For the reader who has not read Elwin's autobiography, *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin*, the first two extracts of the Anthology, the Foreword to *Leaves from the Jungle* and *Philanthropology*, will give the broad details of Elwin's life and activities until 1955, when he was enlisted as Adviser for the tribal areas of India's North-Eastern Frontier. From 1955 until his death in 1964, Elwin was mainly preoccupied in helping to implement the policy of promoting deeper and wider respect for the culture and way of life of the tribes of India in general and of the North-Eastern Frontier in particular. Although he enjoyed no statutory powers, his influence and inspiration permeated the entire administrative fabric. The first step taken was to build up a Department of Tribal Research, to collect material and publish a series of monographs on NEFA's manifold tribes. A team of young research scholars was recruited and quickly put to work under Elwin's overall guidance. The objective was to make available to our Administrative Officers, in a compact and easily readable form, the basic data regarding the tribes amongst whom their work lay—their customs, beliefs

and superstitions, their art, history and language. The more thoroughly our officers could be briefed about the tribal people, their traditional values, their aspirations, the less likely that they would cause offence through unintended indiscretions. But we also wanted the tribal people to know that their culture was important enough to be worth studying and telling the world about. For nothing is so damaging to a tribal's vitality and sense of well-being as loss of self-respect, as a devaluation in their own estimation of their own culture and heritage.

Had it not been for the inspiration of Elwin, his burning enthusiasm and his unflagging efforts, the battle for the tribes might well have taken a very different turn. Elwin's books on the art of NEFA, lavishly and beautifully illustrated by his own photographs, presented a fresh and exciting concept of the primitive tribal. The tribals' unerring instinct for colour combinations was confirmed in the reproduction of their lovely textile designs. Elwin's translations of tribal folk-poetry were also proof that their folklore was as rich in imagery as the literature of the most advanced societies.

This Anthology will, we hope, reflect something of Elwin's many-sided contribution to the tribal cause and will be a useful guide to the general reader for selecting works that may be of interest to him when the proposed uniform edition of Elwin's books is eventually published.

I can only close by expressing my deepest gratitude to Mr R. E. Hawkins for his invaluable assistance in compiling this work.

NARI RUSTOMJI

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Section V

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Carved pillar at Chandabera

Carved pillar at Remawand



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