

## Elwin, Verrier

b. 29 August 1902, Dover, Kent, UK

d. 22 February 1964, Delhi, India

Verrier Elwin had no formal training in anthropology. He strayed into it through poetry. However, he was one of the best-known anthropologists in India, and his anthropological knowledge, controversial as it was to some, was praised by many. His description of the tribal life and culture in central, eastern or northeastern India is undoubtedly the liveliest, the most passionate, the most legendary, and, perhaps, the most romantic as well. He not only described the tribes and fought for their land and forest rights, but also lived like them, as a true participant observer, with tribal spouses. India has not seen another ethnographer, who wrote as beautifully as he did, who was as concerned with the fate of Indian tribes as he was, who could work half as hard as he did, and who was as dear, eccentric, and influential as Elwin. Grown and tutored to be a clergyman and gifted as a poet, he lived as the messiah of the tribal world.

Elwin was a prolific writer in many genres. His publications included monographs, a collection of oral traditions, a collection of songs and poems, novels, articles, commentaries, rejoinders, etc., and he often had more than twenty publications per year, the highest being sixty in 1953. The themes of his publications, including his posthumous and undated publications, comprised Christianity, Indian national movement, myths, love and sex, tribal crimes, world views, folk songs and poetry, traditional institutions, art, development, administration, democracy, etc. Of these themes he wrote more frequently on Christianity, tribal poetry, oral traditions, songs and dances, and change and development. However, he made the most significant impact on the scholars, activists, and administrators in India with his concept of Christianity as reparation; his notion of tribal development according to tribal genius; his advocacy for a restrained relationship between the tribes and plains Hindus; and his poetry inspired by the

poverty, frustration, and the passion of tribes in India. He wanted the tribes to be respected and not pitied; he opposed their conversion to either Christianity or Hinduism; and he wished their songs, dances, sports, art, poetry, dormitory, customs, etc. to survive the challenges of the outside world.

### Education

BA University of Oxford, 1924

D.Sc. University of Oxford, 1944

### Fieldwork

Karanjia, Mandla District, 1932–5

Sarwachappar village, Mandla District, 1935–7

Patangarh village, Mandla District 1937–40,  
1942–6, 1949–54

Bastar, Madhya Pradesh, 1940–2

Orissa, 1942–51

North Eastern Frontier Agency, 1954–64

### Key Publications

(1939) *The Baiga*, London: John Murray.

(1943) *The Aborigines*, Oxford Pamphlets on Indian Affairs, No. 14.

(1957) *A Philosophy for NEFA*, Shillong: Director of Information, NEFA.

(1989) *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin: An Autobiography*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

### Further Reading

Guha, R. (1999) *Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Takeshi, F. (1987) 'An annotated bibliography of Verrier Elwin (1902–1964)', *Journal of South Asian Languages and Cultures* 1, pp. 5–56.

TANKA SUBBA

## Epstein, Arnold L.

b. 1924, Liverpool, UK

A concern to understand social process and