

Understanding Tribal Development in Arunachal Pradesh : Elwin — Furer Haimendorf — Rustomji

T. B. SUBBA

Department of Anthropology, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong

Abstract : The contribution of Verrier Elwin, Christoph von Furer Haimendorf, and Nari Kalkhosru Rustomji to the understanding of tribes in India in general and of Arunachal Pradesh in particular was rather unique. They visited the erstwhile North Eastern Frontier Agency in different years and wrote extensively on the tribes there but they showed a remarkable unanimity of thoughts, actions, and ideosyncracies.

This paper is an attempt towards an assessment of their contribution. After a brief biographic account of them and reconstruction of the situation in Arunachal prior to their entry there this paper highlights their major contributions to the understanding and development of the tribes there. While appreciating all this, this paper also questions the epistemology of their writings on the tribes there and concludes that they prove themselves to be nothing but orientalist, albeit perhaps unconscious orientalist, who were never tired of the "white man's burden".

INTRODUCTION

It needs no special effort to establish the credentials of Verrier Elwin, Christoph von Furer Haimendorf, and Nari Kaikhosru Rustomji regarding their contribution to the understanding of tribal development in general and of Arunachal Pradesh in particular. All three held key administrative/advisory positions of the Government of India or other provincial governments rather long and had significant impact on the processes and policies of tribal development and administration in India. While the third often disclaims academics in his writings and lectures, his views and experiences have no less academic value than the other two. In fact, the powerful and influential writings of this trio have made such a halo that it eclipses the writings of other scholars who have made a life-time study of the tribes of this state. This trio also has a remarkable unanimity of thoughts, actions, and ideosyncracies: hence, the hyphenated title of this paper.

This paper proposes to make an epistemological analysis of some of their considered views on tribal development in India with special reference to Arunachal Pradesh. It is hoped that this exercise will have some bearing on tribal development policies and practices in other parts of India as well.

A brief biographic account :

Among the three, there is no precise biographic detail on the life of Elwin who has been strangely kept out of the biographic dictionaries. (In this context, one looks forward to the biographic work on Elwin who has been strangely kept out of the biographic work on Elwin in progress by Ramachandra Guha).

Elwin : Renowned as a social anthropologist, Elwin was actually a student of English literature from Merton College in Oxford. He began his career as an Anglican clergyman though later turned towards Catholicism. His coming to India was not accidental but, according to himself, an act of reparation :

Now in relation to India I remembered how my family had made its money, such as it was, out of India, and my contrymen had gone to India to exploit it and to rule. I thought, therefore, that I might go to India as an act of reparation, that from my own family

somebody should go to give instead of to get, to serve with the poorest people instead of ruling them, to become one with the country that we had helped to dominate and subdue (in Rustomji 1988: 13-14).

Once in India he won the fatherly love of Mahatma Gandhi who affectionately addressed him as 'son', and the friendship of Pandit Nehru and Sardar Patel. Thus, his involvement in the Indian national movement, much to the chagrin of his fellow countrymen, was a logical conclusion. His about twenty years' anthropological experience in the Central Provinces was, however, recognized only in 1953 when he was appointed as Consultant for Tribal Areas in the north-eastern frontiers, particularly NEFA. (Rustomji was then the Adviser to the Governor of Assam for the north-eastern borderlands). His *A Philosophy for NEFA* (1959) later became the bible for the tribal administrators in India. It was probably not an overstatement when Furer Haimendorf complimented him as "the most inspired chronicler of India's tribal people".

Furer Haimendorf: Born on July 27, 1909, he had his education in Theresianische Akademie in Vienna. Since 1951, he was a Professor of Asian Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University. He was first appointed as Special Officer Subansiri under External Affairs Department of the Government of India during 1944-45. During the next four years or so, he was the Adviser to the Nizam's government and also held the Chair of Professor of Anthropology in Osmania University.

He conducted extensive fieldwork in India (1939-43, 1970), Nepal (1953), and in the Phillipines (1957-58) and wrote profusely on the tribal life in India. His major publications on Arunachal Pradesh are *The Himalayan Barbary* (1955), *The Apa Tanis and their Neighbours* (1963), *A Himalayan Tribe: From Cattle to Cash* (1980), and *Highlanders of Arunachal Pradesh* (1982) (for more details, see Srinivas 1990).

Rustomji: He was born on 16 May 1919 at Lahore, which was but an accident. His family was affluent enough to give him the best of education in Bedford and Cambridge. He joined the elite Indian Civil Service in 1941 and became Adviser to the Governor of Assam for Tribal areas and states of Manipur, Tripura and Coochbehar at a rather early age. During 1948-63 he was the Dewan (the Indian substitute for the British political officer) of Sikkim. He was also the Speaker, Sikkim Council and President, Sikkim Executive Council during 1954-59. In 1963, he became the Adviser to the Government of Bhutan and served in that capacity for four years after which he went to Assam to serve as Additional Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam. He also became the Chief Secretary to the Government of Meghalaya in October 1971.

Rustomji was not only a distinguished administrator but also an accomplished violinist and a prolific writer. His major publications are *Enchanted Frontiers* (1971), *Imperilled Frontiers* (1983), Verrier Elwin and India's *North-Eastern Borderlands* (1988), and *Sikkim: A Himalayan Tragedy* (1987). He was also the founder-member of Namgyal Institute of Tibetology at Gangtok, which was later renamed as Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology.

There is a lot common among these three scholars. They were not just advisers but active participants in the administrative and development activities. They had influential contacts in India and abroad and no qualms about their own aristocracy. They too, shared a deep, almost fanatical, concern for India's impoverished tribals whose protection was a life-time goal for them.

It is to be noted that they did not go to Arunachal without a purpose, no matter how noble it was in their own eyes. Notwithstanding their love for the tribals, they were there to collect

information on and build friendly relations with them. To quote Furer Haimendorf: . . . to obtain firsthand information on conditions in the area in question and to establish friendly relation with the tribesmen inhabiting the highlands I was offered an appointment as Special Officer Subansiri and Assistant Political Officer (1982:4).

Rustomji in particular was there to establish the rudiments of Indian administrative structure without which the very legitimacy of Indian authority over that bordering region was thought to be questionable. The tribes until then were considered to be self-administering, independent, and without any trait of the modern administrative system. He was there also to initiate the process of development which had evaded the territory due to certain policies adopted by the British colonialists.

In other words, Elwin, Furer Haimendorf, and Rustomji went there as representatives of India, to unravel the benevolent image of it to the frontiersmen. To achieve this goal, they took special care in handpicking officers and training them rigorously in how they should go about with the tribesmen. They even taught the officers what words to use and how to treat the tribals. If they were patriotic of India, they were also clearly paternalistic.

British policy towards Arunachal

The British policy towards Arunachal makes no departure from their policy towards the colonized countries. In one word, this policy was described as the policy of 'indirect rule'. This received favour from the colonial rulers due to a number of factors: (i) this would involve a relatively small number of British troops and officials, (ii) the government expenditure would be at its minimum, (iii) Colonial Civil Service personnels had limited knowledge of the local areas and peoples, and (iv) this was expected to pacify the 'natives' and law and order would be more easily maintained.

With regard to their knowledge about Arunachal in particular, Elwin cites an 1865 *Pioneer* publication as follows:

(T)he only idea which most men had, with reference to the hills and forests (of Assam) was that they were the habitat of savage tribes, whose bloody raids and thieving forays threatened serious danger to the cause of tea (1959:xvi).

Elwin further notes that the British officers, with the sole exception of Dalton, had a very low opinion of the tribes there. He cites many instances to show how contemptuously Butler described the Singphos and Khaptis, and Rowlett about the Mishimis. Even the Needham's views about the Abors (Adis) and Mishimis were no different (1959-vii).

In this context, it is worthwhile to reproduce the passage by T. H. Lewin anticipating their attitude and policy of modern India:

This I say, let us not govern these hills for ourselves, but administer the country for the well-being and happiness of the people dwelling therein. What is wanted there is not measures, but a man. Place over them an officer gifted with the power of rule, not a mere cog in the great wheel of government, but one tolerant of the failings of his fellow-creatures and yet prompt to see and recognize in them the touch of nature that makes the whole world kin, apt to enter into new trains of thought and to modify and adopt ideas, but cautious in offending national prejudice. Under a guidance like this, let the people by slow degree civilize themselves. With education open to them and yet moving under their own laws and customs, they will turn out not debased and miniature epitomes of Englishmen, but a new

and noble type of God's creatures (1959: xviii - xix).

The reason for citing this lengthy passage is that this seems to have provided the guiding principle to all the three scholars dealt in here. Their thinking and approach do not seem to be different from what has been enshrined here. This policy of non-interference was later strengthened by introducing the Inner Line due mainly to the troubles between the Nagas and the planters in the Naga hills and the fear of such troubles spreading elsewhere too (Choudhury 1978:38). After 1911, however, the British felt the necessity of having political control over the frontier tribes while allowing them to have their internal affairs as before (ibid : 64).

The British policy of non-interference was further strengthened by the government of India Act of 1953. Sections 52 and 92 of that Act provided for the reservation of certain areas as "Excluded" or "Partially Excluded" from the provincial legislatures, which had an executive authority over such areas but the administration in the former was entirely in the hands of the Governor and the same in the latter was in the hands of the ministers but subject to the responsibility imposed on the Governor by Section 52(e) of the act (Elwin 1943:21-22).

Summarizing the British policy towards the frontier areas, Rustomji writes:

The policy of the British in the hill areas had been a policy of least possible interference... The Political Officer might occasionally visit their area to distribute salt, yarn, perhaps also rum and cigarettes, but no question arose of administering them directly or changing their life-style, customs, language or religion... It may be stated, in broad terms, that at the time of independence, the culture and economy of the hill people of Arunachal Pradesh was not much different from what it had been five hundred or even a thousand years earlier (1987:5-6).

Elwin—Furer Haimendorf—Rustomji on tribal development

It is indeed difficult to isolate the views of Elwin, Furer Haimendorf, and Rustomji on tribal development in Arunachal. Furer Haimendorf is the first of them to have visited that region but his views, like Rustomji's, do not deviate from what have been expressed in Elwin's *A Philosophy for NEFA*. It may be added that Elwin's views were fully endorsed by the then prime minister of India, Pandit Nehru, who wrote the following in his foreword to the first edition of this book:

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.

Some of the highlights of Elwin's inherited policies are as follows:

- a) "We do not want to preserve the tribesmen as museum specimens, but equally we do not want to turn them into clowns in a circus. We do not want to stop the clock of progress, but do want to see that it keeps the right time" (p. 59).
- b) "Their moral virtues, their self-reliance, their courage, their artistic gifts, their cheerfulness are things we need. They also need the comradeship, the technical knowledge, the wider world-view of the plains" (p. 59).
- c) "We do not want to put the clock back or preserve NEFA as a sort of museum. But we do want the best for the people, and in this important matter, they should not be left without guidance" (p. 119).
- d) "Change will come everywhere, even in the remotest places, and our task is not to check

it but to guide it" (p. 136).

Furer Haimendorf's views are no different from these views. For instance, he deplors the growing dependence of the Apa Tanis on the commodities to be supplied from Assam and the large spendings by the government (1980:75). He also decries the impact of the introduction of the panchayati raj on the tribal institutions like *buliang* (village council), *kotoki* (government interpreters), and *gaonbura* (village elders), which have become almost obsolete today (ibid: 188-92). And he warns:

The rapid progress which the Apa Tanis have made in the fields of commerce and education, and the general sense of prosperity pervading the whole valley should not blind us to the fact that in the foreseeable future this very progress is likely to create a number of social problems (ibid:210).

It is clear from this citation that he was very much in tune with the development policy of "hastening slowly" advocated by Elwin and Rustomji. Like others, he also wanted "protective development" for the tribes there is clear here:

A problem which in future is likely to become a debating point both in Itanagar and in Delhi is the continuation of the Inner Line Policy which has proved so successful in protecting the tribal people of Arunachal Pradesh from being swamped and exploited by outsiders such as has been the fate of many of the tribes of Peninsular India. Apa Tanis of the present generation, both traditionalist and modern, fully support this policy, and there are no indications that they would welcome the lifting of the protective barrier which interferes in no way with the movements of Apa Tanis and other tribesmen but keeps out potential exploiters (1980:217-18).

This view perfectly matches with that of Rustomji expressed in the following passage:
... an over-rapid programme of road construction would cause serious hardship to the tribals if they were to be conscripted to carry out the work. And there would be complications of different work, and no less harmful, if a labour force from outside was inducted for the purpose (1983:110).

Like his predecessors again, he was never prepared to give primacy to economic development at the cost of cultural despoilment. Witness :

Nothing has been more detrimental to tribal interest than the approach that tribal development must be pushed forward 'on a war-footing'. It is an approach that rests on the assumption that the tribals are so far behind in material culture that it can only be by operations on a war-footing that they can ever hope to be brought up to the level of their fellow-citizens. The risk that, in this traumatic process, the whole basis of their culture may disintegrate is tragically over-looked (1983:121).

Now, a summary of their views on tribal development in Arunachal Pradesh:

- a) They did not want economic development to take place but slowly so that the rich cultural heritage of the tribals was not polluted or got enough time to adjust with the material changes.
- b) They did not want any change that would disrupt the socio-cultural balance of the region.
- c) They wanted 'protective development' and guide the developmental activities along the path they considered beneficial for the tribals.

- d) They did not want to 'isolate' the tribes but they also did not want them to come in contact with outsiders suddenly.
- e) finally, they wanted the tribes to be gradually involved in the administrative and developmental activities of the Government of India and thus develop a sense of belonging to the Indian nation as equal partners.

Policy implications: an analysis

Prima facie, these views on tribal development are sound and one wonders if the frontier tribes would have expected more. But a closer scrutiny of their views shows, though perhaps inadvertently, that they were very much orientalists

Orientalism as a style of thought is characterized by an epistemological division between two worlds, two geographical areas: the privileged term occident exploring/studying/recreating the object of its study—the Orient. What is proposed here is the further division of the Orient (here, India) into the dominant Hindu 'mainstream' and the peripheral, marginalized tribal/frontier societies. In this division, which is essentialized by the Levi-Straussian binary opposition, the Orient is the silent Other; unconsulted because "they (i.e., the Orientals) cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (Marx 1977:478-79). In the discourses on various tribal groups, for instance, the episteme which presupposes the representational view of knowledges of the subject always in control and in a position of transcendence over the object, deprives the knowledges that these groups have or can have about themselves (Inden 1986 :402).

In this context, it will not be quite incorrect to label Elwin, Furer Haimendorf, and Rustomji as modern Orientalists. There are plenty of examples even in the quoted policies above, which show how they had no confidence in the knowledge of the tribes themselves, thereby justifying their need for guidance and supervision. To them, the native knowledge was what Foucault has called "subjugated knowledge", which means 'a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: native knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity' (1980:82). In Said's words, they seemed to have believed in the 'absurd theses that man plays no part in setting up both the material and the processes of knowledge' (1978:300).

There is also, one would admit, a constant "othering" of the tribes of Arunachal by these scholars. While they often appear to be paternalistic the "We-They" difference between them and the tribes they represented is only too clear to be missed. In fact, the difference appears in almost each of their policy recommendations. Hence, the paternalistic attitude of them, which we abundantly receive from the pages of their books, is perhaps nothing but what Said quoting Anwar Abdel Malek, calls 'the hegemonism of possessing minorities' (1978:108). If we do not hold this explanation true, the incongruence between their personal and textual images becomes enigma.

With particular reference to Rustomji, it may be stated that he seems to have attempted to give a concrete shape to the widely known orientalist belief that 'primitive societies are societies without a state', or in other words, "they are not quite true societies — they are not civilized — their existence continues to suffer the painful experience of a lack — the lack of a State — which, try as they may, they will never make up" (Clastres 1977:159).

In fine, like Elwin and Furer Haimendorf, he fits in the role of the Orientalist who 'makes it his work to be always converting the Orient from something into something else: he does this

for himself, for the sake of his culture, in some cases for what he believes is the sake of the Oriental' (Said 1978;67). Again, like the other two, Rustomji was "a hero rescuing the Orient from the obscurity, alienation, and strangeness which he himself had properly distinguished" (ibid: 121). In short, they were tireless of the "White Man's Burden".

CONCLUSION

Such an assessment may be shocking to many of us who regard(ed) them very highly and more so those who had the fortune (or misfortune) of working with these legends. No, even these legends themselves will perhaps be surprised at what has been derived here. But one who is familiar with the growing anti-Orientalist literature referred to (or not) here one would not be surprised. S/he would instead be surprised not to see such challenges coming from academicians even after over forty years of Independence.

There is nothing to be surprised if one's demigod is suddenly labelled by someone as an Orientalist. An Orientalist acts and thinks the way that s/he does often unconsciously: the actor is often not aware of what makes him/her so. Orientalism grows with generations of socialization in colonial academic, professional and bureaucratic institutions, is deeply institutionalized, and becomes a culture. That is why not only does the actor find nothing objectionable in what s/he does or thinks but even the society is seldom surprised.

REFERENCES

- Choudhury, D. P. 1978. *The North-East Frontier of India 1865-1914*. The Asiatic Society, Calcutta.
- Clastres, Pierre 1977. *Society Against the State*. Urizen Books, New York.
- Elwin, Verrier 1943. *The Aborigines*. Oxford University Press, London.
- Elwin Verrier 1959a. *A Philosophy for NEFA*. Govt. Pubs., Shillong.
- Elwin Verrier 1959b. *India's North-East Frontier in the Nineteenth Century*. Oxford University Press, Madras.
- Foucault Michel. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Ed. by Colin Gordon. Random House, New York.
- Haimendorf, C. Von Furer 1980. *A Himalayan Tribe*. Vikas, New Delhi.
- Haimendorf, C. Von Furer 1982. *Highlanders of Arunachal Pradesh*. Vikas, New Delhi.
- Inden, Ronald 1986. Orientalist reconstructions of India. *Modern Asian Studies*, 20 (3) : 401-46.
- Marx, Karl 1977. Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. Rpt. in *Selected Works*, vol. 1. Progress Pubs, Moscow.
- Rustomji, Nari K. 1971. *Enchanted Frontiers*. Oxford University Press, Delhi.
- Rustomji, Nari K. 1983. *Imperilled Frontiers*. Oxford University Press, Delhi.
- Rustomji, Nari 1988. *Verrier Elwin and India's North-Eastern Borderlands*. North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.
- Said, Edward W. 1978. *Orientalism*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Srinivas, M. N. 1990. A tribal obsession. *The Times of India*. Nov 25.

Address for correspondence : Dr. T. B. Subba, Department of Anthropology, North-Eastern Hill University, Nongthymmai, Shillong 793014.