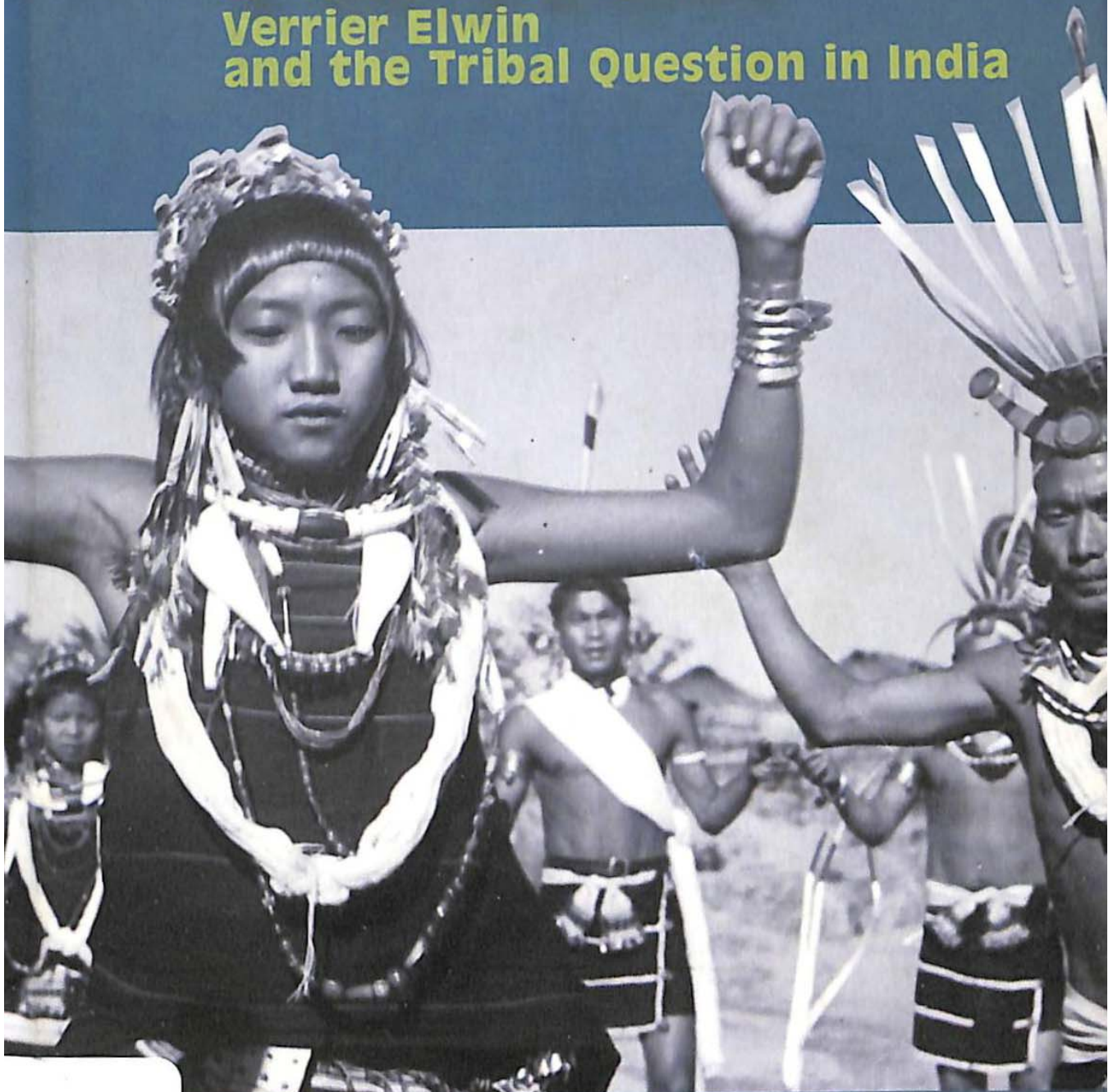


# BETWEEN ETHNOGRAPHY and FICTION

Verrier Elwin  
and the Tribal Question in India



edited by  
**T B Subba and Sujit Som**

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SUJIT SOM



**Orient Longman**

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August 2004

T.B. SUBBA AND SUJIT SOM

## CHAPTER ONE

# Introduction

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T.B. SUBBA AND SUJIT SOM

The presence of Verrier Elwin in various academic fora, writings on tribes of India, and the writings on North-East India in particular is heavy even about forty years after his death. One of the reasons why Elwin returns on the academic agenda of North-Eastern Hill University almost every year is the Elwin Endowment Lectures that the University's Department of Anthropology organises. The second is the fact that we meet members of Elwin's family almost every day in Shillong; this city is where they live. The third, and perhaps the most important, is the sustained interest of many young and old scholars and film-makers in Elwin, an interest which is increasing rather than declining. However, there are still very few scholars who are well informed of his writings and who understand him fully. Many simply write about him on the basis of what he said in one or two of his many books or articles. Some talk about him and his ideas on the basis of what they have heard about him. And in a sense, Elwin has become a myth, a kind of emblem in the world of anthropological scholarship.

Much has changed in the lives of the tribes in India since Elwin's time. While these changes—technological, educational, religious, pertaining to health and occupation—are overwhelming, still, the situation of some tribes like the Onge, Jarawa, and Shompen has remained much the same. The Government of India has made special efforts to bring the tribes at par with non-tribes, the supposedly more advanced population: these efforts have not been in vain. As a consequence, the tribes of India today present a spectrum of occupations, educational



achievement, religious pursuits, politics and political affiliations, and economic development. It is no longer easy to put them in one category, either administrative or otherwise.

Under the circumstances, some of us thought it desirable to examine the relevance of Elwin's ideas in the contemporary tribal situation in the country on the occasion of his birth centenary. The present volume is the outcome of that centenary celebration-cum-seminar. There are 16 articles here (including this Introduction) written by anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and scholars of English literature, most of them, senior scholars who have established themselves in their respective fields. Some of them corroborate Elwin's views whereas other are critical of him. But it is not whether Elwin was right or wrong that is of interest here. Rather, it is the fact that the papers in this volume seem to point to an interesting fact about Elwin's writing itself. Reading Elwin, and reading the papers presented in the volume, one comes to the conclusion that Elwin's writings are neither ethnography nor fiction, but something in between.

The book begins with an article by K.C. Baral. His main effort is to understand how an author—Elwin in this context—managed the apparently 'contradictory desires' of an ethnographer-recorder of events actually observed, and a fiction-writer who has the freedom to write about his/her dreams, imaginations, and speculations. Elwin shares this quality with other writers such as Gopinath Mohanty and Pratibha Ray. Baral draws on current literary theory to shed light on this apparant tension. The result is a highly nuanced analysis. Although generally sympathetic to Elwin, Baral does not lose sight of his failings which, for instance, he finds in *Phulmat of the Hills*.

Indra Munshi finds revisiting Elwin a rewarding experience. She finds many of Elwin's observations relevant, so many decades after his death. She argues that Independence has by and large failed to emancipate the tribes who are, more often than not, victims of development programmes. They are being displaced, their values are being degraded, and their beliefs and institutions are dying. In her admiration for Elwin, she is, however, not blind to some of the overstatements made by him.

Drawing her example from the Warlis, she writes that neither the Hindu nor the Christian missionaries have been successful in completely doing away with some aspects of their tribal culture. Munshi also points out that Elwin gave scant or no attention to issues of social inequality, particularly gender issues in tribal societies.

Ajit K. Danda makes the interesting point that Elwin received a lot of attention and importance from the government but was ignored by professional anthropologists. Elwin himself chose to stay away from the trained anthropologists, who could possibly ask him awkward questions on theory and the methodology of his works. He produced highly admirable and readable monographs on various tribes, but rarely explained how he did what he did. Not being trained as an anthropologist, he was prone to swaying with the songs and dances of the tribes, to responding emotionally and aesthetically, and often failed to see their internal dynamics. Danda also makes a critical assessment of Elwin's vision of tribal development, which he sees as 'truncated' and mired with contradictions, simplistic and top-heavy.

P.K. Misra argues that Elwin's idea of the relationship between tribes and non-tribes was Eurocentric and ignorant of certain aspects of Indian civilisation. Referring to a rich literature on the relationship between tribes and non-tribes in India, Misra argues that this extremely complex subject has been simplified by Elwin. Misra reviews intensively two of Elwin's most important publications *The Aborigines* (1943) and *A New Deal for Tribal India* (1963). In the first, according to Misra, Elwin considers the tribes and non-tribes as two separate social formations and the former are seen as 'noble savages' of an earlier stage in social evolution. In the second text, Misra points to changes in Elwin's thinking insofar as he concedes that the tribal problems cannot be studied in isolation of the non-tribal population. He pleads for a sympathetic treatment of their problems and protection of their rights over forests and lands. He even shows the consequence of the colonial policy of isolating the tribes in reducing them to 'a state of penury' in

most parts of India. He also has a word of praise for independent India for its sense of responsibility towards the tribes.

A.C. Sinha makes an interesting comparison between Elwin and Ghurye on the basis of personal background, academic approach, academic orientation, tribal policy, and vision for India. Despite a slight tilt towards the former, Sinha makes a useful contribution in this article not only by drawing our attention to the points of difference between the two but also by trying to explain why they differed.

Nandini Sundar, in the next chapter, brings another interesting debate to focus. This debate is about Elwin himself, his changing and often contradictory stands on the question of conversion, a perennially significant issue in India. Sundar chronicles the shift in his stand on conversion. She also tries to understand his extremely ambivalent attitudes towards Christianity. She particularly shows how it is important to keep in mind the particular historical contexts of Elwin's views and shows how the issue of what constitutes the religion of tribes has changed over the years. Finally, she argues that the conversion of Hindus or tribes into Christianity is neither a threat to India nor really an issue in the country today.

B.K. Roy Burman makes a subtle conceptual distinction between humanism and humanitarianism and sees Elwin as fitting the second type. He recounts the complex historical and geo-political background of the people and the region presently known as the North-East and discusses two important concepts related to land ownership and control, viz., *terra nullius* and *res nullius*, and argues how the continuation of the latter concept as a colonial legacy in India is responsible for much of tribal militancy in the region. Although critical of Elwin in general, he agrees with Elwin that any large scale influx of people from outside India or within India may cause a 'massive upsurge' in the region. This does not mean that he defends the status quo. What he argues for is not Elwin's humanitarian and paternalistic approach to tribal development but a more humanistic approach to their overall development.

Jan Brouwer argues that conversion has to be understood

within the framework of indigenous knowledge systems. Beginning with an account of conversion in the Netherlands, his home country, and in Goa, an ex-Portuguese colony in western India, he points out that for conversion to be possible at all, the idea of conversion must have sunk in the minds of those who are finally converted. Such people must feel positively about this change of religion, and this positive feeling must link with power, prestige, identity or privilege. He holds that anthropology can be of help in understanding this complex process of conversion. Finally, he raises certain key conceptual questions—which have a wider application—concerning conversion in the North-East region of India, with particular reference to the Khasi and Naga tribes.

David R. Syiemlieh makes a critical assessment of the Christian missionaries in the hills of North-East India. He shows how, due perhaps to historical coincidence, certain negative attitudes of the colonial masters rubbed off onto the missionaries as well. He also shows how one set of tribal taboos were replaced by others that were introduced by the missionaries, and how, at the instance of the latter, many tribes lost what they had treasured for ages. In this regard, he gives instances of some tribes that were more fortunate than others. However, the most important contribution of his article is perhaps when he argues that the core of tribal culture has actually not been touched and it continues to exist even today. The areas where Christian missionaries could make little or no impact are family, clan, rules of marriage, laws of inheritance, lineage and racial identity. He also notes that missionaries have by and large failed to provide an alternative set of values to the tribal values that they have displaced.

Temsula Ao deals with the concepts and classification of myths in order to prepare a perspective for understanding the Ao-Naga myths, which she has categorised into origin myths, myths about gods, and creation myths. After giving examples of each kind, she deals with the challenges the Ao-Nagas faced in the wake of the spread of Christianity. According to her, the new religion came with a completely different set of concepts about

the supernatural, that treated existing Ao beliefs as 'heathen'. Many Ao myths that had sacred and religious content died as the new religion spread. Myths make contemporary sense in a time-space continuum, and so it has been possible to revive some of these by endowing them with cultural and ethnic content.

Jayanta Sarkar's article is based on his visits to the Wancho area, in February 1976 and subsequently in June 2001. This gives his work a diachronic perspective. He focusses on the changes brought about with the spread of Christianity among the Wancho tribe. As he sees it, Christianity did not face any opposition among the Wanchos, as they had already seen their Naga neighbours being converted to this religion. With conversion however, there were large-scale changes in their dress and ornaments, hair-keeping, social hierarchy, marital rules, cultural practices such as head-hunting, practices related to the disposal of the dead, the dormitory system etc. Christianity also encouraged the spread of literacy and bilingualism. Interestingly though the villagers see education as having brought problems of unemployment, the unwillingness of the youth to do shifting cultivation work etc., and this is resented by many.

Sarit Chaudhuri writes on the contemporary tribal art of the Wanchos, in particular, on the art of wood carving, although he also touches on the art of tattooing. Wood carving was associated with their institutions and activities such as of dormitory, chieftaincy, funerary rites, head-hunting, etc. Before the advent of Christianity wood carving had an almost sacred association. However, the spread of the new religion brought about not only a disjunction between this art and the various other aspects of their culture, but also degeneration in the art itself. Yet there is a silver lining and old skills are being used to carve other kinds of sacred images, such as images of Jesus. But this is rare, and the disappearance of this art is certain unless the Wanchos make this relevant under the changed religious and socio-political situations.

A.N.M. Irshad Ali and Bapukan Choudhury deal with the problems of opium addiction in Tirap, Upper Siang, and Changlang districts, which border on Myanmar. The addiction

is found to be highest among the Wanchos, followed by the Tangsas, and the Singphos. The extent of opium addiction among the Adis is however relatively insignificant. The extent of addiction is indeed quite a disturbing development, and unless restrained, it can have far-reaching consequences on their economy and health. Opium cultivation is popular because it is a cash crop and it is used as medicine for a large number of ailments in a region where modern medical facilities are yet to reach. The authors remind us that Verrier Elwin had, many decades back foretold some of the consequences of opium cultivation in Arunachal Pradesh, and yet there was no state intervention in this matter.

Riddi, an indigenous scholar from Arunachal Pradesh writes on the performing arts of this state. Originally considered to be sacred performances, the Tagin performing arts tradition has in the last four decades or so degenerated under the influence of alien music, songs and performing arts. Riddi holds the government officials from outside, as also radio, television, and cinema to be responsible for this. He finds some hope of the performing arts surviving in the rural areas, where they are still performed, although such areas are not completely free from external influences.

The last chapter in the volume is on Manipur, which comprises a small valley inhabited mainly by the Hindu Meiteis, surrounded by the hills where numerous tribes professing the Christian faith live. In a sense, this is not only the gateway to South-East Asia but also the meeting point of the Hindu and Christian civilisations. Hence, it was one of the most appropriate places to revisit Elwin's views on the Hindu-tribal relationship in India. In his paper R.K. Saha shows how a symbiotic relationship between the Meiteis and the hill tribes changed over the years into an inimical one and how the hill tribes themselves got deeply divided due to the policies of the Manipur state, followed by the British. He also discusses how the situation has been further worsened by the spread of insurgency.

The articles included here show that there is still much to be known about Elwin. There is a need to critique him by scholars

who know the ground situation very well. It further appears from the writings included here that Elwin has been written off without giving him a fair chance to have his say, and without seriously considering and debating his ideas. Such a debate actually never took off, neither during his lifetime nor after his death. What was written either eulogised him or was acrimoniously critical of him as a person and as a writer. Elwin invited strong opinions; those who knew him either liked or hated him. Hardly anyone sought to understand him. If this book stirs such a debate that would be the most gratifying experience for all those involved in its production.

The tribal question in India obviously does not begin or end with Elwin. It is both broader and more complex than what Elwin had been able to experience, write about and advocate. But the efforts made so far by anthropologists and administrators alike have tended to iron out all naunce from our understanding of this category of people called tribes. It is hoped that this book might lead to more discussion, debate, a greater understanding and, ultimately, suggest comprehensive, culture-friendly, and environment-friendly measures for tribal development. The category 'tribe' is neither fixed nor static. We need to be more holistic in our story of tribes—the answer lies in holism, and not in compartmentalisation. Further, we need to emphasise that development should be people-centric rather than programme-centric.

This volume also reveals that the tribes in India are yet to define their agenda, which is fixed by persons who do not yet belong to the category called 'Scheduled Tribes'. A creamy layer has been formed in tribal society but this layer is still too thin to withstand the strong winds of discourse or advocacy. A vast majority of tribals still enjoy being patronised, paternalised, and represented as the pure, the unadulterated, those close to nature, etc. In this regard, the most important tribal question is not when they will be able to represent themselves, or understand the politics of patronisation or paternalisation, but how they will relate with the dominant Other.

## Ethnography and Fiction: Verrier Elwin's World

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K.C. BARAL

Words and things produce each other and bring the events of a narrative into a discursive formation. What is important for any reading regime is to recognise the discursive nature of a text. 'Discursive practices', Foucault maintains, 'are characterised by the delimitation of a field of objects, the definition of a legitimate perspective for the agent of knowledge, and the fixing of the norms for the elaboration of concepts and theories' (Foucault 1977: 199). Driven by diverse theoretical speculations, critical analysis of a text today is foregrounded in an understanding that meaning(s) is chimerical, a context-bound product in a domain of relativised truths and multiple contexts. Such a critical position however cannot deny the fact that a text is primarily a 'result of some immediate contact between author and medium' (Said 1991: 33). Said underlines the fact that 'texts have ways of existing that even in their most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, and society—in short, they are in the world, and hence worldly' (ibid: 35). What follows from this is that a text's discursive journey is neither a purely linguistic nor a purely material phenomenon. Narrative problems however arise when the same author produces works in different modes using the same material—for example, ethnography and fiction. In fact these narratives foreground two different modes: one scientific and empirical and the other fictional and imaginative. Any reading strategy that is adopted for the analysis of these texts obviously recognises the



genre identity and also functions within a network, 'not just of other texts, but of institutional and disciplinary boundaries' (Colebrook 1977: 45). In spite of these theoretical speculations on the authorial presence/absence, as readers we do take note of some 'presences' and one of those presences is the author's, the one who authorises the narrative. Narrative authority coordinates voices—Who is speaking? Why? And for/to whom?—in a text, where some voices are privileged over others. As the teleological perspective in fictional narratives and ethnographic accounts is different, the narrative formation runs the risk of blurring authorial identity where an ethnographer writes fiction or a novelist attempts to offer an ethnographic account. For example, how does one organise reading relations in *Phulmat of the Hills*, a fiction by Verrier Elwin, an ethnographer, or works such as *Paraja*, a novel by Gopinath Mohanty on the Paraja tribe of Orissa, or *The Primal Land*, a novel by Pratibha Ray (the original Oriya title is *Adi Bhumi*) about the Bondo tribe of Orissa, or Mahasweta Devi's many works on the tribes of central India? It appears that the ethnographer and the novelist are driven by contradictory desires. On the one hand the ethnographer seeks refuge in fictional narratives to give expression to facts that could not be included in the ethnographic report under the constraints of objectivity and scientific rigour. The novelist, on the other hand, attempts to be an authentic narrator, a realist, a pseudo-ethnographer, taking the mantle of a fieldworker-theorist (both Mohanty and Ray lived and worked among the tribes they have fictionalised). In the dispersed and deferred significations of these texts, what is important, to me, is the problem of organising the narrative using the same material in two different modes/forms.

The career of Verrier Elwin—an Oxford-educated clergyman, who became an anthropologist, lived among the people he was studying, married tribal women and became an Indian citizen—is fascinating. He combined many professions and passions. Ramachandra Guha in his biography of Elwin, *Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India*, alludes to Annie Besant's life (another remarkable Britisher who made India her

home) that in a limited context bears on Elwin's. Guha refers to a study published in 1961 by an American scholar on Besant, curiously titled *The Nine Lives of Annie Besant* where he implies that Elwin had more than nine lives:

In 1961 an American scholar published a study titled *The Nine Lives of Annie Besant*, comprising two-500 page volumes titled, respectively, *The First Five Lives* and *The Next Four Lives*. At about the same time Elwin was writing his autobiography. When he asked his publisher to suggest a title, the man came up with twenty-five alternatives. How can one adequately illustrate, in four or five words, a life so varied? 'From Merton to Nongthymai' would mark only the place he came from and the place he ended up in; 'Khadi, Cassock, and Gown' mechanically matched dress to vocation; 'Into the Forests, Over the Hills' said something of the terrain he went through on the way but nothing of what he did therein; 'Anthropologist at Large' and 'Philanthropologist' only indicated his last professional affiliation (and might invite unwelcome jokes about the 'Philanthropologist!'); 'No Tribal Myth' and 'My Passage to Tribal India' focused only on the people with whom he had made his home.

Verrier Elwin was as eccentric as Annie Besant, as inclined to rebel, as willing to throw up one career and campaign for another. He was also a better writer and, in the circumstances of his life, luckier. Besant, who came to Madras in 1893 and died there in 1932, knew only one kind of India; but Elwin, who came to India in 1927 and stayed on till his death in 1964, knew both the India of the Raj and the India of the Congress, and made notable contributions to both. We are fortunate, too, that the richness of experience is equalled by the richness of the oeuvre. For Elwin was a novelist, pamphleteer, poet, anthropologist and autobiographer, an author in many genres of works that were influential in their day and are not unread in ours (Guha 2000: ix-x).

Elwin's life, unlike Besant's, is difficult to categorise because professions or jobs he adopted/undertook intermingle; the

passion of one profession unconsciously impinges upon the other. The twenty-five titles for Elwin's autobiography suggested by the publisher were perhaps inadequate to describe a life so varied and variegated. Nevertheless, the title *The Tribal World*, chosen for his autobiography, justified to a great extent his life's manifest predicaments and concerns.

## II

While Barthes' theorisation of a 'work' as a 'text' underlines a larger redefinition of literary writing, Derrida's understanding of 'writing' explodes the myth of the stable text. Bakhtin further complicates our understanding of literary writing, fiction in particular, that it is not only polyphonic but also *unfinalisable*. The complexity of these theories illuminates the world of a text with insights across disciplines in the temporality of presences, absences and fixity of inherited assumptions that problematise coherence and understanding. Said, following Derrida, argues that a critical text stands alongside the original, appearing to account for everything in it (1991: 192). Although it is clear from this example that duplication and elaboration take place, it is difficult to draw such a parallel between ethnography and fiction. Nevertheless, some measure of doubling or intermingling between the two cannot be denied, as life and art not only imitate but also produce each other. As Said maintains:

Before I give examples of Derrida's revisionary disruption of critical duplication and containment, I should like to note one important thing in his choice of texts. Most are texts in which there is very little narrative, or texts that use narrative so as to illustrate or represent a point. And this choice of texts is similar in the work of Derrida's disciples and critical allies. In fact, illustrative narrative—for instance, as it is used by Plato or Rousseau or Levi-Strauss—is precisely what (in the case of Levi-Strauss) draws Derrida's suspicious attention to the author's elisions and complicities, or in its ambiguity (Rousseau's narrative of language bursting forth as a

supplement to the passion of primitive man) to what the author tries to tell and obscure at the same time (Said 1991: 192–93).

Although Derrida considers writing as a succession, his understanding of an author's elisions and complicities in the context of illustrative narratives is important, for 'the return to the book does not enclose us within the book' (1978: 294–95). Considered as illustrative narratives, ethnographies either as interpretations or explanations of native cultures are complicit in the fictions created by the observer-participant/interpreter in spite of the claim of objectivity and scientific sanction of 'the method. This understanding further complicates the issue whether we accept ethnographic writing as 'explanation' or 'description'. In this context, Clifford Geertz maintains:

...anthropological writings are themselves interpretations, and second and third order ones to boot. (By definition, only a 'native' makes first order ones: it's his culture.) They are, thus, fictions; fictions in the sense that they are 'something made', 'something fashioned'—the original meaning of fiction—not that they are false, unfactual, or merely 'as if thought experiments' (Geertz 1973: 15 quoted in Colebrook 1997: 75).

For Geertz, anthropological writings (ethnographies) are made-out fictions based on facts. If fictionalisation becomes general practice rather than exception, there is absolutely no difference between ethnography and fiction, except that in the former case, it may be considered as 'thought experiments', tying happenings to some believable explanations, and in the latter, allowing free flow of imagination without any logical explanation. If the author is the same in the case of both genres, the ambiguity of the one willy-nilly affects the ambiguity of the other.

It is obvious that ethnographic writing, 'enacts a specific strategy of authority' (Clifford 1996: 25) that claims to be the purveyor of truth in the text. In explaining the historical

development of narrative authority in ethnographic writing, Clifford maintains that the nineteenth century ethnographers' status as 'men on the spot' was different from the works of travellers, missionaries and colonial administrators. These latter lived with the natives and had fair competence in the native languages. The 'men on the spot', therefore, had the authority to validate their claims but as witnesses not as interpreters. A trained fieldworker, on the other hand, whose authority was scientifically validated, brought into the study a 'unique personal experience'. In the early part of the twentieth century, Bronislaw Malinowski further strengthened this position advocating his 'functional theory', crediting the fieldworker with superior status over other writers on the natives. The natural scientists, who, guided by Boas, had engaged in the empirical study of anthropology were known as the 'intermediate generation' which was now replaced by the participant-observer. For Malinowski experience is a vital tool:

[the anthropologist] evokes a participatory presence, a sensitive contact with the world to be understood, a rapport with its people, a concreteness of perception...an ethnographer's real but ineffable feel or flair for 'his' or 'her' people. It is worth noting, however, that this 'world', when conceived as an experiential creation, is subjective, not dialogical or intersubjective (Clifford 1996: 37).

In recent years, ethnographic narratives guided by developments in critical theory have followed the discursive model and have privileged intersubjectivity and immediate performative contexts of narrative. These developments, in spite of the critical debate, underline two important aspects of ethnographic narrative. First that it is enmeshed in writing translated or textualised, that validates personal experience as the most important factor over the claims of scientificity. Second, that the narrative authority historically and contextually has been always already displaced. This understanding takes us to the third position that is reflexive upon the ethnographer's/novelist's discrete desire to be the other.

In an interesting comparison between Malinowski and Conrad, Clifford (1996: 96) refers to Malinowski's remark: '[W.H.R.] Rivers is the Rider Haggard of Anthropology: I shall be the Conrad!' He probably had in mind the difference between Rivers' multicultural survey methodology (collecting traits and genealogies) and his own intensive study of a single group. For Malinowski, the name Conrad was a symbol of depth, complexity, and subtlety. In a detailed comparative analysis of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Malinowski's *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (1967) and *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), Clifford has shown that Malinowski's inspiration had all along been Conrad. In fact, the two Poles, who made England their home and followed different careers, had both been moved by the desire to consolidate their writing in an alien language.

This example is directly relevant to the life and works of Verrier Elwin. Although he had neither the model of a novelist before him, nor did he write in an alien language, Elwin had always wanted to be a poet and a novelist. The other facts of his life however bear on the lives of Conrad and Malinowski. He left his home in England, came to India, became an ethnographer of Indian tribal life, (although not trained in the profession) and, finally, became an Indian citizen. He lived among the tribes of India as one of them and became a Gandhian. As a model, Gandhi to him was more than Conrad was to Malinowski, a model who taught him how to live creatively, not excluding the other but living through and with the other. Thus experiential and intuitive lives merged to give new meaning to his works, while giving birth to a subjectivity that arose out of the realisation of coexistence in a shared world, moving in/through an intersubjective space, attempting to textualise/fictionalise experience. This understanding may be extended to the Malinowski-Elwin encounter. The encounter is both amusing and interesting: it is not clear what prompted Elwin to tell Malinowski, after listening to his lecture in a seminar in London, that one of his (Elwin's) pet monkeys having, quite literally, an appetite for literature, ate a copy of his

(Malinowski's) *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*, and went mad thereafter.

As expected the story did not receive any response from the great man, which forced Elwin to leave the place rather hurriedly. This incident may look trivial but it raises questions that remain unanswered. Was the tale intended to disapprove of Malinowski's work or his method? What was the implication of the story in the context of anthropological reporting? In spite of the questions and the levity of the story, a working formulation emerges that ethnographic narratives are not simply objective and impersonal descriptions, they also include both the strange and the true, validating personal experience over methodological sanctity. This formulation complicates and contradicts Elwin's own ethnographic study of the Baiga, where he follows Malinowski's method to a great extent.

Ramachandra Guha in a comparison maintains:

Where Malinowski's work had given Elwin scientific sanction and a honourable precedent, the Pole was a dry-as-dust technician analysing the sexual consciousness in terms of incest taboos and mother-right, the totemic organisation of clans and the economy of wife-exchange. In his books the discussion of sex is generalised rather than particular, with individuals subsumed for the most part in the grid of social structure. In contrast Elwin's account is animated and vigorous, illuminating through character and example what was for the tribe, as for him, 'the most important and enthralling thing in life' (2000: 113).

This is in fact the beginning of a narrative practice in which ethnographic narrative follows the intersubjective and intertextual trajectory turning the raw data into a discursive representation. If Malinowski, a trained anthropologist aspired to be a creative writer like Conrad, Elwin interestingly trained neither in creative writing nor in ethnography, was always moved with the aspiration to be a creative writer. What shaped Elwin as a writer are the many influences he received. In his autobiography, he writes:

When I think of the things that have influenced me and moulded my life, I put poverty first. Music, Western orchestral music, especially the works of Mozart and Beethoven or, in another mood, Stravinsky, has spoken to me, but not enough: my way of life has not allowed me to see a great deal of painting and sculpture in original.... And so the poets have been my teachers: they have taught me to explore the secret places of my own heart; they have opened a window through which I can see my tribes with clearer eyes....

...There have always been two sides to me—one side, the world-renouncing, was captivated by Gandhi, but the other side of world-affirmation I found in Tagore. His belief in beauty, rhythm and colour, the fact that so many people in India seemed to be afraid of love and that he was not, awoke an enthusiastic response in my heart. 'He who wants to do good knocks at the gate; he who loves finds the gate open.' Everything about Tagore was positive, affirmative. He made life itself a work of art. He was interested in the tribal Santals and inspired by them. Indeed I have often felt that the tribal areas should be administered and their policies directed by poets and artists (1998: 339–41).

Indeed poetry was Elwin's first love, for elsewhere in his autobiography he writes: 'I came to anthropology through poetry.' To him a student of 'man' (the discipline of anthropology by implication) has to look for meaning beneath the surface (in a sense implying Geertz's 'thick descriptions' of culture), and has to 'dig' people. 'Poetry', for him, 'is the greater revealer, the unveiler; by heightening a man's own sensitivity, by opening to him the treasures of his imagination, it increases his powers of sympathy and understanding' (ibid: 143). He further adds:

It [poetry] has brought me 'in hours of weariness sensations sweet'; comforted and restored in me in stormy weather; filled times of loneliness and illuminated all that has been dull and dark. Like Keats, I cannot exist without Eternal Poetry to fill the day (ibid: 143).



Besides poetry, his studies of works by Jane Austen and Swift, along with his training in theology shaped his interest in man. As he maintains:

I have read a great deal of anthropology in the last thirty years. But unlike the professional anthropologists of today I did not begin with it. My interest in human beings began with literature and my first teachers were Jane Austen and Swift. What a wealth of sociological information and analysis can be found in *Pride and Prejudice* or *Gulliver's Travels*! And later, curiously enough my studies in theology developed my interest in Man. The science of God led me to the science of human beings. I read a little history, philosophy and psychology: they too prepared the way (Rustomji 1989: 19).

These statements clearly show the disjuncture between inspiration and accomplishment. Although Elwin wrote poems, his poems did not receive the critical acclaim of his ethnographies. The conflict between, what he desired and what he actually did, could not be resolved into accomplishment in two different fields, as it happened, for example, in case of John Donne, who moved from theology to poetry and received recognition in both. The question thus arises, how does one explain the status of narrative authority in the writings of a person who is an ethnographer, a novelist and a poet rolled into one?

If Elwin came to ethnography, as claimed by him, through poetry, how did he come to fiction? Was it through ethnography? If so, did he make any distinction between ethnography and fiction? The sociological aspects of the works of Austen and Dickens, as stated by him, held some fascination for him. But it remained a fascination only, for it could not be converted into a deeper articulation, as a reading of *Phulmat of the Hills* would show. Among his fictional works only two are considered important: *Phulmat of the Hills*, a love-story of a Pradhan girl and *A Cloud that's Dragonish*, a tribal crime-story in which the detectives are Gonds and Baigas.

### III

According to Henry James, 'The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does represent life.' Elwin in his fictions has not only represented human life, but has also created it. James further adds that fiction arises from the 'intensity of the impressions' (quoted in Raman Selden 1992: 503) in that fictional narrative is close to painting, as different shades and colours merge into a totality of effect. 'In a circular letter announcing the publication of *Phulmat*, Verrier warned his friends that they might find the book "coarse and realistic"' (Guha 2000: 112). This confession in spite of his other defences such as it is difficult to describe a primitive village as though it were a 'Brompton drawing room' and the Gonds and the Baigas, 'are more or less absorbed in two things—food and sex' (ibid: 112), implying that their situation cannot be redeemed, shows that Elwin, as a novelist is far from James's concept of 'intensity of the impressions'. Further, by stating that 'their (Gonds and Baigas) conversation is like the prose parts of Shakespeare' and 'that *Phulmat of the Hills* is not pornographic, but simply photographic' (Guha 2000: 112), Elwin has complicated his position as a novelist. If the conversations of the tribes, Elwin represented, are like the 'prose parts of Shakespeare' (not only in utterances, but also in syntactical formation), their linguistic ability then is highly developed! Sex and food are two important aspects of daily life. These two factors cannot be downplayed as obsessions, when considered from a host of other aspects such as economics of desire, psychology of characters, sociological implications of marriage and also value of love in a permissive society. In examining Elwin's statements in the context of *Phulmat*, it may be surmised that Elwin somewhere missed the intensity of Lawrence's claim that the novel is 'the burning bush', the 'book of life' (quoted in Sheldon 1992: 507).

Elwin has offered a detailed physical description of the village and the characters in a simple plot that lacks the painter's touch. He rationalises the tribal world with its witches, spirits and black magic. In representing tribal practices, Elwin has

conducted himself as an ethnographer yet, at the back of his mind is the understanding that he is representing a 'primitive society'. To sustain the narrative, he has used some of the myths of the Gonds already documented in his work *Myths of Middle India*.

The above discussion underlines the conflict between an ethnographer's mission and a creative writer's vision. This cleavage substantiates the fact that Elwin has mixed up the roles of objective reporter and creative writer. Yet, in spite of his claims, his *Phulmat* is an ethnographic account in the guise of a novel.

The narrative of *Phulmat* starts *in medias res*. The opening of the novel with the snake dance is fascinating, an innovation over ethnographic reporting. The narrative familiarises a reader with a detailed physical description of the locale, mixing the present with the mythical past. This style of narrative-beginning comes close to Raja Rao's description in *Kathapura*, which starts as follows:

Our village—I don't think you have ever heard about it—Kanthapura is its name, and it is in the province of Kara.

High on the Ghats is it, high up the steep mountains that face the cool Arabian seas, up the Malabar coast is it, up Mangalore and Puttur and many a centre of cardamom and coffee, rice and sugarcane. Roads, narrow, dusty, rut-covered roads, wind through the forests of teak and of jack, of sandal and sal, and hanging over bellowing gores and leaping over elephant-hunted valleys, they turn now to the left and now to the right and bring you through the Alambe and Champa and Mena and Kola passes into the great granaries of trade. There, on the blue waters, they say, our carted cardamoms and coffee get into the ships the Red-men bring, and so they say, they go across the seven oceans into the countries where our rulers live....

...Kenchamma is our goddess. Great and bounteous is she. She killed a demon ages, ages ago, a demon that had come to ask our young sons as food and our young women as wives.

Kenchamma came from the Heavens—it was the sage Tripura who had made penances to bring her down—and she waged such a battle and she fought so many a night that the blood soaked and soaked into the earth, and that is why the Kenchamma Hill is all red (Rao 1980: 1, 2).

*Phulmat of the Hills* begins with almost similar details:

This village, Mulmula, stands high in the Maikal Range that runs a hundred miles from the Saletkri Hills to sacred Amarkantak, all its sprawling rocky limbs covered with forest. Here Maikala Rishi suffered the pains and joys of penance; here Vyasa, Agastya and Brighu sought the truth of things in their own depths and in the vast loneliness of trees. Here rises Narbada, which one day is to surpass all other streams in sanctity, and flows westward to the sea; and here springs the golden-armed Sone which runs five hundred miles to Ganges. It was to these evergreen forests of towering sal that the Gonds retired before the fierce onslaught of the Moghuls and the more subtle corruptions of civilisation. Here live witches and every kind of ghost; the tiger and the bear move freely in sheltered, half-forgotten glades; wild and naked tribesmen eke out a scanty living with roots and berries. But no one can forget the Maikal Hills; they are full of a holy magic that enchants with love and beauty. Their children cannot forsake these hills; however far away they wander they desire to return to them before they die (Elwin 1937: 12).

Only in the opening section, does Elwin's narrative match Rao's. After a few pages, in spite of patches of intense and flowing descriptions, it becomes bland and mechanical. Incidentally, both the works were published a year apart of each other, *Phulmat* in 1937 by Murray, and *Kanthapura* in 1938 by George Allen and Unwin. Achaka is the participant-narrator who narrates Rao's tale, Elwin's narrative alternates between the third and the first person-narrators. Such a technique that is both impersonal and subjective combines the ethnographer and the novelist. Further, Elwin offers detailed family genealogies at the

beginning of the novel along with information regarding various institutions and customs, in particular, of mating and marriage that cannot be attributed to a novelist's practice but to the cut and paste method of an ethnographer.

The book mixes fictional narrative with sumptuous ethnographic data that includes the totem identity of characters, black magic, the power of the witch doctors and other information about the tribe. The totemic identity of a character informs his strength, for example Bhuta, who belongs to the snake totem, is swift like a snake and is capable of killing Ghamira, who belongs to the tortoise totem. The Gunias (witch doctors), who fill the narrative with their awe-inspiring tales of mythologies and practices of black magic, evoke dread among the people and add colour to the book. Gond society is structured around hierarchies of different types, and shifts in power relations cause inter-tribal and clan conflicts. The description of the dormitories, as social institutions loses importance in the novel, for its description and function appear to be taken from a work of ethnography. Besides, the treatment of emotions of different characters in different situations is not focused.

The novel is not only about 'food and sex', it also highlights the theme of love. Phulmat's character stands out in a world of confusion, sickness, disease and poverty. She would not have enjoyed so much of narrative space in any ethnographic description as she enjoys in the novel. Besides being a great lover who saves her husband's life from Bhuta's snake, as a traditional wife she also swallows the insult of her husband's open infidelity. Phulmat is kind to those who are vulnerable like Tutta. After she contracts leprosy, her husband who lives with Adri without sparing a thought for her drives her out, yet she does not seek revenge. A victim of patriarchal domination, Elwin has presented her as an empathetic character.

The theme of love does not reach any level of intensity, and it appears that the characters are passive and accept their fate without qualms. The story of Ghamira, Phulmat and Bhuta ends as Bhuta's attempts to kill Ghamira fail. Similarly, the Ghamira-

Phulmat-Adri story comes to an end with Phulmat leaving Ghamira's house and taking the open road to nowhere. The rest of the story tells us what happens to Phulmat, as different men prey upon her in her search for food and shelter. In the meantime, Ghamira rises in wealth and prosperity. He enjoys a good life with Adri for some time, then she deserts him for an Ahir man. Ghamira finally decides to get Phulmat back, but then rejects her, when he discovers that she is disfigured by leprosy. The ugly, spastic Tutta discovers her and wants to keep her, but before that happens he dies because of the insinuation of Peterson, the British Engineer and Nilakantha, the contractor. Throughout her miserable life, Phulmat's love towards Ghamira remains steadfast. Although there is suffering and death, the novel lacks tragic intensity. Most of the characters remain lifeless illustrations like photographs in an ethnographic work. The novelist fails to penetrate the complexity of human nature, and offers only a surface account. Occasional reflections by Phulmat on life and circumstances make her appear a strong character in comparison to others:

'Why not?' she said casually; her thoughts were far away, in Mulmula, chasing Ghamira with rage and love and hatred. Sleep with Tutta? Why not? They were both of one fate, ruined and outcast, hideous and despised. Yes, certainly, she would give him a little happiness. 'Why not?' she repeated, smiling at him (Elwin 1937: 235).

It is Tutta, who proves to be a sincere friend and lover who sacrifices his life to save Phulmat's. In trying to strengthen the narrative and rescue the tribal world from sickness, disease and many betrayals, Elwin inserts some philosophical thoughts that are incidental to the main narrative.

The reflections on Hindu philosophy may be a little too much for Phulmat, who hardly understands its intricate formulation. The inclusion of a *sadhu* towards the end of the novel might have been for the satisfaction of the novelist, as his reflections have no bearing on the lives of the characters. The following

passage is no doubt powerful and provides some measure of consolation to take life in one's stride.

'You are to live in your body as a guest lives in the house of his friend. Be courteous to it, for long you are to remain there. But the body is no more than the tree by the wayside under whose shade we rest.'

'And if the body grows unruly?' asked the boy sadhu shyly.

'Slay it; trample on it.' The old ascetic seemed to grow in stature as he spoke. 'Would you sleep on the coils of a serpent? Would you lodge in a tiger's cave? Slay first the tiger and the cave is yours. You can do nothing for the world till the snake is dead. An impure man who tries to help the world is like a corpse adorned with fair jewels—or a donkey bathing in the holy Ganges' (Elwin 1937: 287–88).

These and other reflections uneasily hinge on the main narrative, as they do not grow from the characters' realisation of life. What has made the narrative fall short of an intense fictional work is the unconscious intervention of the ethnographer. The work remains what Elwin has said—'coarse and realistic'. The interventions however raise serious questions regarding the authorial intention: is it an attempt to detribalise the tribes, or to integrate them into a culture that they hardly understand? Is it meant for the readers of a larger community? If this is so, then there is a real conflict between the ethnographer who wants to preserve the tribal world and the novelist who, according to his own understanding of life, wants to transcend that world.

Beyond this contradiction one may look at creative writing as a means of self-quest. We listen to others' stories and take part in their lives because the other is always present within us. It is in this sense that both the ethnographer and the novelist are moved by the desire of self-discovery through the other. We as so-called civilised people always try to discover the primitive man within us. As Levi-Strauss maintains:

the savage mind is a repository of a particularly powerful imaginative faculty that has all but disappeared from its

civilised counterpart under the impact of modernisation (quoted in Rath, *Diogenes*, 184: 76).

Following Levi-Strauss, one may assert that both the ethnographer and the novelist are complicit in the fictionalisation of not only the conflicts and paradoxes of their profession, but also of life.

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