

## CHAPTER 3

### VERRIER ELWIN: 'BETWEEN TWO WORLDS'

*This is the story of one who for many years has lived between the two worlds of Britain and India... Europe is deep in my bones, but India has gone even more deeply now, as I came to realize when I set out to write this book, for much of it is written from the Indian point of view and most of its characters are Indians (Elwin *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin* vii-viii).*

#### *Of Titles and Entitlement*

Iconoclast and institution-builder, a missionary whose sense of mission changed from the orthodox Christianity of his inherited faith to its exact opposite in romanticized tribal worship, a self-made anthropologist who defied the established rules of the game and made bitter enemies, even as he did pioneering work that still holds relevance, Verrier Elwin offers a series of paradoxes, not least as one or other of his many lives tends to stay in public memory, often fed by hearsay and sometimes openly bigoted information, and with little encounter with his actual work. An Englishman who made the forests of India his home, he settled into governmental work and official position in postcolonial India, as the first foreigner to become an Indian citizen in 1954, the culmination of a process begun 25 years earlier, and one that he described as “the fruit of an intense desire for identification” (*Tribal World* 325).

Ten years later, he published *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin: An Autobiography*, towards the end of his variegated and eventful life. The title indicates a desire to project a life where the personal was subsumed in the larger affiliations that had been sought and negotiated in that life. Elwin the individual, his personal growth, dilemmas, his many challenges have to be excavated from this overwhelmingly public narrative that foregrounds the tribal world that he came to identify himself with. Apart from his childhood and early years at Oxford, the personal focus is blurred, with some rather large gaps in the narrative. However, while

this rather obvious conflation of his unusual vocation with his person underlies the choice of title, reading carefully in the archive and into his life and indeed into the autobiography suggests that the life, though transformed by the tribal encounter, retained traces of the older self, of an Oxford product with a literary sensibility honed on Keats, Wordsworth as well as Addison, Johnson and Chesterton, and a Romanticism that owed its origin as much to his readings in literature as to the wide-eyed response of a protected, somewhat priggish English youth, to a way of life very distant from his origins.

In the 'Preface' to his autobiography, Elwin addresses this first and fundamental paradox of location: that of the Westerner making the East his home. In its neat encapsulation of the major shifts in his life, and in its attempt to render it neater still, the first paragraph bears quotation:

This is the story of one who for many years has lived between the two worlds of Britain and India and who has in his own experience, if it is not too pompous to say so, found that 'East and West are but alternate beats of the same heart'. My journey from a deeply religious evangelical home to modernist and catholic Oxford and then through Gandhi's settlement at Sabarmati to the tribal hills of India involved many changes in my outlook and way of life. I was ordained an Anglican priest at Oxford and had almost settled down to the life of a don there, when India caught my imagination and transported me to another hemisphere. After some years of struggle, I left the Church, though I have never turned from the life of scholarship. My contact with Gandhi wedded me to India and I am today an Indian citizen. Although I loved, and still love, great and ancient cities, I have lived, by choice, in remote and primitive villages. I have married into tribal society and found felicity there. In India I have found sorrow and joy, disappointment and fulfillment but above all reality, an answer to the prayer: 'From the unreal, lead me to the real' (*Tribal World* vii).

The passage, much like the life, is structured upon binaries: 'East' and 'West', real and un real, sorrow and joy, disappointment and fulfillment, cities and villages.

Even as they are evoked, however, some of these binaries are also sought to be dissolved. Seeing East and West as “alternate beats of the same heart” seems to evoke the classic orientalist binary, but undoes it in the language of a romantic humanism. This strain of romanticism is evident in his evocation of the ‘imagination’ as the faculty that was the decisive factor determining his decision to relocate to India. When he uses the word ‘transported’ to describe his arrival in another ‘hemisphere’(another binary division that carries an underlying sense of organic wholeness, the sphere), we are urged, by his lyrical tone, to look beyond the simple connotations of that word as a physical act of bodily transfer to another location. Reading the autobiography, with its deployment of the vocabulary and values of Wordsworthian romanticism, one encounters an Elwin who combines an understated British wit, pragmatic considerations, and a trace of ironic self-referentiality with a more excitable sensibility visible in passages indicating ‘transports’ of delight at the unexpected beauty of the other, tribal world to which he paradoxically lays claim even as he acknowledges its difference.

This claim is embedded in the title *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin*. The preposition ‘of’ is ambivalent. The tribal world rendered here could be seen as the perspectively limited world that *Elwin* encountered and worked with ( keeping alive the possibility that there might be *other* tribal worlds experienced and rendered by others into English, or perhaps into other languages by the tribals themselves) or the gesture could be one of *ownership*, indicating possessiveness and even colonial discursive power, that comes from having laid claim to an uncharted terrain which is being made available to the Western reader (the autobiography is in English and assumes a Western/ Western-educated reader) for the first time. Further, Elwin could be seen to subsume and subordinate his identity in the larger reality of the tribal world, or as incorporating that world into an enlargement of his identity. The former would be an act of abnegation and surrender of identity, the latter, of aggrandizement. Each, in its own way, could be seen to rehearse familiar tropes of Western encounters with the East: either as a space where a truer, more mystifyingly elemental reality could be discovered into which the seeking Western self could merge in an act of self-forgetting, or as the exotic uncharted domain awaiting discovery by the intrepid

Western explorer, in a rehearsal of an imperial paradigm of discursive and often geographical power that has been well-theorized in colonial discourse analysis in terms of the interlinked dynamics of adventure, travel, exploration and mapping.

The fact that Elwin came to India in 1927, at a moment that saw the intensification of the anti-colonial struggle, and that his life and work intersected directly with that struggle, and its post-colonial legacy, makes the colonial dynamic come alive with a sense of directness and urgency. In 1928, he met Gandhi, whose liberal and inclusive ashram space could not only accommodate but welcomed Englishmen and women of an anti-colonial persuasion like Madeleine Slade (Mira Behn), and C.F. Andrews. After four years of association, he parted ways from Gandhi on many issues, *excluding* that of India's right to be independent of British rule, and he set about charting his own terrain, his commitment to India strong enough to win him an Indian citizenship and to prompt the first Prime Minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, to appoint him Advisor on Tribal Affairs for the North Eastern Frontier Agency. The mature years of his life were spent as an institution-builder, a friend and advisor to Nehru on matters of tribal policy in debates that were central to India's emergent modernity as a newly independent nation that faced a baffling array of identities and ethnicities. This insider/outsider, far from disappearing into the forests of oblivion or of consolidating academic gain as an ethnographer, thus lived amongst the tribals, and died in Shillong, a quiet town in what is today one of the most unquiet parts of India. Having left a mark on the way the future of the region took shape, his own footprints, however, are somewhat faint in the land he felt entitled to.

Elwin's life and career resonate centrally with the concerns of the larger thesis: nation and vocation and its relation to the circumstances and choices that result in relocation. Born an Englishman, he traveled East, to India, partly to give back to a land that had given much to his family. However, the extraordinary directions his life took go beyond the expected trajectory of missionary self-sacrifice, or even of the romantic Westerner 'gone native'. While these narratives inform his life and quest, reading his life as told in his autobiography and reading in its interstices as contained in his other writings, published and unpublished, one encounters a self-fashioning that

resists facile categorization. As a policy-maker he has been largely neglected after Nehru, alternately blamed for the tribal mess in the North-East and lionized by a few. Indian anthropologists like Ghurye wrote bitterly of him in print and even contemporary sociologists seem to harbour a combination of disdain mixed with astounding ignorance of his work. Recent engagements with his legacy have ranged from one extreme to the other, often focusing on a phase or an aspect narrowly, to the exclusion of crucial facts and aspects that challenge partisan formulations.

### ***The Autobiography: the invisible self***

The problematics of public individuals and the genre of autobiography find various articulations in the context of this project. Issues of cultural barriers (Indians are reluctant to speak of the self in public) get compounded when the individuals concerned are Mahatmas with great responsibility towards public perceptions of their life. M.K. Gandhi negotiated with these in his own way, electing a selective mode of self-representation that aimed at presenting his life as a series of encounters (experiments is a questionable translation of ‘prayog’) with ‘Truth’. His life was offered as an exemplum, his notable candor regarding his failings and weaknesses woven into a morality fable of personal growth and evolution, his unrelenting and uncharacteristic honesty, elevating him above the common. At the same time, it brought his life closer to those of his readers, humanizing him, and undoing some of the alienating effects of the label ‘Mahatma’. The purpose, in either case, was instructive, the focus on the self so taut that when he plunged into full-scale political activity, the autobiographical narrative simply stopped.

Elwin’s autobiography comes out of impulses that mirror Gandhi’s in that something other than the self (Truth in Gandhi, the tribals in Elwin) takes centre stage. The sense of self is defined in terms of these larger entities, the active subject (the ‘experimenter’, and the inhabitant of the radically other ‘world’ in each of the cases) defined in terms of something outside that animates and gives meaning to it. However, while for Gandhi, an abstract, transhistorical, perennial ‘Truth’ dominates the narrative of the active ‘my’, Elwin chooses an altogether worldlier set of associations in his title. His book, as most of his oeuvre, is a celebration of the colour

and joy that that world embodied and conveyed to him, a tribute to its living reality, and, in parts, a concerned and tragic paean for its imminent disappearance. While for Gandhi ‘Truth’ can never die, though it has to be tested in real life on a daily basis, Elwin’s ‘tribal world’ is all too close to its historical demise, dying a daily death even as he wrote, a vulnerable treasure to be cherished, protected and mourned. The tone of the two books varies, in consequence; Gandhi observes himself, watchfully and honestly, presenting the bare bones of each of his experiments; Elwin describes in narrative and lyrical detail the astounding newness and variety of the *outer* world which challenged and shaped him. Paradoxically, the autobiography is curiously silent on many of the most dramatic of his transformations.

In fact, so keen does Elwin seem in this book to detach himself from the self as an interiorized entity, an object of close analysis, that the naming of the autobiography as such is an afterthought, while the first person pronoun is entirely missing from the title. The main title (by which the book is generally recognized) seems designed to give the impression that it is an ethnographic tract written by someone *other* than Elwin. The roots of this ‘absent’ self take us, paradoxically, not into the realization that he has completely subsumed his identity into that of the tribal world that he dedicated his life to studying and working for, but to the continued presence of the England he ostensibly left behind. The gaps and silences in his narrative, it is argued here, are evidence of an uncertain identity and the complex pressures of making India his home. They force attention, paradoxically enough, on precisely the *non-tribal* aspects of his world: the English reticence and the needs of a being accommodated socially into a milieu that was something less than a welcoming home. The tone and tenor of the autobiography hides, suppresses and glosses over some of these pressures, while allowing, reading between the lines, for glimpses into the possible sources of his conflicted sense of location.

Elwin states in the Preface that the earliest lessons of his childhood, supported by his subsequent education in the English literary classics and Western philosophy, have sustained him in a serene fashion, “a perennial philosophy which has survived the loss of conventional faith.” He speaks of a neo-Platonic “essence” that continues to inspire him, insists on a continuity that is somehow above the hurly burly of the

many adventures that his life was, and celebrates this gift: an “independence from external circumstances,” a philosophical interiority that resists change (Elwin *Tribal World* vii). This same universalistic Wordsworthian garb sustains him through his years in India, simultaneously marking his continued difference from his Indian milieu *and* making it possible, due to its transhistorical quality to connect with the tribals as yet another kind of rural folk, untouched by civilization. His Englishness and literary education, thus, poses no threat to his assimilation into a radically new milieu; it becomes a facilitator for it. This poise comes across in reflective textual moments such as the Preface to the autobiography, written from the steady domesticity of Shillong, where, surrounded by his large personal library of English Literature, he could afford a distance and clarity of vision which was a product of hindsight. In this, it is a classic autobiography, a construction of the ‘whole’ self in retrospect, written in his sixties, towards the end of his life, when he could claim that his life had been lived and mulled over.

Unlike Gandhi’s rendition of a temporally marked section of his life which stops short of being a ‘full’ account as it stops with his entry into active politics, Elwin’s is an account that like Nehru’s balances the claims of candour with a very English sense of privacy. Ramachandra Guha conjectures that the autobiography is intended “seemingly for an audience of home-loving, petty-bourgeois Indians,” basing his statement on the absence of the “confessional mode” (Guha 127). Here is Elwin’s own, more complex, statement on this aspect of his book:

I have tried to show my life as a whole and to describe those things in it that have been important to me. I have not put in everything. In a recent discussion in the *Times Literary Supplement*, it is suggested that while, inevitably, every autobiography is an essay in omission, readers in the modern world are no longer content with a self-idealized *persona*, ‘something not too wide of the mark—but please Heaven, not too close either’: they want the full man. The realistic Confession, the unexpurgated Diary is what appeals today and ‘the blacker the picture of a lifetime the louder the applause with which it is likely to be acclaimed’. The difficulty is that the writer and his readers

have very different ideas about what is important, even about what is black.

My path has sometimes been shadowed by clouds and I have hinted at them in the following pages, but I have not enlarged on them, for I don't think they are very interesting. Other matters, which some readers may envy or even admire, and others will condemn, are my own business and, whatever the modern trend may be, I do not think that in an autobiography a man is required to lower the barriers of the discreet reticence which would govern his everyday conversation (*Tribal World* viii-ix).

This discreet Elwin, a smiling public man in his sixties, reluctant to cater to decadent 'modern' taste for puerile titillation, sits at odds with the irreverent, somewhat provocative, content of much of his recorded life and career as a self-confessed "controversialist" (as he declared in his spirited rebuttal to Ghurye's attack in *Seminar* in 1960). The whiff of scandal that preceded him and which he cultivated to debunk the excessive seriousness that he was convinced was the bane of 'great men,' scandalized many of his professional colleagues, let alone the Gandhians and his first colleagues, the earnest missionaries. And yet, that discreet curtain of silence that Elwin draws upon his *own* life in writing his autobiography is not extended to the depiction of the tribals, whose unclothed glory he celebrates with abandon in his writings, a strain missing from the respectable pieties of the Preface. Interestingly, the "other matters" that he expects some to admire and others to condemn, are quietly slipped out, and away, as "[his] own business." Autobiography is circumscribed by something as mundane as the demands of discretion that govern "everyday conversation," a consensually agreed norm that does not quite fit in with the earlier assertion that perceptions of what is "black" may vary from person to person. Elwin protects his freedom to retain a relativistic notion of reality, conduct and judgment, while claiming to speak within a framework of agreed norms. The move is symptomatic of his lifelong struggle between conformity and the questioning of it, of being between two worlds.

### ***The Missionary Impulse: Inheritance, Rebellion, Integration***

*I said to myself, "All my family has made money out of India, they went there to get what they could; it is high time that somebody goes there to give instead of to get, to serve and to suffer instead of to rule" (Elwin, quoted in Hivale 10).*

*...in this [decision to come to India] there were a good many factors present. The first was that my family had a long connexion with that country. All through my childhood I had been abused with Hindustani galis by the older members of my mother's family. My mother herself was born in India. India, you might say, was in my blood far more than Africa, where my father died (Elwin, quoted in Hivale 10).*

While in the autobiography Elwin simply states that India "caught his "imagination", Shamrao Hivale's more detailed account gives a better sense of the nature of that 'imaginative' engagement. The autobiography underplays the political dimension, the colonial past and the attendant guilt. It is in Hivale's biography that we learn that coming to India was an act of "reparation", a religious act, for Elwin. But as the second quotation makes clear, it also had elements of cultural sympathy, born, ironically, of a history of family connections facilitated by colonialism. The contours of that religiosity were defined via a route that took the Franciscan road of simplicity and service rather than the proselytizer's staff and book.

His books were and continued to be important to Elwin, but his library was eclectic and even irreverent, with Chesterton rubbing shoulders with Wordsworth, the Gospels with Wodehouse. A self-confessed stickler for textual accuracy, he also combined a fine balance between a scholar's impulse and an abandonment of the bookish for a direct engagement with the material of life. In fact, the dialectic between 'nature' and 'culture', an open embrace of experience, and a pedantic obsession with the written word, specifically its English heritage, run like a parallel stream through his life.

His childhood spent having his head "filled by [his] uncles with conventional Imperialist ideas and by [his] mother with the belief that there was nothing, nothing in the world, to compare with the joy of leading souls to Jesus," Elwin admits that "the instincts of the anthropologist" first found priggish expression in his boyhood. "On

one occasion,” he says, “I made a list of boys in my class with columns in which I gave each so many marks for morals, intelligence, religion and attractiveness and a note on whether they were saved or not” (*Tribal World* 11).

The First World War saw him, at twelve, barely aware of politics, but a subsequent stint at the Officers’ Training Corps at Dean Close, saw him letting off “a barrage of crackers from the top of the school tower in the early morning of Victory Day....It never occurred to anyone that there was the least inconsistency between the Scripture classes, where we were taught to love our enemies, and the Bombing classes where we were taught to kill them” (14). When at sixteen he “discovered poetry and fell in love with the beauty of words,” he found himself facing a paradox for the first time: “I was in two worlds which could not be reconciled. Orthodox evangelicalism stood strangely beside the mystical pantheism of Wordsworth, and that time, and for several years afterwards, I did not know which was the real thing for me” (17).

Elwin’s tone in his autobiography, written well after his successful and complete de-baptism, makes light of the struggle he must have undergone as he attempted to live out the initial years of his life within the fold of the Christian faith, albeit a version somewhat modified by his mother’s choice of a denomination less dull than the Evangelical Anglicanism which had claimed his father’s allegiance. As he put it in his autobiography, born into a family that was “strictly religious in the conventional way”, his later adoption of the utterly pagan tribal world-view put him so beyond the pale that his “ex-ICS Uncle Edgar Elwin forbade the female members of the family to read any of [his] books” (8). But his family-inspired early religiosity led him through the gamut of appropriate vocational apprenticeships: “from the age of about seven and continuing until my third year at Oxford, a very important part of our life was concerned with the Children’s Special Service Mission (CSSM) [which] “created a forced and unnatural religious precocity” (8) besides “foster[ing] an upper-class religion” (8), with a “caste barrier based on economic standards” (9). Elwin would, in proceeding to India, break this caste barrier in more radical ways than imagined by most Englishmen of his day, not least via the private domain, specifically the institution of marriage, a point on which Stokes and he share common ground.

Hivale's account of his student years carries an insightful aside that holds a key to understanding the protean possibilities latent in him:

Verrier won a lot of prizes in his last year at school, but he failed to get a scholarship at St. John's and in 1921 went up to Merton as a Commoner with no very great expectation of academic success. But directly he reached Oxford, he completely changed. He is still almost abnormally sensitive to atmosphere and *there are several different Verriers according to the company he is in.* (Hivale 5, emphasis added).

Though advised against it, he took English Literature in his third term, a subject that in 1921 "had not yet established itself as a respectable subject in the University," and therefore not eligible for scholarship grants. Elwin titles his chapter on his Oxford days "Youth of Delight"; the Blakean title somewhat misleading as after he got his First in English, he moved on to Theology for two years. Unlike the older Elwin who sees this in retrospect as time "wasted", the young man found religion "very exciting", an alternative to "bridge or racing" (*Tribal World* 28).

An appointment as Vice-Principal of Wycliffe Hall was followed by ordainment in Christ Church Cathedral by Tommy Strong, the Bishop of Oxford, whom Elwin remembers for his irreverent attitude towards sermons and hymns and whom he credits with a "delayed-action influence in ...later life, revealing itself in very similar attitude to receptions, committees, and all ceremonial occasions" (*Tribal World* 31). Increasingly drawn to Anglo-Catholicism for its "poetry and beauty as well as mysticism of a kind that the evangelical party in the church could not provide," "the path of sincerity" made him resign from the Church of England. That gave "a lot of pain to [his] family and friends," cast "a cloud on what should have been a felicitous progress of the mind and spirit towards reality."

It was in this context that Elwin began to turn his thoughts towards India. Oxford, which stayed with him throughout for it "offered the search for truth, the dignity and interest of a life of scholarship, friendships of the most stimulating kind, surroundings of great beauty", "did not satisfy". "Some life of men unblest' troubled me as it had troubled the Scholar Gipsy (sic) and driven him into the fields" (*Tribal*

*World* 35). That this gypsy's scholarly contribution to better understanding these fields of India would earn him a D.Sc. from Oxford fourteen years on, is just one of the many ways in which Elwin's life of travel was a story of never fully leaving home. But the fact that the autobiography of this "British-born Indian" who himself was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1960, and received the Sahitya Akademi award is a tribute to his amphibious being, the gypsy who nevertheless settled down, ploughed new fields, and reaped the rewards.

In addition to the family connection with India, factors such as being drawn by the ideals of Indian nationalism and Hindu mysticism, and an inspiring meeting with Sadhu Sunder Singh, a "gentle and spiritual Christian ascetic" in his fourth year at Oxford acted as motivating factors to coming to India. Father Jack Winslow's new settlement Christa Seva Sangh founded "to explore the possibilities of the reorientalization of the Christian religion" (*Tribal World* 37) gave him the institutional answer he needed. This also had an established history that Elwin proudly cites, of Father Stevens, the Jesuit, one of the first Englishmen to come to India who wrote a version of the Bible in the form of a *Purana* and The Abbe<sup>l</sup> Dubois who "lived and dressed in Indian style and composed a supplement to the Vedas proving the truth of Christian doctrine." It was however, the pull of Gandhi, who touched even his orthodox Christian mother enough to forge a lifelong bond, that acted as the magnet that inspired Elwin as he boarded the third class rail compartment, seeing himself as "a young apostle braving all discomforts...carried along a wave of excitement" (39).

Elwin seems keen on seeing a unity of ideas guiding his life-choices. Arriving in India and visiting Sabarmati for a conference of the Inter-Religious Fellowship in January 1928, he writes:

From the moment of my arrival there I was doomed. For long a sympathetic fellow-traveller, I now became an ardent disciple.... The impact of those few days at Sabarmati was extraordinary. It was as if I had suddenly been reborn as an Indian on Indian soil. Everything fell into place so naturally that I did not, I think, realize at first how very serious was the new attitude I adopted or what the consequences would be .

As he clarifies, his understanding of India was not entirely that of the exotic other; it was already mediated via the West thanks to Gandhi's assimilative discourse:

At first I did not see the conflict as between India and Britain but rather as between two different kinds of people. My theme was freedom and this was not confined to India. The prize essay on the poetry of revolution which I wrote at Oxford had shown me how many Europeans, and particularly how many of the English poets, had treasured liberty. Many of the ideas inspiring India's national movement came originally from the West. Tolstoy and Ruskin had a profound influence on Gandhi. The first result of my contact with him, therefore, was to put me among those Europeans, those Englishmen, to whom colonialism or imperialism was intolerable... (*Tribal World* 42).

Early on, too, a telling ironic reference captures Elwin's humour, even as it pits the scholar in him against the man of action. One of his earliest memories upon arrival in Poona was of learning Marathi from "a wonderful old Brahmin": "We spent most of my language-lessons discussing Hindu mysticism and philosophy with the result that after six months I knew the Marathi or Sanskrit words for most of the higher spiritual states, yogic postures and exercises, but I was quite incapable of ordering lunch at the railway station" (41).

### ***In India—Phase I: Bhagavad-Gita, not Bhagat Singh***

A large part of the book is devoted to the tribal Indians, amongst whom he cut his anthropological teeth, and amongst whom he married and lived. But even before them, there was another set of Indians that he came in contact with and was transformed by: the world of Gandhi's ashrams, spaces where many binaries, of thought and action, of spirituality and politics, of 'East' and 'West', were being undone. Elwin begins his essay on this phase of his life with the title: "Saints and Satyagrahis", with an epigraph from Browning:

Look East, where whole new thousands are!  
In Vishnu-land what Avatar? (40)

And indeed, his “youthful and romantic imagination” had rendered the soil of India “sacred, hallowed by the feet of countless saints, mystics and seekers after truth” (40). From this early impression he moved to a somewhat less romantic view: “Bapu’s asceticism did not express itself in sitting on a bed of spikes, but in the careful keeping of accounts” (54). And it is entirely in keeping with the unexpected and sometimes contradictory turns that made his life’s trajectory, that it should be Seth Jammalal Bajaj, a “merchant prince” (whom Elwin describes as “a typical product of the Indian national movement: he had given his life to the winning of freedom through national reconstruction” (60)) from whose mouth Elwin “heard for the first time in [his] life...the magic word ‘Gond’ ...” It is Bajaj who urged him to go to “the Central Provinces, and do something for a tribe which is almost entirely neglected both by national workers and by missionaries” (58). Elwin liked what Jammalal had to tell him about the Gonds, and decided to visit their country before the end of the year. It is thus that the most transformative chapter in his life began, at the quiet urging of a Gandhian philanthropist, one of Gandhi’s followers little known to Englishmen, “largely because of his unwillingness to talk much in English,” which, rues Elwin, “was a pity, for there was a great deal in him...his Quaker-like attitude to existence would have made a strong appeal to them” (60).

His initial idea, shared with his fellow Christian worker Shamrao who was in England, was to “live together in a small ashram in a Gond village...identify[ing] with the positive aspects of the national movement....We would continue to be members of the Church, and would draw up a Rule of Franciscan living. We would not, however, do any missionary work or preaching, and we would not aim at any conversion. Our ashram would be open to people of all faiths or of none” (59).

“Good advice from Gandhi” did not quell their fears regarding “this plunge in the dark. We had no idea what our new country would be like. We knew nothing about the tribes....For our immediate needs our new friend Jammalal Bajaj was ready to provide....” A narrative of seamless transition guides the reconstruction of the move away from the Christa Seva Sangh: “it was an amicable retirement from an

institution, not a drastic reversal of ideas” (59). The same spirit of amicable coexistence seems to guide their experiments with ecumenical thought: “We were still interested in the mystical aspects of Christianity blending with the mysticism of the Hindus,” an experiment that a contemporary Satyanand Stokes was to spell out in his book *Satyakama*, and which Elwin would attempt in another vein in his subsequent monograph, *Christ and Satyagraha* (59). Each of them, in doing so, was following Gandhi philosophically even as each was following him politically, the former by joining the Congress and serving a six month jail term, the latter, by participating in a somewhat more attenuated way in the action programmes of the mainstream freedom struggle led by Gandhi.

Elwin also put his training in theology to good use by writing booklets like *Religious and Cultural Aspects of Khadi* and articles on mysticism and bhakti in the *Ashram Review*. His *Mahatma Gandhi's Philosophy of Truth*, which appeared in the *Modern Review*, surveyed Western mystics from Plato to Plotinus to modern times and proceeded to make a detailed study of Gandhi's own philosophy. He ascribed his own “dramatic conversion, but in reverse”, “a great liberation” to his “experience in Gandhi's ashram [which] made it impossible to believe in an exclusive form of Christianity” (*Tribal World* 99).

His brush with Imperial authority, though a tribute to his commitment to the nationalist cause, has, like much else in his life, a touch of a comedy of errors. On a tour of United Provinces to spread the message of Khadi with Acharya Kripalani, he set out for Bombay to meet Gandhi on his return from the Round Table Conference. En route, in “Jubbulpore” Elwin gave the same lecture he had been giving all along his tour “urging people to remain non-violent, to love their enemies and, while fighting bravely for freedom, to keep the spirit of peace in their hearts. The local CID, whose agent was not apparently very familiar with the English language, sent in a report that I had advocated violent revolution, and had praised the terrorist Bhagat Singh, who had recently been executed, I had made some reference to the Bhagvad-Gita, and no doubt the reporter had confuse the two names.” The follow-up to this was that the Commissioner “at once recommended my deportation from India” (64).

In a repeated trope regarding Gandhi, Elwin too compares Gandhi with Christ: sharing a tent with “Bapu” at Mani Bhavan, Elwin describes him sleeping “like child committed to his Father’s hands. I thought of Christ going up to Jerusalem, his eyes filled with determination and courage: and I seemed to see the Spirit of Christ traveling the centuries like a bright sword turned against all wrong and injustice” (66). Gandhi was arrested in the middle of that night, and his letter to Elwin captures his distinction between the British “people” as against “Empire”:

My dear Elwyn [sic],

I am so glad you have come. I would like you to tell your countrymen that I love them even as I love my own countrymen....I am acting no differently towards them now from what I have done under similar circumstances towards my own kith and kin (67).

This reconfiguring of the conflict in terms not of races or people but of political circumstances was the key to the holistic universalistic approach that Bhikhu Parekh notes as Gandhi’s advantage over his predecessors who had responded to the colonial encounter. To quote Parekh,

While their [his predecessors’] formulation was territorial and neatly divided the world into East and West or Asia and Europe, Gandhi’s was temporal and allowed him to affirm the unity of mankind even within a colonial context....By calling European civilization modern, he isolated it in time and space and undermined its universalistic claims. It was a historical upstart and did not represent the whole of Western civilization... (72).

Gandhi’s critique of the modern and evocation of a pre-modern unity of humans untainted by the evils of industrialization, finds an echo in Elwin who moved seamlessly from his devotion to Christ to his devotion to the Christ in Gandhi, and later, from Wordsworth to the forest people of India, seeking and finding there a unity that attempts to bypass the accidents of language, culture, tradition and geography.

A strain of Gandhian universalism, in the guise of Romanticism, guided Elwin, even as he paradoxically found himself moving away from Gandhi on two

counts: their varied perceptions on the role and importance of the body, and Elwin's growing difficulties with British officialdom due to his continued political activity.

When Elwin claims that "contact with Gandhi wedded me to India" (*Tribal World* vii), it is instructive to remember that the two marriages that Elwin entered into were without Gandhi's blessings, outside the fold of the 'father-son' relationship they had initially established. Gandhi's dichotomization of the body and soul along a hierarchical axis was anathema to an Elwin who was overjoyed with his first glimpse of the freedoms traditionally enjoyed by the tribals, untouched by puritan religion. For him, living and loving amongst the tribals was an individual form of freedom that had its antecedents in the pre-modern, in a Nature that is pre-cultural. This version of the pre-modern was aligned along a different axis, not mediated through the spiritual sublimatory route that Gandhi took. In his own words, Gandhi's "emphatic views on Prohibition (which I considered damaging for the tribes), his philosophy of sex relations (which I considered damaging for everybody), and what seemed to be a certain distortion of values – the excessive emphasis on diet ...separated me from him" (*Tribal World* 85). In choosing the tribals over Gandhi, Elwin was also rejecting his own Christian past and forging a new freedom. Later in his autobiography, he would seek to balance the two claims by posing it as an inner division between a "world-renouncing" self attracted by Gandhi and a "world-affirmation" found in Tagore (340).

But his distance from Gandhi was also, in context, a retreat rather than an engagement, a shrinking from history in the making. For, as he went to prison, Gandhi's instructions were for Elwin and Hivale to go to the North West Frontier Province to gather information on the progress of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and the Red Shirts. As they travel incognito (Elwin has to "act" as a regular Englishman, and Hivale his "clerk"), their skill in successfully concealing their identities, gathering information and bringing it back undetected, betrays a comfort with his new role and vocational options open up for them:

We were now at a new crisis of our fortunes. The general idea was that Verrier should follow in the footsteps of C. F. Andrews, and devote

himself to the same kind of semi-political work... more specially devoting himself to keeping Britain and America informed about what was going on, in making enquiries where necessary into allegations of excessive repression, and generally working for a solution of the problem (Hivale 39).

This was the time when the Congress was appointing a series of Presidents which would include members of every community, and Jamnalal Bajaj asked Elwin if he would be willing to become Congress President when it was the turn of an Englishman to occupy that high office. Elwin writes:

I told him that I was willing and I have sometimes wondered what would have happened if I had gone through with it....But when Shamrao and I talked it over, we came to the conclusion that this was not really our line. I have always been a little doubtful of the value of the intervention of European political amateurs in matters they are not expert. And, though I have always regretted that I did not go to jail, it was obvious that Government would not have given me that privilege, but would have deported me from the country (74).

His ostensible reasons are ideological and principled, as well as pragmatic. But given Elwin's later plunge into anthropology without any training, and his even greater and more controversial plunge into advising the government on tribal affairs, that principled resistance to joining politics as a European amateur deserves to be taken with some well-deserved irony. Elwin was exercising a personal vocational choice in opting for the path of going to the forests to work with the tribal poor in what "was a deliberate attempt to find reality away from the bustle and confusion of politics" (Hivale 40). In any case, it was Elwin's report on the Peshawar trip, Hivale boasts, which was proscribed, but in reprinted form, was the "first to make the name of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and his Red Shirts widely known in Europe and America" (33).

On the advice of the Bishop of Nagpur, he chose Mandla District, in particular the village of Karanjia, as a place which would be suitable for his real vocation of working with the aboriginals. As Hivale constructs it, the decision "did not mean that we had

abandoned our political interests. But it did mean, as Verrier informed the Provincial Government, that we had no intention of carrying out political propaganda among the aboriginals. Verrier has always strongly felt that the aboriginals were not suitable cannon fodder for a political movement. They have too many wrongs of their own which must be righted before they can be enlisted in any wider movement” (40-41).

### ***Phase II: Gandhi to Birsa Munda: Encounters with “The Real”***

In moving away from the Congress, and the larger Indian narrative of anti-British struggle, Elwin was also recasting the problem of what it meant to be “wronged”. This early sense of the tribals’ isolated and specific sense of marginalization, within the larger narrative of Indian nationalism, would lead to his later advocacy (subsequently revised) of the desirability of their isolation and graduated inclusion into the national mainstream. But the decision also intersected with personal transformations and crises that helped him reconfigure his own beliefs and professional trajectory. This was the phase that saw him move away from celibacy and Christianity, and was the final impetus for the emergence of Elwin the self-taught anthropologist, with a complex relation to the ‘scientific’ or technical aspects of the discipline. Gandhi had to be rejected for his denial of the body and elevation of the soul, and his version of being in the world was given up for a greater earthy ‘reality’ amongst the tribals in the forests. The Elwin who wrote “Hymn to Excess” with its Blakean epigraph “All nature is excess” would sit ill with the Gandhian economies of the self (*Twenty Eight Poems* 25).

This phase of Elwin’s life throws into sharp relief the questions of nation, culture and identity, shaped in and through the wrestling with the question of vocation. And yet, Elwin, a self-confessed “romantic”, continued in subtle ways to understand that tribal world in terms that carried the cultural memory of his days at Oxford (*Tribal World* 286). It was here that the universality of the Romantic/philosophical notions he acquired through his reading of Western literature was confirmed:

My childhood had impressed upon me that here we have no abiding city and that there is an elusive treasure far above the prizes of the world...At Oxford I developed a habit of thinking in neo-Platonic terms by which one can build up a store of inner strength that will be independent of external circumstances. Without this I do not think I could have endured the isolation and the tragedies of village life (*Tribal World* vii).

Significantly, the discursive category that got increasingly marginalized, or at least problematised, as he delved deeper into the tribal life, was that of the nation. The discourse shifted from national politics and its urgencies, to injustice at the village level, that too, specifically the tribal belt in middle India. But even this sense of the tribal injustice was overshadowed by a celebratory language where the aesthetic categories of “poetry” and “beauty” begin to dominate, alongside a discourse on the regenerative capacity of “nature”. For an anthropologist who “came to anthropology through poetry” (*Tribal World* 143) it was natural that the whole force of his aesthetic sensibility should be thrown behind his appreciation of the primitive. When he declares that “for me anthropology did not mean ‘field work’: it meant my whole life,” or that “the essence of anthropology is love. Without it, nothing is fertile, nothing is true” (142), he was seeking to cast the vocational pursuit in terms that transcend the demands of the professional. This aversion to the utilitarian he found reflected in many tribal cultures he visited. Beauty and happiness as pursuits, built into the structure of many tribal practices like dance, were pitted against “this utilitarian modern world” (228).

This implicit critique of modernity, and by extension a rethinking of the hierarchy of East and the contemporary industrialized West, insofar as it meant a rethinking of discourses on racial superiority, specially the distinction of “civilized” and “savage” that were so central to imperialist ideology, was still within the domain of politics. In challenging racist shibboleths and underscoring the savagery of the so-called civilized, Elwin was dipping into a rich stream of thought that ranged from Rousseau to Gandhi, but the political distancing from the national movement meant that his alignments were increasingly with the more distant, Western fonts of this

stream of thought, rather than the immediate, neighboring ones. There are clear shades of the effete Western fascination with raw nature found in the life of French painters like Gauguin.

The trope of the white man enlarging his sensibility with contact with unspoilt 'vital' people was played out in his account of his visit to Africa where he described a dance: "To witness a dance such as the one in Atiak was to realize the deep elemental power of Africa, its capacity for enjoyment and display, its overmastering love of rhythm. 'The discovery of the dark races,' said Karen Blixen, 'was to me a magnificent enlargement of all my world,' and anyone who is not blinded by prejudice will agree with her" (217).

This warred with a contrary pull indicating his acculturation in Western aesthetics. The very first encounter with the tribals had been anticlimactic: "at that moment, there was little that was beautiful, or exciting or romantic: the Gonds of Tikera Tola seemed dull (no dances to welcome us), very poor, dirty, timid and shockingly diseased. But I had had the first glimpse of the 'elusive treasure' and I knew I must search till I found it, even if it took all my life" (75-6). The Englishman in him survived: "with my Wordsworth, my T.S.Eliot, my Blake and Shakespeare burning like torches in my little mud house, it was natural that I should look about me for poetry" (143).

Elwin's distancing of himself from the mainstream of Indian nationalism, and his protectionist attitude towards the tribals earned him the hostility of other sociologists, most notably G.S. Ghurye, who attacked him sharply for his policy of isolationism and for saying that the tribals had nothing to do with Hinduism. As late as 1980, Ghurye would continue his attacks in terms that equated national identity with a Hindu one, accusing Elwin of being "a revitalizer of the cultural complex of those tribes, a complex which was most inconsistent with the cultural complex of the rest of India" (Guha 326). In reality Elwin had gradually shifted to a middle path between assimilationism and total isolation of the tribals from the rest of India. He also joined hands with anti-missionary propagandists, by writing a 'Foreword' for a pamphlet titled *Religious Banditry: Religious Conversion of Aboriginal Hindu*

published by the All India Hindu Dharma Sewa Sangha in 1944 which also contained a memorandum by the All India Dayananada Salvation Mission, Hoshiarpur, requesting that “some reasonably compliant step should be taken by the GOI [Government of India] towards regulating the activities of missionaries in this country” (17). Beginning with a polemic against the backwardness, anti-democratic nature, and dark history of the Catholic Church, he makes one of his own most controversial statements: “When I first settled in aboriginal company thirteen years ago, I was under the impression that the hillmen were not Hindus. Eight years of hard study and research convinced me that I was wrong. I mention this to show that I have no special bias in this matter” (5). He speaks of the psychological and social exploitation of the tribals by the missionaries, evoking the dark history of Ireland and Spain, and castigates Dutch missionaries in Mandla who have “not hesitated to exploit to the full their membership of the white race. They have revealed to us not only the old alliance of Christ and Ceasar, but a new monstrous partnership of Christ and Dogberry” (13). He also urges “all Hindu organizations interested in this problem to pass resolutions accepting the major aboriginal communities as Kshatriyas, which is what they are and claim to be...and above all never to allow the slightest association in mind or organization between the Harijan movement and that for the establishment of the aboriginals in an honoured place within the Hindu fold” (15).

Ramchandra Guha points out that this move allowed Elwin

to reconfirm his Indian identity, to make tenuous peace with nationalist social workers and sociologists. Elwin was in principle opposed to Christian priests and Congress-minded Hindus, but asked (and forced) to choose, there was little doubt which side he would come down to. For one thing he saw the Congress as the less intrusive force ...For another he was keenly aware of the Congress' rising influence with the coming of Indian independence (168).

But his position against conversion was not a new one. The early debate he conducted with C.F. Andrews on what Andrews called his “following Gandhi on conversion” is significant. Andrews wrote to Elwin:

while what you say is undoubtedly true about primitive people, there are hideous savageries which are unclean and diabolical, such as I myself have witnessed in Central Africa and Fiji...Once, at Muttra, I saw another sight which filled me with loathing and disgust. It was cow worship in its most gross form...I am writing all this out because I myself have gone to the utmost limits of toleration, bordering on weakness, and I can see the same danger in your own case” (Hivale 105-6).

Andrews’ own experiments with truth were here set forth as an example to offer guidance to the younger Englishman away from the dangers of weakness, of going ‘too native’ to be able to distinguish between liberal humanist tolerance and soft-headed ‘surrender’ to pure difference.

While Guha reads Elwin sympathetically, Archana Prasad has suggested more pragmatic reasons for his shift in position: a realistic recognition of the weakness of his ‘primitivist’ position to meet the material challenges posed by the modernizing Christian missionaries, forcing him to align himself with the Gandhians who in turn were aligning with the Hindu nationalists to form a broad front against Christian missionaries. “The genesis of Elwin’s position lay in this inability of ecological romanticism to deal with the problems of tribal life in the twentieth century” (93).

Prasad contends that Elwin, in his zeal to oppose the missionaries, paved the way for the politics of Hindutva. This is significant not only in the present context of *shuddhi* or reconversion from Christianity and Islam into Hinduism, as Prasad points out, but had important reverberations in his own time. Though Elwin did not feel the need to declare his personal religious affiliations in order to be accepted, it is significant to note that Satyanand Stokes had felt the need to ‘convert’ to Hinduism, Himachali Christian wife and children in tow, in a *shuddhi* ceremony aimed at securing the family greater acceptability in the traditional, predominantly Hindu Kotgarh *ilaga* that he had made his *karmabhoomi*. That the region came well within the sphere of influence of the Arya Samaj was not incidental to Stokes’ decision. Elwin’s location, in the tribal belt and later in the non-Hindu areas of Arunachal Pradesh and Shillong, freed him from the kind of social compulsions that Stokes’ environment forced upon him.

### ***Phase III: Nehru's Missionary***

*I am a missionary of the Nehru Gospel (Elwin, Diary Nov 16 1954).*

*Verrier was...a saint, not a pale historical saint reeking of purity and unction, but a modern saint, fallible and human, yet with an infinite compassion (Gerald Sparrow, quoted in Tribal World 222).*

*The glory of science is to direct the radiance of truth into the dark places of human life and transform them (Tribal World 143).*

The broad divide between Indian and European posited here presumes one India, a unity of point of view. However, Elwin's actual engagement with India shows a widely divergent space, in terms cultural, political and ideological. The 'Indian' that Elwin had become by the end of his life was a combination of the tribal and the English, and this was not unusual in that being Indian for some Indians could well mean being English, akin to Nehru, who too, was part of the generation of Europeanized Indians who negotiated two worlds. It was this post-colonial India that Elwin finally became part of, of Prime Ministerial assignments, the Bombay business/industrial bourgeoisie which was cosmopolitan in its cultural formation, and the mixed culture of Shillong, the British capital of Assam, with its church bells and English-style cottages. The 'hill stations' of the British present fine examples of European-style architecture, complete with colonial interiors that survive 1947, and Shillong is one such. The administrators whom he interacted so smoothly with were the Westernized public school-educated ICS officers, while the Assamese politicians found him difficult to deal with.

In an important sense, then, Elwin could say he belonged to an India in a way that did not clash at all with being European. To the extent that 'the West' survived in India, in forms of culture, architecture, and governmentality, Elwin's continued stay in India as a divided self synergized with the atmosphere in Delhi and in his town of domicile in the North-East. However, this India was also a modern India, patterning itself on modern Europe, and the Gandhian resolution of contraries which rested on a rejection of the modern West in terms of its technological and ideological legacy would not work here. Post-colonial India was also bristling with a sense of new-found confidence and the presence of an Englishman as the sole arbiter of a people's destiny

would not go unchallenged by other Indians. The Indian state had to deal with the difficult task of consolidating its presence within a democratic framework that was also centrist and state-oriented.

Guha points out that when Elwin toured the tribal belt in 1955 with his son Kumar, “he was greeted with the cry ‘The Jai Hind has come’. The nationalist salutation had been turned into a noun. Verrier found it ‘a rather pleasant variation on the usual Sahib.’ Any suspicion that it might be a sarcastic comment on Indian hegemony was dispelled when the chief presented the son of the Jai Hind a monkey” (Guha 256).

His concerns with building a good administration dovetailed into his research and life:

To study a people is to learn to love them, and to publish your studies is to make them widely loved. The ignorant and patronizing scorn with which all but the very best officials, politicians and members of the public regard the tribesman is seen in the use of words such as ‘uplift’ and ‘backward classes’...and the very common belief that the tribesman is a sort of animal incapable of the higher love or spiritual perception (“The Aborigines”).

His desire to integrate all aspects of life in a plotted narrative of logical consistency made him assert:

My first teachers were Jane Austen and Swift. What a wealth of sociological information and analysis can be found in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Gulliver’s Travels*! And later...my studies in theology developed my interest in Man. The science of God led me to the science of human beings (*Tribal World* 19).

This retrospective reconstruction of a continuity in his defining attitudes and life-choices pays tribute to his English Literary training, albeit the figures have changed from the enthusiastic Romantics to the more urbane Augustans. Rather than the gushing outpourings of a Wordsworth drunk on nature or the ‘excess’ of a Blake, Elwin seems here to draw upon the soberer Augustans, better known for irony and

detachment than emotional and imaginative abandon. In either case, he upholds a universalistic application of “human” truths, regardless of cultural specificity.

Nehru is associated with modernity, change, and Westernisation. Elwin was a reluctant advocate of change in the tribal way of life. This apparent contradiction is resolved when we see their shared Oxford-educated Romanticism, and a liberal humanist individualism that respects the notion of private space and ‘difference’. “People should develop according to their own genius” was a key mantra of the Nehru-Elwin philosophy of the NEFA (Guha 262). However, the homogenizing impulse of the nation as a project comes into clash here with a fundamental resistance to letting the pincers of state machinery damage the delicate blossom that the tribal was seen to be. This was branded by Bombay’s *Economic Weekly* as “evidence of the schizophrenia of the Nehru mind, the Indian mind,” caught between “a pathetic Wellsian faith in the march of civilization and “the T.E.Lawrentian fascination for the tribal, the primitive, the elemental” (Guha 269). Elwin, for his part, reports being deeply affected when an educated Mishmi told him: “remember that we are not by culture or even race Indian. If you continue to send among us officers who look down on our culture and religion, and above all look down on us as human beings, then within a few years we will be against you” (‘Report of Tour in Lohit Frontier Division in November 1955’, Elwin Papers, File 138, NMML).

Though Elwin came to change his position in favour of greater integration of the tribals into the national mainstream, the attacks launched by Ghurye and Lohia against his supposed position on the policy of Isolation were answered by Elwin in a spirited and witty article titled “Beating a Dead Horse” published in the “Tribal India” issue of *Seminar* in October 1960. This was in response to an earlier attack on him in the same journal. Clarifying his position, he argued that the attacks were based on two books, *The Baiga* published in 1939 and *The Aborigines*, first published in 1943, and that his position had changed since then and the attack was therefore “out of date” and “distorted”. “As a professional controversialist,” he said with characteristic humour, “I feel that this is not only unfair, but unwise.” Now, he said, the decision to cover the whole of India by community development blocks by 1962 would mean that

“Whether we like it or not, they are going to be civilized; their country will be opened up” (Elwin, “Beating” 1).

It is a new voice in which he speaks, less romantic, more attuned to the concerns of administration. He even reworks the connotations of the term National Park that he had advocated earlier: “But in 1939, what on earth was one to do? It was not a question of preserving tribal culture – for the Baigas had very little culture; it was a question of keeping them alive, giving them a simple form of development” (Elwin “Beating” 3). However, in this, amongst the last of his writings before the autobiography, Elwin holds on to a cherished liberal individualist principle: of letting people be, recognizing here that sometimes those very conditions of continuing ‘to be’, of surviving need interventions by the state to protect them from systemic violence. His views thus grow from a simplistic Wordsworthian idealisation of the untouched unspoilt idyll to a more complex engagement with modernity, development, and the demands of history:

Gradually modern methods and ideas are influencing India’s study of the subject....A whole phase of India culture will disappear from history unless means are speedily forthcoming to record it by pen and camera.

My own plan for the aboriginals has no claim to scientific authority. It is a simple practical scheme that has been impressed upon me by the actual realities of life during twelve years in a Gond village (*The Aboriginals*).

The challenges of nation-building, especially in a place as diverse as India were great. And as “Nehru’s missionary,” Elwin was aware of the pitfalls of the project. His unique position as an insider/outsider gave him a perspective that was very similar to that of Nehru’s. It may have been shaped and defined by poetry and philosophy, and given to romantic idealization, but was quite severely tested by the “reality” that Elwin claimed he found in India. His legacy today is a mixed one. Travelling in the North East, I found a disturbing absence of a debate on the issues he raised, with local intellectuals dismissing him as a spent force. My conversations with contemporary Assamese intellectuals and historians like Sanjoy Hazarika confirm the

unease that the Assamese have felt with his policy of sequestering the region, especially Arunachal Pradesh, from local influence, and bringing it under direct Central control. Ramchandra Guha confirms the animus that the Assamese, who were seen by Elwin as the hegemonizing ‘imperialists’ to be kept off-limits in the NEFA, have historically felt towards Elwin (Guha 270-1).

On the other hand, in a recent documentary film “Verrier Elwin: Angel of the Aborigines” (Bora 2010), a young Assamese filmmaker, despite relying heavily on Elwin’s own often ironic rendition of his story, casts his multihued personality into the monochromatic sanctity of the epithet ‘angel’. The film attempts to cast a halo around him and risks replicating the colonial discourse of the ‘white man’s burden’, accentuated by the alliterative connect between ‘Angel’ and ‘Aboriginal’. Not only does this bypass the earthly, quotidian reality of being a tribal in India, it takes no account of Ramchandra Guha’s well-documented though self- confessedly idealized portrait of the man who emerges as a maverick, all the more human for his frailty. It also betrays total innocence of other, more recent, critiques that have come from positions that problematise the environmental movement in India, and of Elwin’s influence on it, such as Archana Prasad’s polemical *Against Ecological Romanticism: Verrier Elwin and the Making of an Anti-Modern Tribal Identity*. Though the film may be seen as representing a re-instatement of Elwin in twenty first century India, in its hagiographic tendencies it flattens the texture of Elwin’s Indian engagement.

The life-trajectory of Satyanand Stokes who forms the basis of the next chapter provides both continuities and departures from that of Elwin. It too carries traces of the theme of ‘the white man’s burden’, but indicates a level of immersion in India’s national movement and its post-colonial realities that raises important questions about how nationalism came to be negotiated with at levels both personal and public.