

Problematizing Verrier Elwin's View of The Tribal World

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Archana Prasad in her book 'Against Ecological Romanticism: Verrier Elwin and the Making of an Anti-Modern Tribal Identity' 'attempts to question the assumptions of Elwin's ecological romanticism and challenges the unrealistic interpretation of tribal history on which they are based.' Prasad argues that the tribal people of Central India depend on shifting cultivation and hunting and gathering only as a result of their marginalization into the forested tracts by the settlement of caste hindu cultivators in the Maratha period. The first essay is trying to unpack the myth of the 'original inhabitant' theory and its subsequent proposition that 'the tribals were the inhabitants of forested areas originally and that their practices were of ancient origins.' This essay concluded that indigenous people of central provinces were the victims of 'two-stage' colonization. First the fertile agricultural lands were captured by caste Hindu Maratha rulers. It also advances the theory of 'instability and flux' in pre-colonial India. The second phase of colonization was initiated by the 'first direct intervention of the British in the region'. In this context she also points out that 'the permanent settlement of agricultural and zamindarilands (1) by the British ensured that the movements of tribals between the highlands and plains were stopped forever.

The second essay – 'The Baiga and Its Eco-Logic Reinterpreting Verrier Elwin's Cultural Ecology' of the Baiga community was based more on 'anthropological particularism' than on any 'historically valid notion of the community and change'. Archana Prasad boldly asserts that 'propositions such as the ones presented by Elwin

need to be re-evaluated if historical evidence is to lead to more realistic and alternative forest and tribal policies.' In the third essay 'paying the way for Hindutva – the tragic tale of the Transformation of Elwin's Romanticism' Prasad frames an interpretation that 'Elwin's change of heart may lie in the inability of his ideas to deal with the modernist challenge.' She argues that being a failure Elwin was compelled to align with Gandhian movement and formed Hindu nationalist front against the Christian missionaries. Thus, she concluded – 'the genesis of the transformation of Elwin's position lay in the inability of ecological romanticism to deal with problems of tribal life of mid-twentieth century.' Her interpretation categorically states that Verrier Elwin's model of Tribal Welfare is 'anti-modern', 'unrealistic', romantic and fruitless, detrimental to the cause of sustainable development of this community. She seriously accuses that Elwin was used by the Hindu nationalist leaders. It is evident in the following words:

The polarity that is created between Christianity and Islam on the one hand and Hinduism on the other is strikingly close to Elwin's position at the advent of independence. By siding with Hinduism as a more inclusive religion than others, the ideas of contemporary environmentalists are likely to be misused by the same right wing Hindu forces who used Elwin's position to make their inroads into the tribal areas to ban Christian Missionaries in Tribal Areas and thereby paving the way for Hindutva. (Prasad 10.)

This analysis of Archana Prasad provides a fresh field of research for reinterpretation of tribal history of India and also to assess the contribution of Verrier Elwin to the welfare of Indian tribal world. Some basic questions are raised – (i) Who are these tribals? (ii) What were their real socio-economic and cultural identity? (iv) What were their hopes aspirations and challenges? In the same vein some basic questions are raised about Verrier Elwin, (i) Who was Verrier Elwin? (ii) Why did he come to India? (iii) Was he successful in his aims and achievements? This study is a prolonged scientific search of all these basic questions and thereby reviews the propositions of Archana Prasad about the tribal history in India and Verrier Elwin's contribution to them.

Etymologically **tribe** means a group of people of the same race and sharing the same language, religion, customs etc often led by a chief. In Indian context the term 'tribal' had been in use among European merchants and travellers in India from the

seventeenth century. After the battle of Plassey in 1757 Indian princes surrendered to the company government. Disbanded and defatted Indian army expressed their opposition by attacking British convoys. In this situation, colonial government surveyed the patterns of these attacks and ultimately this led to form a legislative act which is known as Criminal Tribes Act, 1871.

Almost at the same time, the company government prepared another list of Indian Tribes. They were the communities that had come in conflict with the British on the issue of sovereignty over forest areas. About 1860's British Government had formed a forest department, primarily to provide good quality timber for building railways and naval ships. From this time the Indian forest-dwellers violently opposed the colonial takeover of their forests. Soon after, these conflicting communities, located in different parts of colonial territory were bundled and branded by the term 'tribe'. Since then no 'tribe' had come to stay as an unchallenged category constitutive of the primitive in Indian society. According to G. N. Devy –

While all this was happening in India's political history, a branch of Orientalism in Europe had emerged in the form of anthropology, which could perhaps more appropriately be termed 'savageology'. The tenets of savageology were applied to Indian 'tribes', and tribes came to be seen as necessarily be primitive.(Devy xvi)

Again, I am quoting G. N. Devy's observation to review the 'original inhabitant' theory of V. Elwin.

.....as "First Nation" in Canada, as "Indigenous" in the United States, as "Janajatis" in India, or as "Tribes" in anthropology as "Notified communities" in the administrative parlance of many countries, as "Indigenous People" in the discourse of Human Rights, and as "Adivasis" in the terminology of Asian activists, these variously described communities are far too numerous and dispersed in geographical locations to admit of any single inclusive description. It could be simplistic to perceive them as divergent victim groups of any shared epochal phenomenon such as colonialism, imperialism, modernity or globalization. The term "indigenous", for instance, as employed by the ILO and UNESCO, seeks to represent over a thousand different communities spread over all continents.

(Devy xi)

So it sets up a clear understanding in the first half of the twenty first century, international conception upholds the view that 'tribals' are the first nations and they are the indigenous people. Moreover the term **indigenous** etymologically means 'belonging naturally to a place'. According to Prasad the Baigas and the Gonds were 'vanabasi'(2) and also they were seasonal migratory of different eco-zones. She also opines that 'some early texts describe the Baigas as one sub-sect of the Gond community' and mentioned that 'Gond is used as a generic term for all tribals living in the Chhattisgarh and Deogarh area. But there is plurality in historiography. My field study as community coordinator in PLSI (3) reveals that different tribal community in a single geographical region possess several common cultural religious, and social rituals. But these common cultural, religious, and social events do not necessarily prove that they are the sub-sect of any particular community. Again some oral narratives distinctly differentiated the Baigas and the Gonds. Evidently it is true that the conquest of Maratha empire in 1674 and the consequent atrocities of the Maratha landlords gave a blow to the tribal communities of the Gandowana land. Baigas, Gonds and other tribal communities left their fertile ground, not only to save them from the Hindu landlords. Actually tribal communities are very sensitive about their religious practices and are characteristically fond of their traditional peaceful co-existence with nature.

Now we enlarge our research area from Gondowana land to other remote and obscure tribal zones. It is worth nothing that A. Prasad in her interpretation contrived to 'unpack the myth of original inhabitant' but in doing so she indirectly raises the questions which provide fresh field of research on this matter. First, why this Maratha conquest face the challenge from Gond or Baiga people. Second, why was the land named as Gandowana. Third, Prasad comes to an overhasty conclusion that 'the settlement of these communities in the region was a result of many migrations in the pre-Maratha days'. But the question is that, what is the birth place of these Baigas and Gonds. And also it is very important to know the route of their 'many migrations'. Elwin also searched that different tribal communities migrated to different 'eco-zone to meet their needs' (citation ?). His first hand acquaintance and intensive research revealed the fact that these eco-zones were all naturally enriched, charming and beautiful. By nature they are peace-loving community and have their own artistic sense of exceptional charm. To unpack the theory of original inhabitant , A Prasad unconsciously created the theory of 'many migration'. But she fails to present any valid proof in support of her new theory. She can demand that she has provided some

record of ethnographers like Russell and Jenkins. Though she expressed that ‘Jenkins does not go into the details of the nature of natural resource use patterns, he gives us enough hints about the patterns of cultivation that existed in the area.’ Firstly, her comment itself is evident that Jenkins was a detached ethnographer. Secondly both Russell and Jenkins were British and their records and representations were mostly second hand in comparison with Elwin’s first hand acquaintance and earnest effort. It is also worth noting that, Jenkins recorded ‘myths’ from different informants. But this myths and legends change from village to village. So to get the truth, Elwin became an insider of the tribal community and recorded the information unbiasedly.

The very title of Archana Prasad’s book *Against Ecological Romanticism: Verrier Elwin and the Making of an Anti Modern Tribal Identity* raises some serious enquiry about Elwin’s view about the tribal world in India. This paper tries to unveil the truth in this context. Verrier Elwin represented that the tribal people were ecologically romantic. Prasad in her essay ‘The Baiga and Its Eco-Logic: Reinterpreting Verrier Elwin’s Cultural Ecology in Central India’ evinces that the ‘cultural ecology’ on which ‘The Baiga relied was based more on anthropological particularism.’ This proposition involves an inquiry into several questions What does Prasad mean by anthropological particularism? Does her perception of the cultural ecology match with the forest living people? Is it the Elwin to represent the life and culture of the vanabasi or Prasad’s interpretation problematizes Elwin’s research which bore fruit in a detailed, candid, evocative account of tribal culture in central India? She rightly pointed out that ‘bewar’(4) was not eco-friendly as it is the cause of soil-erosion and hinders the regeneration of timber trees like ‘sal’.. He was also concerned about the adverse effect of bewar. It is revealed in his own words.

Shifting - cultivation is a bad thing :.... But where only a few tribesmen practised it – and the Baigas were a very small tribe and where a regular rotation of at least twenty years was observed, the harm it did to the forest was greatly exaggerated. The Baigas have practised this form of cultivation for centuries in Mandala and Balaghat, yet nowhere is there better forest today.

(Elwin, 57)

It is evident that bewar is not entirely eco-friendly but it is also true that the Baigas were not so densely populated in the central provinces of India and only a part

of the Baigas practised 'bewar'. So it is quite impossible that the bewar cultivation affected massive forest regeneration or it effected erosion and rainfall. Prasad had no first hand acquaintance, she had to depend on the report of the 'foresters'. But how much is it (report of the British foresters) dependable. It raises the question, was it not right that there was other colonial agenda to de-moralize the tribal people, to snatch their dwelling place. History reveals the fact that making railway in Indian subcontinent started in 1852 . Again Indian forest timber was transported to Britain for their ship building. We should have to remember that colonial forest act and the reports of the foresters were prepared for the profit of British government. It is no doubt that dispersed tribal people have to adopt 'bewar' but they did not change their essential cultural habits. Hunting, gathering, religious rituals, social rituals were unchanged and maintained strictly.

Verrier Elwin's research in Bastar focused on one tribe (Muria) and their one institution (the ghotul). Elwin spent over a hundred nights in different ghotuls. His field research was enormously helped by the presence of his wife Kosi, who, as a member of the greater Gondfamily could claim kinship with the Muria. This MuriaGhotul was a dormitory of initiating the young into the mysteries and wonders of sex. RamchandraGuha observed –

Training the young in the arts of sex and the conventions of social life the ghotul was also a stimulus to artistic expression. Its walls were painted with models of motiaris and tigers, its pillars carved with animals fighting or tribals dancing ... The art of combing and comb-making was highly developed.

(Guha,139)

Muria's prepared cat's footprint necklace rat's footprint necklace, decorated knife artistic tobacco box, bead belt, two horn combs, wooden spears apparatus for extracting toddy-juice etc for their use in daily life. Can we stigmatize these artistically enriched materials as anthropological particularity of Muria cultural ecology?

Elwin in his 'The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin' writes that –

I have said that it is not easy to speak of a culture of the Gonds as they are today. And yet what is culture? It is not something moreover he liked to describe the philosophy of his life as the philosophy of love. The

talismanic spell of ecological romanticism is resounded in the his own voice...

Love and the duties it imposes is the real lesson of the forest. Among very poor and exploited people there was the need to maintain those imponderable values that give dignity to the life of man; to restore them their self-respect, the feeling of being loved ... There was the need for reverence, reverence for all life. (Elwin, 146)

'Reverence for all life' is the prime essence of all forms of ecological romance. Elwin's description, receding and representation of aboriginal people and their surroundings strictly followed this revelation.

There is a very true culture that depends mainly on character, and in this sense the Gonds are highly cultured people. They have royal blood in their veins, and even the poorest and simplest of them has a strength of purpose, a dignity, redeeming sense of humour, and a courage in the face of disasters of life that anyone may fancy. The honest peasant in his field, the devotee of Mother Earth, drawing his strength from the elemental forces of nature, is in this sense as truly cultured as the most sophisticated intellectual.

In this observation of Elwin is sufficiently evident that the tribals of India worshipped nature as their mother and their cultural ecology was spiritedly romantic. So the theory of anthropological particularity, which is used to interpret Verrier Elwin's discourse about the tribals of central India just problematizes Elwin's view about tribal India.

According to A. Prasad, Verrier Elwin framed an anti-modern tribal identity in his prolonged narrative. But this proposition invites our attention to re-search the works of Elwin. First we should determine the definition of the term 'modern'. According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary : 'modern means attempting new'. In this light 'The Muria and Their Ghotul' is a triumphant illustration of Elwin's modern representation of tribal life style. The ghotul is described, as something of a night club coming to life at dusk. It was an arena of encounter and friendship, of play, music and dance where chelik' (boy) and motiari (girl) formed deep and loving relationships. But life in the dormitory was also regulated. Chelik and motiari were expected to come every day, to keep the dormitory clean, to share in the common labour. In defending the ghotul from the obvious criticisms of the so called civilized world, Elwin pointed

out that there were virtually no cases of venereal disease among the Muria. Prostitution, rape and child marriage, so visibly present in more 'advanced' societies, were all too absent in Muria community. Muria art, and handicrafts as presented and recorded by Elwin is a clear mark of modernity as there is an extra ordinary presence of 'newness'. Moreover, ghotul life is a distinct departure from the age-old traditional life style of the tribal people.

In 'Democracy in NEFA', Elwin documented one speech of the Kebang (5). I quote a few lines from this speech.

Oh! Villagers, and brethren, let us strengthen our customs and our council, let us improve our regulations; let us make the laws straight and equal for all ... let us not decide differently for different persons; let us be guided by reason and see that justice is done and a compromise reached that is acceptable to both the parties. (Elwin, 38)

This part of the speech categorically represents that almost all the essence of democratic values were existing among the tribal communities of the North East Frontier. Is it not a marker of modernism?

In his seminal book 'The Baiga' Elwin vividly represented that all the tribal societies were socially superior to modern ones because women enjoyed more freedom in the tribal community. Elwin wrote:

In Baiga society women enjoyed an excellent position theoretically; in so patriarchal and priestly a tribe man should be in the ascendant: actually women have great freedom and no little authority. She may go about on her own; she generally chooses her own husband, and changes him at will, she may dance in public, she may take her wares to a bazaar and open her own shop there, she may own property and she may drink and smoke in her husband's presence. (Elwin, 154)

Of late, we are thinking about women's emancipation movement but it was prevalent in tribal community, about two centuries ago. In the field of cultivation they always tested new instruments and new process. Even the handicrafts, they produced for sale in market bear the hallmark of their continuous change in size and colour to meet the market competition. This discussion categorically states that Elwin's representation of Indian Tribal world is in no way anti-modern. Naturally, the proposition

of A. Prasad that Elwin framed an anti-modern tribal identity produces a fresh trouble in Elwin's discourse. The proposition of Prasad (Against ecological romanticism and making of an anti-modern tribal identity) is sharply contradictory to the observation of an eminent scholar like G. N. Devy. In his essay 'Elwin for Tomorrow' he writes :

Elwin was a perpetually doubting modernist, witty if not necessarily ironical, questioning if not without empathy ... he was more like W. B. Yeats, part Romantic and part Modernist. Elwin had Romanticism in abundance when it came to his encounters with the tribals, and Modernism in no mean measure in his encounters with the rest of the world including himself. (Devy, xv)

Notes:

1. Land acquired by land lords or zaminders.
2. A group of people who depend on the jungle for their survival and livelihood .
3. People Linguistic Survey of India. Prof. G.N. Devy founder of Bhasha Research and Publication Centre initiated this linguistic movement in 2010.
4. Bewar is a Baigani term for shifting cultivation. It was being practiced since time immemorial.. Anthropologists like Verrier Elwin used the argument that bewar was both eco- friendly and essential to the preservation of Baiga values.
5. Kebang is the Adi Tribal Council in NEFA. To describe the strong and well organized democratic sense of the tribals of NEFA , Elwin quoted the speech of leaders of the Kebang in his essay *Democracy in NEFA*.

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