



## **Exhibiting the Past in the Present: Verrier Elwin's Photographs of Tribal Cultures in Central India**

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*As one of the foremost researchers on tribal cultures in India, Verrier Elwin's legacy extends to more than 26 books, numerous articles and over 10,000 black and white photographs that document the tribal cultures that he came into contact with at a time of political transition in Central and North East India. These historical negatives were neglected until a recent Exhibition of a selection of them that was organised in Patangarh, a tribal village in Central India. This paper interprets Elwin's approach to research in the choice of captions to accompany the images.*

**Keywords:** culture, ethnography, exhibition, photographs, Gonds, indigenous, postcolonial, representation, tribe, Verrier Elwin.



Village people who are also participants of the cultural programme at the commemorative event view the historical photographs at the Exhibition in Patangarh, 3 July 2017.

### **Patangarh and Verrier Elwin**

Patangarh is a village in Dindori District, Eastern Madhya Pradesh with a population of about 1,200 (Census 2011). When a team of researchers arrived there in 1981 on an official assignment from Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal to survey the folk art practices of the region, they noticed Jangarh Singh Shyam's unusual talent for mural designs. Jangarh, who belonged to the Pardhan Gond clan, was just twenty-one at the time, and he was supporting himself meagerly on daily wage labour.

The first Director of Bharat Bhavan, J. Swaminathan, invited Jangarh to come to Bhopal and he was provided with a new range of art materials to use -- ink and paper, paint and canvas. This led to the launch of his astonishing career that brought unprecedented fame and foreign visits to France and Japan. However, in

2001 tragedy struck on Jangarh's last trip to Japan, when he committed suicide during his second artist-in-residence at the Mithila Museum (Bowles 2009:23). The contemporary art form, in which he trained many relatives when they first came from the village to Bhopal to assist him with his commissions, remains his enduring legacy. There are now over fifty practicing Pardhan artists resident in Bhopal, and a group of his relatives had planned an event in Patangarh on July 3, 2017, to commemorate the anniversary of Jangarh's death.

By chance, Patangarh was the same village where Verrier Elwin (1902-1964) had moved to in 1937, and in 1953 he married a woman called Lila from the village. It was, therefore, important to organise a premier show in Patangarh of a selection of historical black and white photographs that were taken by Verrier Elwin in Central India, to coincide with Jangarh's memorial event. That way it was possible to honour both outstanding personalities associated with the village. Most of all, it was an occasion to celebrate the culture of the Pardhans and neighbouring tribes; the dynamic of the visual art and performance, ethnography and the mythological narratives. Enhanced awareness of the transition of Gond art, from the wall of a mud hut in a rural village to its recent interpretation in digital media, came through, with the opportunity to hold a Premiere Screening of *Tales of the Tribes* (2017). This showcases a folktale from the Pardhan Gonds as part of the five tales included in the animated films.

As the only living son of Dr Elwin, Ashok Elwin is now the custodian of his father's legacy. The last time that Ashok had visited Patangarh was in 1979, with his mother. His Pardhan relatives in Bhopal, now back in contact with him, urged him to revisit Patangarh for the event. I contacted the Director of the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS), Prof Sarit Chaudhuri, and proposed

collaboration between the Government run cultural institution based in Bhopal and the [Adivasi Arts Trust](#) (UK) for the Exhibition of Photographs and the film screening, in addition to the *Chitranjali* creative tribute to Jangarh Singh Shyam, initiated by the Gond art collective, 'Cheenha'.

Verrier Elwin's photographic negatives first had to be digitally scanned and in due course, Ashok was able to undertake this work himself. The digital images were then emailed to me, and I selected and prepared them for the Exhibition. This meant some minimal restoration to the images where it was required; research on the selected photographs; constructing the narrative sequence, and composing the introduction and captions.

Some of Elwin's photographs were published in his books and with the articles that he wrote for *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. It is widely recognised that cultural representations speak more about the author than about the subject of representation (Säid 1978:332). A decision was made to use the photographer's own words to present his images. Verrier Elwin had been a prolific author, and I identified paragraphs written by him that would convey an overview of his personality, experiences and philosophy to accompany the photographs. This Exhibition of images and text reinforces Elwin's method of collecting information from his informants through hardship, hospitality and fieldwork.

The aim was to present the Exhibition as a story, and the first task was to introduce the key actors: second only to Verrier himself, was his lifelong friend and colleague, Shamrao Hivale, who had accompanied him on his mission to work for the benefit of the Gonds in Central India (Fig 1).



**Figure 1: Shamrao and Kusum Hivale, mid 1940s.**



**Figure 2: A group of villagers assembled under a tree in Patangarh.**

There were also the residents of Patangarh, with whom Verrier Elwin lived, integrated and became a part of the extended family, and there was a portrait that depicted a local group assembled under a tree (Fig 2).

In his own words Elwin wrote (1964:120):

Patangarh was a charming village on an abrupt hill in the midst of a wide clearing in the mountains. On every side were the hills, piled up on one another, of the Maikal Range. In the foreground was the magnificent symmetry of the Lingo Mountain. The sacred Narbada was only half a mile away and we could see its bright waters. A fresh wind was always blowing. Patangarh was at least five degrees cooler than Sarwachappar or Karanjia. Not only was the village beautiful, but its inhabitants were more delightful, more amusing, and more friendly than any others. Most of our neighbours were Pardhans, the gay, romantic minstrels of the Gonds.

Elwin's first tribal friend and the informant was Panda Baba, a local gunia or medicine-man who appears in his early publication, *Leaves from the Jungle: Life in a Gond Village* (1936). However, it is unclear whether Panda Baba was depicted in the photograph of two Baiga elders performing a ritual with dry rice and a gourd (Fig 3).



Figure 3: Two Baiga elders performing a ritual with dry rice and a gourd, 1932.

*The Baiga* (1939) was a large volume that was focused on the traditional slash-and-burn agricultural practice of the Baiga people, and it first brought him acclaim as an author on ethnography. The fact that he frequently referred to the tribal mythological stories in his books shows his receptivity to the way that they viewed the world, and to what was meaningful to them – an aspect that will be discussed in more detail. For the Exhibition, the photograph taken by Elwin of a group of Baiga children that shows them squatting on the ground as they play a game is accompanied by a caption that relates the Baiga origin myth as it was recorded by him (Fig 4).



**Figure 4: A group of Baiga children squatting as they play a game called Phugri-Phu, Central India.**

A classical portrait of a young man poised to aim with a bow and arrow is next contextualized by a comment from Verrier Elwin, in which he compared the harsh conditions imposed by the onset of the Second World War as lesser than the daily hardship faced by a Gond villager at the time (Fig 5).

He also went on to record a surprising perspective from an elderly tribal woman about the war (1964:121-122):

This, she said, is how God equalizes things. Our sons and daughters die young, of hunger or disease or attacks of wild beasts. The sons and daughters of the English could grow old in comfort and happiness. But God sends madness upon them, and

they destroy each other, and so in the end their great knowledge and their religion is useless and we are all the same.



**Figure 5: A Gadaba archer**

These photographs that introduce life in the village and the selected captions present Elwin's observations and the voice of his subjects.

### **Elwin's Village Life**

The Exhibition touches on Elwin's intimate relationship with the villagers and a local perspective recorded by Hivale (1946:223) reveals Elwin's warm and humble approach that endeared him to the village people and gave them the confidence to 'open our hearts to him and tell him our secrets.' The informality that is established here is visually affirmed by the informal snapshot of a Baiga father and son seated

squatted drinking wild honey during a special festival of bees celebrated once every nine years (Fig 6).



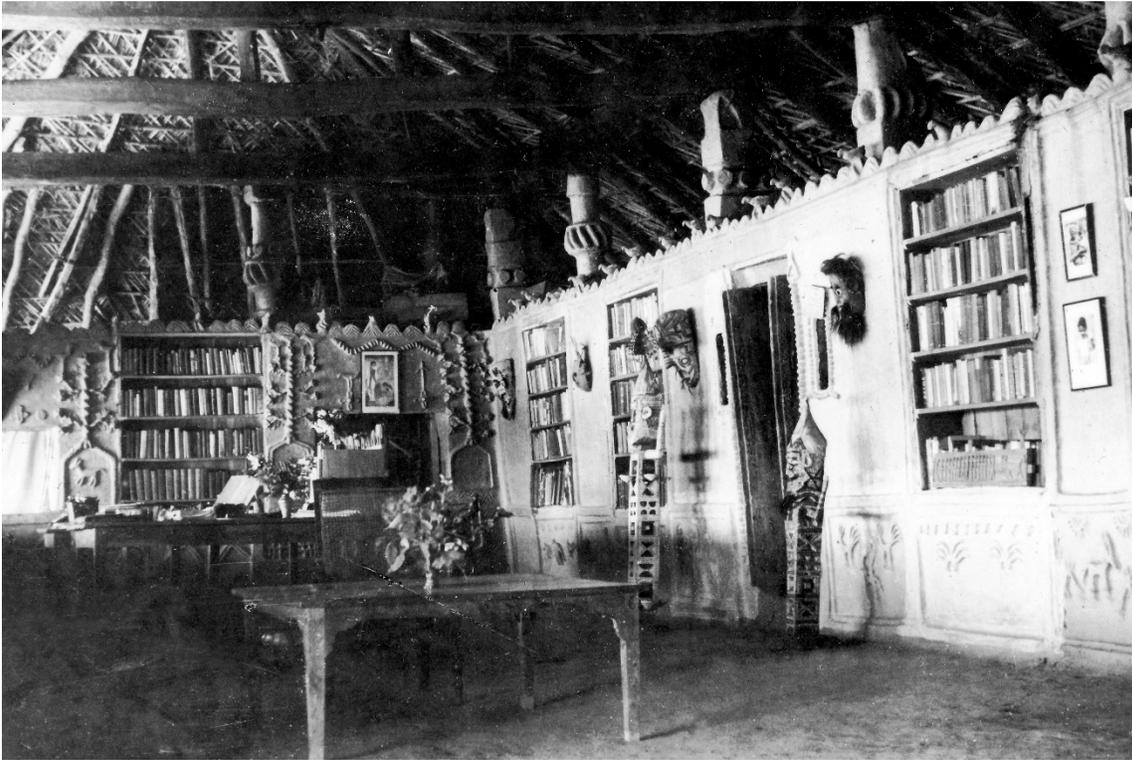
**Figure 6: Baigas refreshing themselves with a drink of wild honey, Madhya Pradesh, 1933 (Illustrated Weekly of India)**

Life in a tribal village in Central India almost eighty years ago was exceedingly hard. Verrier Elwin recounted how he had endured frequent bouts of physical illnesses and he also commented on the hazards of an isolated existence far removed from any medical facilities. On recollecting a septic boil as one of his more severe ailments, he openly acknowledges that the effort by the village residents to carry him to a hospital over 120 miles away had effectively saved his life. This anecdote specifically highlights his vulnerability and the acknowledgement of his dependency on the local people, as well as the communal engagement and sense of interconnectedness that defines the tribal ethos.

The next two photographs in the sequence depict his home in Patangarh and in his autobiography Elwin records how his own residence was constructed according to the manner and design of the local architecture (Fig 7 and 8).



**Figure 7: The exterior of Verrier Elwin's house in Patangarh, 1952.**



**Figure 8: Verrier Elwin's home in Patangarh village, 1952.**

What becomes evident is his appreciation for local aesthetics -- not only did his front room double up as a museum for his art collection, but according to him, the entire building itself was a creation of art. His interest in the vernacular art is further developed in his publication *The Tribal Art of Middle India: a Personal Record* (1951). An image taken by him of a wall painting on a mud hut in the village is included in the Exhibition to establish a direct link to the heritage of the contemporary Pardhan artists (Fig 9). Their creativity has evolved from the simple mural designs of the past to the intricate, contemporary decorative forms. The chosen caption is a comment by Elwin about the organic aesthetic of the local art.

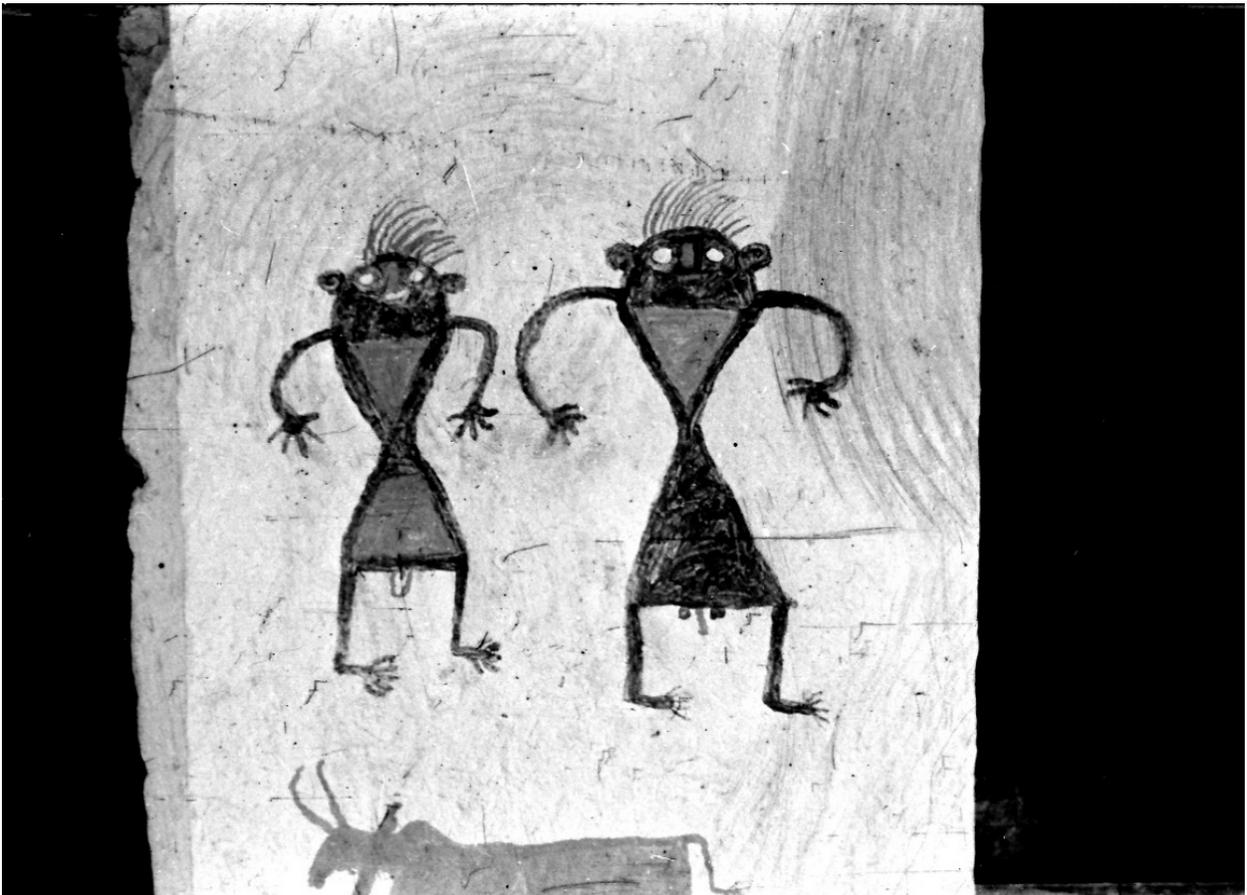


Figure 9: Paintings of demons on the wall of a Gond house.

Next in the series is a photograph of a mysterious musical performer wearing a mask and a headdress adorned with peacock feathers (Fig 10). The photo is accompanied by an intimate reflection from Elwin on loneliness, chosen to convey the intensity of the spectrum of experiences of a lone Englishman far removed from his own culture and society and now relocated into a starkly contrasting environment.



**Figure 10: Muria Jester called the Nakta wearing a mask at the Chherta Festival. The mask is made from a gourd, with nose of beeswax, teeth of gourd-seeds and a turban of red cloth.**



**Figure 11: Patangarh, late 1930s.**

The image taken by him of several elephants that is also included in the Exhibition has been matched with a personal recollection of the arrival of a herd of twenty elephants with their mahouts to the village (1964:135) (Fig 11). This anecdote sheds more light on the familiarity of the relationship that existed between him and the village people. One of them eagerly announces that ‘Bara Bhai’ translated as the ‘elder brother’, is ready to welcome the visitors and this was how they addressed Verrier Elwin.

The next three photographs represent the pinnacle of Elwin’s acculturation – his first marriage to a Raj Gond girl called Kosi, which was performed according to the local custom (Figs 12, 13 and 14).



Figure 12: Verrier Elwin's first wedding to Kosi, Patangarh, 1940.



**Figure 13: Verrier Elwin's first wedding to Kosi, Patangarh 1940.**



**Figure 14: Gond priest to perform the rituals for Verrier Elwin's first wedding to Kosi, on the banks of the Narmada, Dindori District, 1940.**

Relating to this, Elwin's translation of the speech (cited by Guha 1999:130), that was delivered by the Gond *pujari* (priest) at the occasion was curiously fitting:

Listen brother, when she is foolish; do not despise her thinking her a mere daughter of the forest. Never find fault with her or grumble at her. And you girl, never say he is bad he forgets me; he does not love me, and so leave him. He is English. He has come from another land to love us.

The longer Elwin cohabited with the tribes, the more he grew to appreciate their way of life -- the simplicity, spontaneity, vitality and the superior freedom from the psychological complexities that he identified with modern civilization. For instance, the traditional Karma dance and song associated with fertility among the Adivasis of Madhya Pradesh and performed at any time of the year, still has iconic significance in Pardhan Gond culture. During his stay, Elwin described the Karma dance as a form of 'Lila' -- a word with Sanskrit origins that can be loosely translated as 'divine play' and refers to the activity of God. Elwin's appreciation of the transcendental dance form and cultural sensitivity comes across in the caption for the Exhibition (1964:104):

The bulk of the poems are songs of the dance and the most poetic of them are perhaps the songs of the great Karma dance which is common to many of the primitive tribes of central India. This dance symbolizes the growth of the green branches of the forest in the spring; sometimes a tree is set up in the village and the people dance round it. The men leap forward to a rapid roll of drums and the women sway back before them. Then bending low to the ground the women dance, their feet moving in perfect rhythm, until the group of singers advances towards them like the steady urge of wind coming and going among the tree-tops, and the

girls sway to and fro in answer (sic). They often dance all night until, lost in a rapture of movement, they surprise the secret of the Lila the ecstasy of creation.

I hold that Verrier Elwin's background in Literature and Theology (which he had studied at Oxford University), made him more receptive to the indigenous cultural practices and spiritual beliefs. Unlike most of his academic peers from the discipline of anthropology, Elwin was overtly visionary in his outlook, and he recognised and relished the vibrancy of their vivid myths and legends. This poetic aspect of his personality is communicated by the captions that convey his appreciation for their mythologies and legends and their centrality to his understanding of the tribal past.

For them as for their elders, all nature is alive with spirits – Nang-banshee living in the great trees, Bhageshwar Deo, lord of the wild beasts, whose dwelling is in the running water and under stones and bushes, the wicked Machan who lurks by the highways and robs the passers-by, the angry burning ghost in the unhappy hollow of the semur tree, Makramal Kshattri the monstrous spider whom you may meet at dusk straddling across the road, and Saraglil whose mouth is ever open, whose lower lips rests on the ground, while the upper touches the sky. (1936:19)

As Elwin first outlined in his book *Leaves from the Jungle*, the mythologies were the key to the orally transmitted history of the communities who connected themselves to the geography through these narratives. The fact that he recognised the validity of these mythologies as a source of information about the construction of identity demonstrates his receptivity towards accepting them on their own terms. Long periods spent alone gave him the time for contemplation. Verrier Elwin was accustomed to reflecting on his personal motivation and also about the dynamics of the relationship between himself and the village people. He kept reverting back to the subject of reciprocity, and the quote that follows was selected as the caption

for a classic image in the Exhibition -- a linear composition of Maria girls dancing in a line, each with a dancing-stick in her right hand (Fig 15).



**Figure 15: Maria dancers each with a dancing stick in her right hand form a long line in which they go round and through the male dancers with many different movements and steps, 15th January 1942 at Sameli village, Bastar.**

He wrote (1964:124):

We often gave parties, which usually ended in a dance, and what was more important we were given parties in return. In the Mandla villages, these were quite elaborate affairs – our hosts would clean their houses and spend all day preparing food, which was generally very tasty. When the time for supper came, a number of people would arrive to escort us. The strongest youth present would hoist me on his back; another would pick up Shamrao, and then proceeded by women singing songs of welcome we would be carried to our host's house.

For another image of a festive assembly of Maria Gonds under a tree, with those in the foreground shown pouring out home-made liquor from gourds (Fig 16) is another comment from Elwin about tribal hospitality (1964:125):

To accept tribal hospitality (provided it is not overdone) is a very good thing. It breaks the one-sided patronage of charity, the condescension of benevolence. When you reach a point that people want to do things for you and are proud to do so rather than always being on the receiving end, you have made a big step forward.



**Figure 16: A festive assembly of Maria Gonds under a tree with those in the foreground is shown pouring out home-made liquor from gourds, Bastar, 1941.**

### Religion, Caste and Tribe in Elwin's study

Elwin's research work in India took place at the critical period leading up to Indian Independence from British rule. Verrier Elwin first met Mahatma Gandhi in 1928 at his ashram in Ahmedabad, where he had gone to represent the Christa Seva Sangh at the International Fellowship of Religions. Gandhi's philosophy of *Satyagraha* as non-violent resistance against colonial rule had a strong impact on Elwin and he were drawn into the national movement for Independence. However, as he became more deeply involved in the welfare of the community that he lived with, in Central India, he began to question the relevance of Gandhi's severe views on prohibition, celibacy and vegetarianism for that environment. His attachment to Gandhi is represented in the Exhibition by a photograph of Mahatma Gandhi that was taken by him (Fig 17), and his subsequent diversion from Gandhi's rigid approach is alluded to in the following caption (1936:123):

Long letter from Mahatma Gandhi urging me to perform daily *yagna* or sacrifice, of spinning as no one here for hundreds of miles has ever seen a spinning-wheel, decide not to, but suggest rice pounding as a daily sacrifice instead.

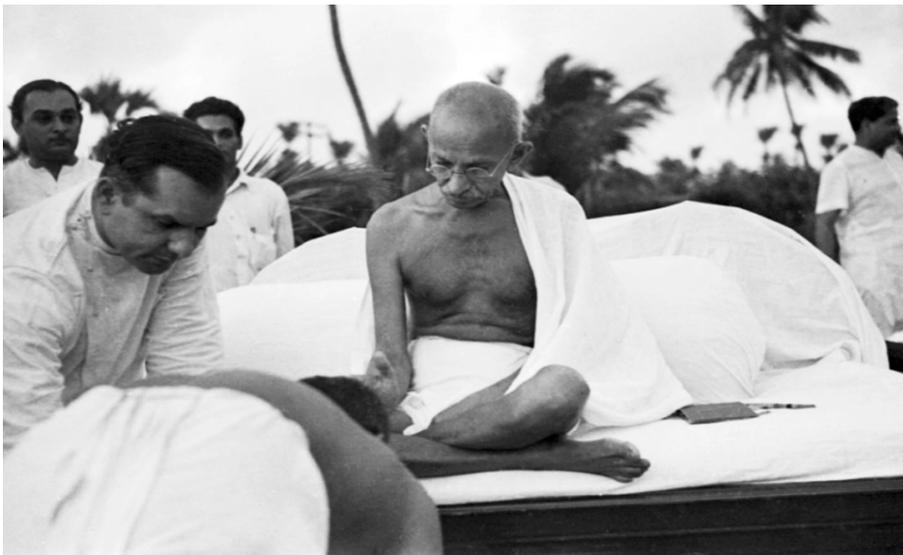


Figure 17: Mahatma Gandhi, early 1930s.

Elwin's life, opinions and writings were radical and unconventional in approach. To begin with, he was not a trained anthropologist. It had been literature and religion that first ignited his interest in human beings (1964:141). Elwin was a self-ascribed champion of the tribal cause and the approach of activism for the empowerment of the tribes derails the romantic stereotypes of colonial anthropological discourse on tribal primitivism through the lens of his own impressions, kinship and citizenship. Caution is needed in order to identify how stereotypes are perpetuated about tribal people, as well as to recognise how persisting assumptions about estrangement also emerge in India based on a European appearance. The image of the innocent and pure 'Noble Savage' that originates from Dryden's work: *The Conquest of Granada* (1672) is endowed with the concepts of Biblical Eden, and it is a description that stimulated a genre of romantic literature. This was in stark contrast to the parallel image of the dark-skinned barbarous aborigine (Trautmann 1997:194), and both of these portraits were popular in the colonial era. Elwin's critics have pointed out his romantic view of the tribal people as they were depicted in his photographs, as well as in his many comments about the superiority of their way of life when compared to what he perceived were the drawbacks of civilization. For example, he wrote (1936:27):

I think that the primitive has a real message for our sophisticated modern world which is once again threatened with disintegration as a result of its passion for possessions and its lack of love.

From early on his mission had been to set up and run a home for lepers and the text that he wrote at the time also delivered graphic accounts of poverty, disease

and suffering to balance the popular romantic pictures. But this did not deter his enthusiasm for their way of life. The captions that are chosen as commentaries for decidedly photogenic images for the Exhibition reflect his position. For the image of two Hill Maria youths wearing traditional leaf skirts (Fig 18):

Once I was off the main road and away from the few administrative centres, I hardly ever saw an official. The people lived their own life, unhampered if unimproved, and they lived it well. (1964:162)



**Figure 18: Hill Maria youths in the traditional leaf skirts, Abujhmar Bastar, 1940.**

He proclaimed that the 'tribes' had unique cultures, and that special measures were needed to protect them from the destructive influence of the incoming dominant social groups. He wrote (1964:347):

Most fortunate are those who are captured by a cause, such as the well-being of the tribal people, which demands a lifelong devotion, even though it may open the door to anxiety, frustration and deep sorrow in sympathy with others.

During his lifetime, Elwin tended to be viewed with suspicion by Indian anthropologists who regarded his approach as paternalistic. The most enduring criticism of Elwin was that he favoured isolation in order to preserve tribal culture for anthropological study. This evaluation was framed by his main detractor G.S. Ghurye (1893-1983), in reaction to his rival's ill-considered recommendation early on in his research on the Baiga that areas of tribal inhabited land should be kept as National Parks and off limit to outsiders. In fact, Elwin was intensely concerned for the future of these people who were unfamiliar with operating within the economic system as he was certain that this would lead to merciless exploitation by money-lenders, traders and Government officials who did not recognise their cultural values.

Ghurye had absorbed the Orientalist portrait of ancient Sanskrit culture as the foundation of originality in the Indian subcontinent. On the cusp of Indian Independence, Ghurye had denounced the existence of separate tribes. He pointed to close relations and cultural similarities with their Hindu neighbours, and by his interpretation, these marginalized ethnic groups were 'backward Hindus' (Ghurye 1943:19) that had yet to become fully assimilated. According to him, this had been misunderstood by the British colonial regime, and the categorization of 'tribes' was thus part of a divide and rule policy that threatened the integrity of the

emerging nation. Curiously, this vision of nationalism that was based on a new aggressive Hindu identity and the exclusion of foreigners has come to the forefront by the rise to power of the BJP Government.

The primitive 'other' of the colonial descriptions was always excluded from the Hindu caste system and continues to occupy a subservient position in relation to the contemporary Hindu society. Religious differences that are perceived as threatening to the concept of the Hindu nation accelerate the mission by the Hindutva movement to integrate the tribes into the mainstream Hindu society by the activities of schools such as the Hindutva Ekal Vidyalayas and Vanvasi Kalyan Ashrams that remove tribal students from their own cultural knowledge (Outlook:2002; Padel:2017). The current political environment arguably sidelines Elwin's work, his Christian background, foreign origins and his activism to empower the tribal peoples, and has also amplified the suspicion directed towards foreign-funded aid projects (Rakesh:2017). The religious circumstances of Elwin's work provide a window to some alternatives in perspective.

Verrier Elwin had been born into a devout middle-class Anglican family and religious faith had a prominent place in his early life. He was ordained as a priest in the Anglo-Catholic church and when he first arrived in India in 1927, it was as a missionary to work for Christa Seva Sangh in Pune. However, his primary calling was for social work to benefit the poor, and he actively resisted evangelism. His contact with Mahatma Gandhi had initiated withdrawal from the exclusivity of Christianity, and his open support of Indian Independence and his public argument that membership of the Congress party did not conflict with being a Christian, culminated in his alienation and dismissal from the Church. Elwin never converted to Hinduism. Even after he left the church, he remained a Christian; it was only

after coming to the North-East and his tours to Tawang and adjacent areas that he became inclined towards Buddhism and as such wished to be cremated as a Buddhist with Buddhist rites.

Post-Independence, the nationalists viewed Christian proselytization as a threat to the integrity of the nation. In this vein, Elwin wrote about the psychological harm that he perceived came with the religious conversions of the tribes. He summarized his view that the indigenous concept of religion was most akin to the broader scope of Hinduism. Even so, Elwin was also critical of the nationalist Hindu reformers and especially the caste system that excluded the tribal populations. He wrote (1964:342): 'As Hinduism spreads in a tribal area, the tribes tend to sink down to the bottom of the social scale.'

A quotation by Elwin provided as a caption in the Exhibition reasserts the position of tribal indigeneity to establish their connection and claims to their land, their position and entitlement in the new nation. Their integration continues to be a complex issue that requires careful study and a sensitive approach.

Whatever is done, and I would be the last to lay down a general programme, it must be done with caution and above all with love and reverence. The aboriginals are the real swadeshi products of India, in whose presence everyone is foreign.  
(Hivale 1946:127)

Elwin's personal reassertion of loyalty and identity was unequivocal. At a time when most of his countrymen had opted to return home after India gained Independence, Verrier Elwin, who had integrated so earnestly, could see no future for himself in England. The fact that he became the first person of foreign origin to apply for and receive Indian citizenship confirmed where his sense of identity and

loyalty lay. For the Exhibition, this personal reflection about his decision is the caption for a photograph of a single unidentified figure wearing a large carved wooden mask (Fig 19):

My becoming an Indian was not a negative thing, or reaction against something. I fell in love with India when I was with Gandhi and he accepted me. Later I had even stronger intense and specialized attachment to India's tribal people (1964:326).



**Figure 19: Baiga Masked Dancer in a Chhera Dance, Pandpur, Mandla District, Central Province**

## Elwin's Field Research

Verrier Elwin's choice to live in tribal villages for many years and to experience their way of life first-hand, was arguably a radical approach when compared to the theoretical studies made by armchair experts, such as Ghurye. From personal experience of cultural research in India and the difficulties of funding such work, I next wanted to shed light on Verrier Elwin's economic situation at the time of his research in Central India. How did this extraordinary man manage to raise income? His autobiography admits that he was impractical in financial matters, and comments made by others have confirmed this (Hivale 1946:207). In his own words Elwin wrote (1964:126):

In our earlier years in the village, Shamrao and I had a common purse. We did not take any salary and foolishly made no kind of insurance for the future. We drew what was needed for our expenses and tried to live simply. Anything we received went into the common stocks. For example, for five years I received a research grant from Merton College and, later, a grant from the Leverhulme Foundation. Later in Shillong, I had my official honorarium.

Elwin's motivation to first get involved in this difficult field of research was his awareness of the injustices that he perceived had been perpetuated by his countrymen in the colonial endeavour. It was this narrative that had brought him to India, in the first place, to work for the poor and in the quote chosen for our caption he commented that (1964:36): 'This idea became sufficiently important to break up my Oxford career and was the driving force that carried me through many difficult years in India.' The fact that the economic challenges did not deter his effort can also be an example to embolden further activism for the rights of marginalized peoples.



Figure 20: Muria girls having fun together, Bastar, 1941

From this point on the Exhibition offers a glimpse of Elwin's extensive research of other neighbouring tribes of Central India in the wider region. His most well-known monograph was *The Muria and their Ghotul* (1947) in which he elaborated in detail the traditional system of the youth dormitory that secured a safe and sanctified environment to bring the young Muria together to assimilate their traditions and celebrate the exuberance of their youth. A photograph representing the ambience of the *ghotul* is included (Fig 20) to indicate the contrast between the indigenous institutions of education and the modern system that excludes their own customs, mannerisms, language and heritage which accounts for the poor attendance and low achievement (Mahipal:1985; Veerbhadranaika et al. 2012:iii).

Elwin's work was critiqued for the lack of academic rigour and the shortage of information about his mode of approach. Did he actively avoid portraying signs of acculturation in his portraits as Edward Curtis had done earlier in his photography of the Native American? On the basis of the rudimentary photographic technology of the time, some of the portraits must have been composed. One image that has been included in this Exhibition shows a group of Muria girls listening to a gramophone (Fig 21) and first sheds light on how he was able to enter a new tribal community with whom he shared no common language; it also shows that his presence in these areas was part of the transformative experience of these communities.



**Figure 14: A group of Muria girls listening to the Gramophone, 1941 (published in The Illustrated Weekly of India)**

He wrote (1964:156):

It was in Bastar that I first began to use the gramophone as a means of breaking down barriers and creating a friendly atmosphere. I got some excellent Hindi comic records and also used to play a little Mozart and Beethoven which, I am sorry to say did not go down very well.

The next acknowledgement is for the astonishing task that Elwin had taken on by collecting and translating an immense repository of hundreds of folktales. Taking the manifold physical challenges that he faced at the heart of tribal India into account, how was he able to produce all those books? A caption in Elwin's words on this subject was chosen for the Exhibition. He wrote (1964:197)

Composing books is one thing. Typing them out and getting them printed is quite another. I myself typed out all my larger books. My practice was to type out a rough draft and then retype it again filling in the gaps and finally to make a fair copy. This involved an enormous amount of work.

A popular charge at the time was that he had 'gone native', but Verrier Elwin was acutely aware of the vast cultural gap that existed between himself and the subjects of his study. His curious gaze at their way of life was paralleled by the multitude of images of his subjects staring back. For example, the caption that is chosen for an archetypal portrait of a young Gadaba woman in her traditional attire (Fig 22) communicates the agency of the dual reflection and at the same time he also reverts back to the former accusation about his perceived wish to keep them exclusively as museum specimens when he wrote (1964:171):

They were full of interest about my way of life, invading the tent at all times, and even peeping into my bathroom (a very small leaf-hut) to study my techniques.

Indeed, I often felt as if I were a museum specimen and they members of an ethnological committee investigating a creature of the absurdist habits.



**Figure 22: Gadaba woman of Orissa, 1943.**

In Southern Orissa, Elwin recounted the reputation of the Bondo for their violent and inhospitable ways. He also recorded an intimate reflection about how he had been perceived on his arrival in a Bondo village when he wrote (1964:183):

Our next village, Bandapada was very timid. As I went down the street, mothers seized their children and hurried them indoors, girls fled whimpering with fright, doors banged fowls and pigs scurried to safety, one youth hastily got up a tree. Only a few old men, greatly daring, came to greet us. I can endure any hardship other than the realization that I look like a sort of ogre. Later I hear that it was supposed that I had come to take girls for the war that I was going to send all the children to America to be baptized, and – most curious of all – that I was an Excise Officer who had come to introduce Prohibition.

The photograph of a Bondo woman that is included in this Exhibition (Fig 23) was taken by Verrier Elwin in 1943 and was later published in *The Illustrated Weekly of India* (1953). Elwin's comment about the alarm that his presence had provoked is balanced in Hivale's admiration for his ability to fit in, supplied as the caption for an image of two Kond male dancers taken in 1955 (Fig 24), in which he observed (Hivale 1946:224): 'One of Verrier's most useful qualities as an anthropologist is his power to put himself out of the picture, to fade into the background and remain as an observer.'

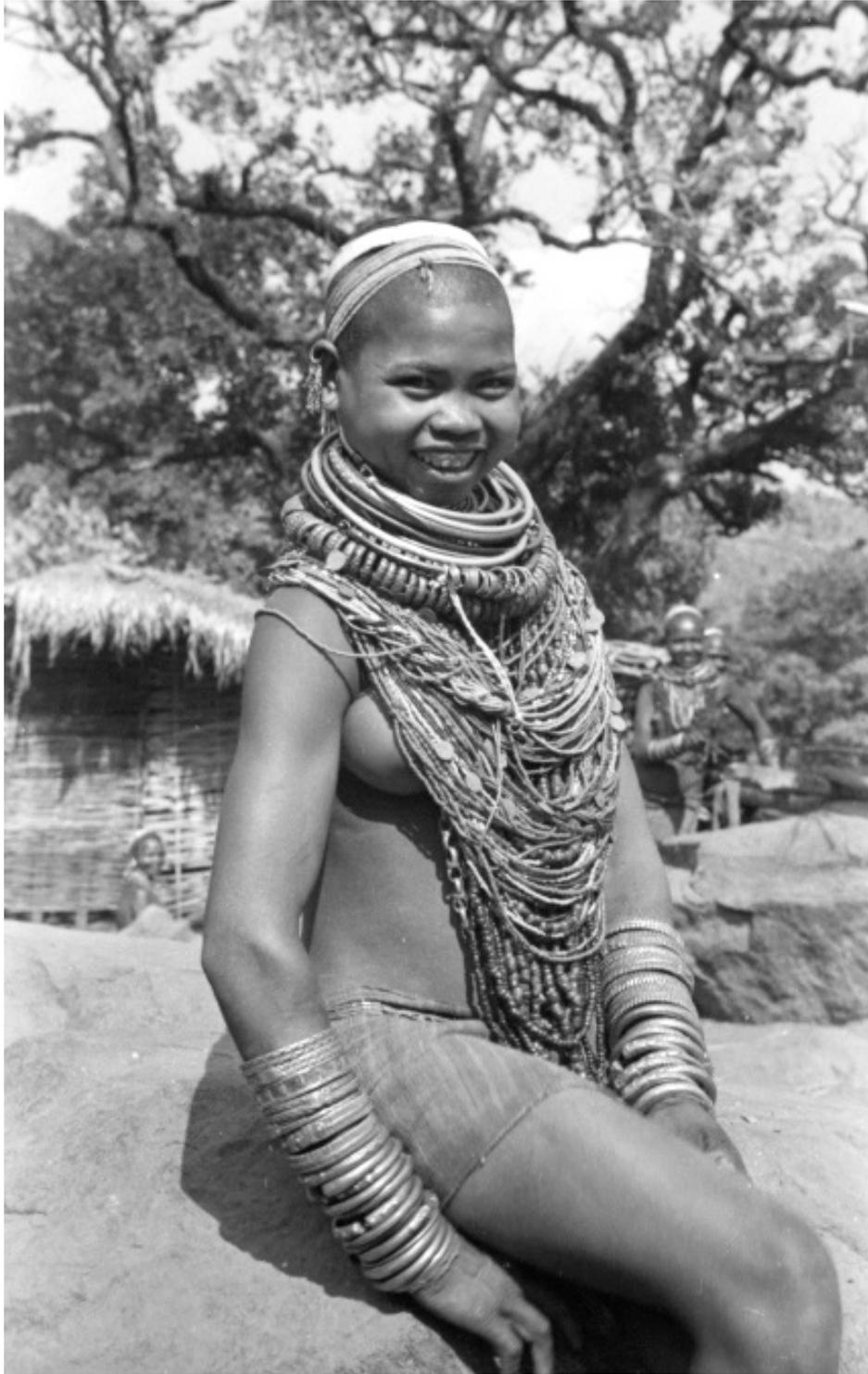


Figure 23: Bondo woman, Koraput District, Orissa 1946.



**Figure 24: Men dancers among the Konds paint themselves with stripes, Ganjam District, Orissa**

In most research locations he had been the only European on the scene; so how could this lone field research have been possible? Based on personal experience, I suggest that the simple fact that he had come alone and was able to adjust to their environment made it viable to be an observer and to give his informants the prime role.

Elwin's ability to personally relate to the tribal environment brings into sharp focus his critical thinking on the degradation of resources. The politics of tribal identity remains at the forefront of the alienation of land and the displacement of tribal communities that is brought on by development projects and multinational investment in the rich mineral resources (Mohanty 2015:144). The urgency of the issue of global environmental degradation and questions about the unsustainability

of particular aggressive capitalist ideals brings Elwin's theory about the transferability of knowledge from the rural to the urban environment, as the central message of the Exhibition presentation. The traditional values of contentment were a rational countermeasure when he wrote (1936:27):

This mud hut philosophy bids us not to demand too much from life, not to set too much store on things, not even to expect too much from the immortal gods, but to love most where love will be returned, in the charmed family circle, in the friends who will stand by you till death. A gay freedom of spirit is the most precious of possessions, and simplicity of hear (sic) the greatest treasure man or woman knows.

The photograph of Marguerite Milward that is included in the Exhibition represents one of the rare visitors from the outside world who had come to the village to meet Elwin. The sculptress and author of *Artist in Tribal India*, was devoted to primitive peoples as subjects for her work. In Elwin's photograph of her (Fig 25), she is shown modeling the head of a Gond girl; the same sculpture that was displayed in the window of India House in London was later given to Elwin. Her motto that 'art unites where politics divide' is relevant to the context of indigenous artistic practices that strengthen social identity and cohesion and the divisive politics that haunt many tribal societies in India today.



**Figure 25: Marguerite Milward, the author of *Artist in Tribal India*, sculpts the bust of Singaru,**

Tribal identity is a political issue that is both linked to the allocation of state funds (Ambagudia 2011:33-34; Ranganatha 2014:33) and to various insurgency movements, for example, the Maoist/Naxal insurgency in Central India (Singh 2012) and the numerous demands for self-determination from groups in North East India. In Manipur for instance, the demarcation between the groups that are classified as tribes and those that are excluded, fuels the ethnic tension and conflict in the state (Lisam 2013; Maisnam 2016). The critics argue that the reservations that give preferential treatment in the form of reserved seats in schools, electoral bodies and government jobs to particular socio-economically marginalized groups (Schleiter and Maaker 2010) have also created a new elite tribal class.

It is also argued that the imposition of restrictions by outsiders, to protect the culture and identity of indigenous tribes residing in a certain inhabited tribal area (Neba 2015:52) enforces the idea of separation that is considered as a threat to the integrity of the state. Notwithstanding, the members of the tribal groups that I have interacted with during this research have maintained that they are culturally distinct from the majority population. The current debate is ongoing about the need for inner line permits to restrict the numbers of migrant incomers to North East states (*The Sangai Express* 2014). In essence, the construction of nationalism that is in opposition to an 'Other', on one hand, and the popular presentations of romanticized tribal identities to promote tourism on the other, are both reminders of the legacy of colonial knowledge.

To bring this Exhibition of Photographs to a conclusion, a quote by Elwin has been selected to deliver an overarching tribute to the tribal ethos of unity and egalitarianism within the groups that he represented. The ethos was in turn compared with the complex individualism of his own social background.

In all the tribes, some of the boys and girls stood out from the rest through their beauty, their intelligence or wit, their aptitude for games or dances. Some of the older people were distinguished by their appearance, their knowledge and willingness to share it, or by what they did for me. But generally speaking, though I have many names in my mind, they were all my friends - and this is the unique and rather wonderful thing about tribal life: you escape from the normal individualism, the possessiveness and jealousies of sophisticated friendships into something broader and more universal. (1964:125-126)

The impression was idealistic as many of Elwin's conclusions were, but it accurately represents a picture of his own experience and personal evolution, and thereby communicating what he had learnt from the encounter. A spiritual reflection about the nature of love that is infused with his Christian humanist values is chosen for the closing note on the philosophy of Verrier Elwin in this Exhibition. This was the subject that he chose for a series of lectures that he delivered for the radio, and the following quote provides the caption for the last photograph of the Exhibition: a formal portrait of his wife Lila (Fig 26).



Figure 26: Lila Elwin, c 1963.

He wrote (1964:348):

When man is brought by love to realize his part in the life of the whole world, he no longer is open to the isolating power of loneliness; his personality is expanded to a

sense of unity with all things. Love brings him freedom from fear. It brings him peace and fills his soul with a gentle power that will unite conflicting forces.

The disintegration of his first marriage had ended in acrimonious divorce. He yearned for family life, and he sought a companion who would accompany him into the next chapter: he was soon to relocate to North East India where he lived for the remaining ten years of his life; this time as a bonafide Government official, in the role of Adviser for Tribal Affairs to the Governor of Assam. He married Lila, who was from Patangarh village in middle age and his son Ashok was born in Shillong.

#### **Patangarh Exhibition of Elwin's field research**

The Exhibition presents a portrait of Verrier Elwin as a romantic, sensitive man who was drawn to field research and activism over a career in the academy. Despite the criticism that he has provoked from some fellow anthropologists, many of his personal methods were well matched with the values that are upheld by marginalized indigenous communities worldwide -- long-term relationships and social empowerment over the pillar of objectivity that is professed by Western research (Smith 1999:136).



**The author Tara Douglas with a representative from IGRMS, Pardhan Gond artist and the Chief Guest at the inauguration of the Exhibition of photographs in Patangarh 3 July 2017.**

The show in Patangarh was the first event that brought Verrier Elwin's photographs back to the local community. How is the impact of the Exhibition to be assessed? There was evident interest in the photographs at the event: Gaind Lal Shyam was able to identify everyone in the group portrait under the tree in Patangarh village all those years ago – apart from himself (a child at the time), none of the others were still living. Ram Singh Urveti was emotional when he saw a picture of his mother for the first time in the same photograph. Kamli Bai Urveti, who had made special effort to come to Patangarh from her home in Chhattisgarh to meet her nephew Ashok, was able to recollect Elwin's marriage to her sister Lila.



**Gaindlal Shyam identifies the people in the portrait taken by Elwin in Patangarh.**

The village people had a glimpse of their history in the Exhibition – their ancestors, the attire, and the traditional way of life. Modern concrete buildings gradually replace the traditional mud huts; electric power has come to the village and there are now some small shops. Yet the pace of change is negligible. For those that have not migrated to Bhopal to pursue careers as professional artists (the most successful of these now enjoy a middle-class life), the rest continue subsistence farming in the village. There are still many folk artists in Patangarh. The Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya organised a three-day painting workshop for local artists to take place in the same hall where the photographs were on display, and this was the opportunity for them to create new cultural representations of their own. The postcolonial discourse on the empowerment of self-representation (Spivak 1988:70) is significant for Adivasi institutional self-

centring. The Indira Gandhi National Tribal University was established in 2008 in nearby Amarkantak to undertake cultural studies and research on tribal communities and to provide higher education and research facilities primarily for the tribal population of India. The Pardhan Gond art that originated in the village receives global recognition and has brought awards to a few selected practitioners who vie to be accepted as contemporary artists. This generation of artists is also venturing into the digital medium of animated film. The new representations illustrate the dynamism of tribal cultures that respond to the contemporary environment and deliver a different and varied landscape imagery from that used in the display captions of the exhibition of photographs.

As the text of the Exhibition has shown, Elwin was a collector of legends and myths and a believer in historical indigeneity that did not stem from a fixed repository of information. The Exhibition is a reminder for reading the Adivasi past that is associated with myths and legends. These mythologies also provide the themes for the contemporary Pardhan Gond visual art, as well as for the film *Manjoor Jhali* in the *Tales of the Tribes* collection. This short animated film that relates the story of how the peacock was created according to the Pardhan oral tradition was produced as a collaborative project between Gond artists and storytellers and media professionals who were able to assist in the technical processes of adapting the story to the audio-visual medium. Elwin's complex individualism and his distance from European objectivity that is discussed in this text, similarly points to adaptable methods and the persistent caution that is crucial to avoid delivering essentialised identities.

A second Exhibition of Photographs from Central India by Verrier Elwin is planned to take place at the Brunei Gallery at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London from 12 January to 24 March 2018. There will also be a presentation and discussion about Verrier Elwin's photographic work and his new interpretation as the animated presenter of the *Tales of the Tribes* collection of animated films at Merton College on 17 January 2018.

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