



# Il Novissimo Ramusio

28





# Incredible India – The Land of Gandhi



Verrier Elwin

# Gandhiji Bapu of His People

edited, with an Appendix, by Fabio Scialpi



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TUTTI I DIRITTI RISERVATI

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via Malladra 33 – 00157 Roma  
e-mail: [info@scienzelettere.com](mailto:info@scienzelettere.com)  
[www.scienzelettere.com](http://www.scienzelettere.com)

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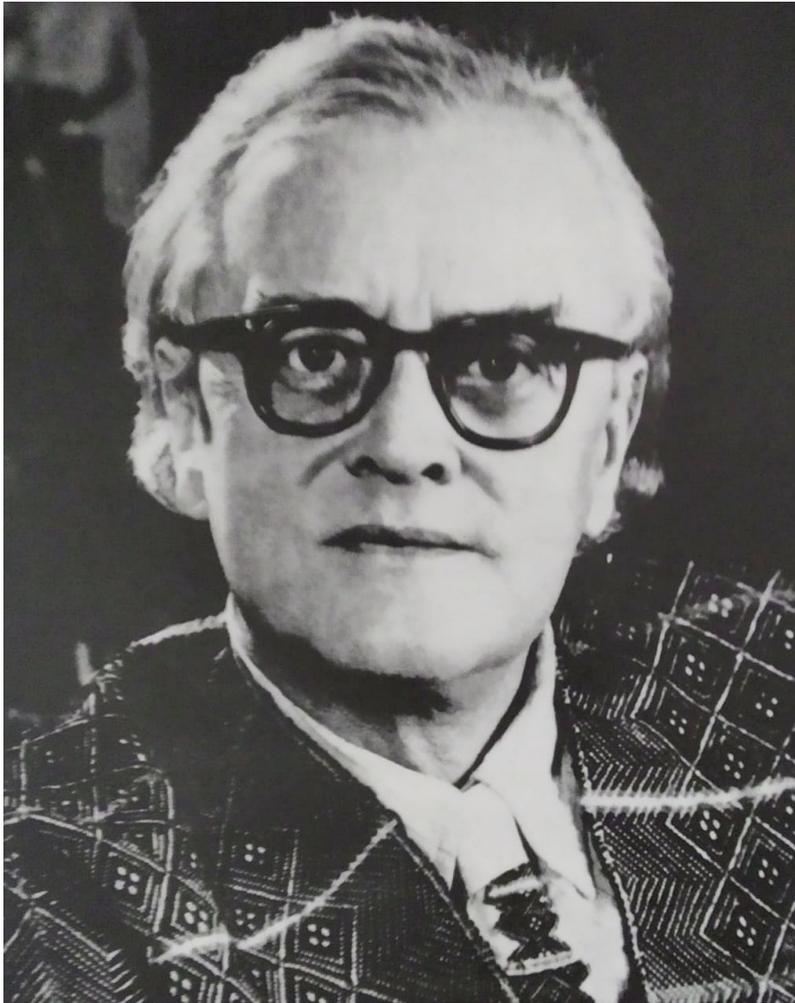
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Verrier Elwin, 1902-1964.  
Courtesy of Mr Ashok Elwin.



FABIO SCIALPI

INTRODUCTION

*Years of Training*

Dr Verrier Elwin (29.8.1902-22.2.1964) was the son of an Anglican bishop holding the see of Sierra Leone, who had been appointed Bishop of Bristol; his mother “was born in India, at Murree,<sup>1</sup> which her family had done much to found.” He was one of the most well-known, authoritative, and dedicated students of Indian Tribal Cultures. His life—described in his books, *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin. An Autobiography* (Bombay, Oxford University Press, 1964); *Philanthropologist. Selected Writings* (ed. by Nari Rustomji, North-Eastern Hill University Publications, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 1-17); and in *Scholar Gypsy: A Study of Verrier Elwin by Shamrao Hivale* (Bombay, N.M. Tripathi Ltd, Booksellers, Publishers, 1946)—, bears witness to an adventurous, fascinating story of an extraordinary man of past times.

After a brilliant career of studies in English Literature and Theology in Oxford—an experience that would continually recur with nostalgia during all his life, he left as a Christian missionary for India in November 1927 to join an ashram-settlement called the Christa Seva Sangh in Pune (then commonly written Poona). This was a small Order, founded by Father Jack

\* The Author would like to thank Dr Shobha Raghuram for her reading the manuscript and suggesting, as usual, most useful remarks.

<sup>1</sup> First British hill-station of the Punjab. Today Murri, in the Rawalpindi District of Punjab, Pakistan.

Winslow, who, after having been a missionary in Western India for many years, had identified himself more closely with the poor, with Indian nationalism, and with Indian culture. He had, therefore, decided to explore the possibility of a re-orientation of the Christian religion according to a new model of evangelical work offered by the Indian experience with special attention to service to the poor.<sup>2</sup>

It is interesting to note that the young Elwin's choice of his new activity in India was influenced by a most noble intent which, however, was characterized more by the ideal of social service than by religious commitment, i.e.,

the desire to make reparation to the poor for the way more privileged people had behaved to them. Now in relation to India I remembered how my family had made its money, such as it was, out of India, and my countrymen had gone to India to exploit it and to rule./I thought, therefore, that I might go to India as an act of reparation, that from my family somebody should go to give instead of to get, [...].<sup>3</sup>

This perhaps explains the reason why he was to become a Gandhian follower. The personality of Gandhi, who, in previous years, had impressed also his Christian most devout mother, had a strong impact on this young man who, all along his life, was to be on the side of the exploited poor, fighting for them against injustice and oppression. Elwin saw Gandhi, for the first time, in the course of a visit to his ashram, at Sabar-mati, near Ahmedabad, Gujarat in 1928, on the occasion of a conference of a body, the Inter-Religious Fellowship, which was

<sup>2</sup> This was not an unprecedented experiment. Verrier Elwin gives a few examples of missionaries trying to innovate the Christian approach in Hindu terms; amongst them he quotes Abbé Dubois, but does not mention two Italian missionaries, both Jesuits, that is, Father Roberto De Nobili (1577-1656) and Father Costantino Beschi (1680-1742). The former was accused and denounced by other jealous missionaries who reported his behaviour to Rome; he had to justify himself and wrote his *Apologia*. Cf. G. Tucci, *Italia e Oriente*, ed. F. D'Arelli, Rome, ISIAO (now ISMEO), 2005<sup>2</sup>, pp. 134-139.

<sup>3</sup> *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin. An Autobiography*, Bombay, Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 36. Indeed, he said that "he was never a missionary in the ordinary sense." (*Ibid.*, p. 96).

attended by adherents of all religions. The impression he received from this encounter is best rendered through his very words, which reflect, in Hindu terms, a sort of *darshana* (vision) that he then enjoyed:

Among them Gandhi walked in almost unearthly dignity and beauty. That was the first thing that struck me about him—his beauty, and the inner spiritual power that transformed his frail body and filled the entire place with kindness and love.<sup>4</sup>

Verrier Elwin paid several more visits at Sabarmati, while his association with the Christa Seva Sangh was gradually waning. For his first long sojourn there he was a guest in Gandhi's own house; in 1930 Gandhi said to him that as Mirabeau, a young English girl, who had left her family to become her follower, was his daughter, Verrier would be his son. From that day he considered himself as a citizen of India.<sup>5</sup>

He took part in the Indian Independence Movement from 1928 to 1932. What this cost him is witnessed by Shamrao Hivale, his friend since the time of their common association with the Christa Seva Sangh, who thus wrote:

Remember how for all these years he has been under fire from every side; he has known hatred, suspicion, criticism, abuse; he has been harassed constantly by the police for his politics; by Bishops for his religion; and it has taught him to live within himself.<sup>6</sup>

The Mahatma was most helpful when Verrier was painfully uncertain about his future with the Christa Seva Sangh. In 1931, though very busy with some important official engagements in Bombay, Gandhi sent for him and encouraged him to get rid of the burden on his mind; then he sent him at his own expense to a resort in the Himalayas to recover his health to the best.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>6</sup> Shamrao Hivale, *Scholar Gypsy. A Study of Verrier Elwin*, Bombay, N.M. Tripathi Ltd, Booksellers Publishers, 1946, p. 219. *The Scholar Gypsy* is the title of a poem by Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), which seems particularly appropriate to summarize Verrier Elwin's life and his manifold interests and talents.

*The Tribal World*

But the time was ripe for a substantial reorientation in Elwin's life. He had come to the conclusion that he had better leave the Christa Seva Sangh; so, following his special predilection for the poor, he thought of going to the untouchables and settling in Gujarat. However, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel persuaded him to renounce this project and to work instead among the tribal people for whom social workers and missionaries had not yet shown any interest, and the National Movement had ignored.

One day as I was driving through the streets of Ahmedabad with Sardar Vallabhbhai and Seth Jammalal Bajaj, I heard for the first time in my life—from the lips of Jammalal—the magic word 'Gond.'<sup>7</sup>

He decided to visit their country in the Central Provinces (now Madhya Pradesh) and afterwards to work in a small ashram in a Gond village, still as a member of the Church, but according to a Rule of Franciscan living, together with Shamrao Hivale, once the latter would be back from England where he had, in the meantime, gone for training in the Church of England. After long discussions and much good advice from Gandhi, Shamrao at last came back travelling together with Gandhi's party on his return from the Round Table Conference in London. Verrier was in Bombay to welcome back Gandhi and greet Shamrao, whose return to India was of capital importance to start out his new undertaking.

Verrier, who had resigned from the Christa Seva Sangh, was making his plans together with Shamrao for their new activity in the Gond country but was suddenly asked to reach Gandhi once again in Bombay. Here he was the eyewitness of his arrest by the police during the night. The event, which took place on 4<sup>th</sup> January 1932, is described in detail by Elwin, and is a moving testimony of Gandhi's dignified and superior moral behaviour. He was still sleeping when he was woken up by the Com-

<sup>7</sup> Elwin, *The Tribal World*, *cit.*, p. 58.

missioner of Police, and was ready in half an hour to follow him without any resistance and without saying a single word, as that was his weekly silence day. He wrote some words of encouragement and perseverance for the people, inciting them to continue the struggle for Swaraj in the spirit of truth and non-violence. Then he gave a letter to Verrier, asking him to tell Elwin's countrymen that he loved them, and had never done, nor would he ever do in future, anything against them in hatred or in malice, but would act towards them no differently from what, in similar circumstances, he had done towards his kith and kin. That happened in the midst of the crowd of about three hundred of Gandhi's followers, who could have easily overwhelmed the few policemen who were arresting their beloved leader, but had no reaction against them.

On the advice of the Bishop Wood of Nagpur, he and Shamrao decided to choose the Gond village of Karanjia, in the Mandla District of the Central Provinces. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of January, 1932, they started out in a bullock-cart, with only a couple of hundred rupees between them, through the jungle into the Maikal Hills to reach the village two days later.

This was the onset of a period of great difficulties due to the strong opposition of the new Bishop of Nagpur, who considered Gandhi as "the great enemy of Christ in modern India," and, therefore, could not admit any association of Verrier and Shamrao with him and the Congress. He went so far in his correspondence with Elwin as to insult him as "an undesirable and dangerous person" and accuse him of being "a traitor to the cause of Christ," "a traitor to the King-Emperor" and to do "the work of the devil."

On the other hand, after writing a letter, as a matter of courtesy, on the 29<sup>th</sup> January, to the Deputy Commissioner at Mandla, D.V. Rege, Verrier was informed that, in view of his political record, they did not want him in that District. Previously, on 15<sup>th</sup> January, from the District Magistrate of Peshawar he had received an Order of deportation from the North-West Frontier Province, and was forced to leave at once on the first train without being allowed to catch a more comfortable train the next morning.

In the same year, in view of returning to England during the rains to inform people about the Indian situation, and to see his mother, who had been seriously ill, Elwin asked for a renewal of his passport from the Bombay Government, but that was only extended for three weeks, a period which would allow him to reach England but not to return to India. Once in London he was not received by Samuel Hoare, then the Secretary of State for India, and the renewal of his passport was done but it was endorsed as not valid for India. Later, Verrier was allowed to return to India only after accepting very heavy conditions limiting his liberty of action in that country.

He then started his work amongst the tribals according to an attitude of mind totally different from that which was proper to the Christa Seva Sangh that he had left and to the missionary purposes in general.

I did not have the least desire to preach my religion to anyone, still less to convert any of the Gonds to Christianity. [...]. This was partly due, [...], to my Oxford studies in mysticism, partly due to the influence of Gandhi and my growing knowledge of other religions and reverence for them. [...]. I had also already developed my dislike of imposing on other people and especially on tribal people. While I could see the point of a missionary entering into religious argument with a Brahmin, it seemed to me that to chase after a simple tribesman was rather too much liking shooting a sitting bird.<sup>8</sup>

Verrier Elwin was to become the most passionate advocate of the Indian Tribals' rights and an in-depth student of their cultures which, at that time, were already facing the risk of vanishing under the impact of modernity as well as the dangers of uncontrolled exploitation of Indian forests, from immemorial time the ancestral home to these little human groups. Once he said, "the pen is the chief weapon with which I fight for my poor."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>9</sup> Ramachandra Guha (ed. and introduced by), *Makers of Modern India*, Gurgaon, Haryana, Penguin Books India, 2012, p. 470. See the Chapter 'The Defender of the Tribals. Verrier Elwin,' pp. 469-484.

Amongst the tribes to which he devoted his attention a special mention is deserved by the Baiga of Madhya Pradesh,<sup>10</sup> characterized by a complex mythology and for their well-known expertise in magic. In fact, magic was the most potent reality of their life. The Baiga's charms were a necessity in a world where nothing was believed to happen by chance, so that to the village magicians was entrusted the task of controlling every aspect of village life—"the growth of the crops, the potency of the bridegroom, the frustration of witches, the protection of the village against bears and tigers."<sup>11</sup>

The Agaria, a small group of blacksmiths and iron-smelters of the old Central Provinces, shared with the Baiga many social customs that shaped a remarkable part of their way of life. Iron was at the core of their beliefs which were founded on the idea of magic iron and chastity, "vestal iron that is powerful to protect from earthquake and lightning and every assault of ghostly enemies." The Virgin Iron was that extracted from a new furnace used for the first time, which was thought to be most potent for magic and for medicine. Virgin Iron was especially vital when a group of Agaria moved to a new village, where they could build a virgin furnace, make a virgin smithy, and establish a virgin home. Virgin Iron was surrounded by taboos, preserved carefully, and particularly valuable against cosmic dangers; at the beginning of the world, it was used to make the nails that would keep it fixed in its proper state.<sup>12</sup>

In Bastar<sup>13</sup> he studied the Bison-Horn Marias of the south, well-known for their marriage-dance, probably the finest one in tribal India.<sup>14</sup> In the north of the same region, careful atten-

<sup>10</sup> V. Elwin, *The Baiga*, London, John Murray, 1939.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 338-339.

<sup>12</sup> V. Elwin, *The Agaria*, London, Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1942, pp. XXI, 157-164.

<sup>13</sup> Bastar State was a Princely State during the British Raj. It was situated in the south-eastern corner of the Central Provinces and Berar. It acceded to the Union of India on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1948; became part of the Madhya Pradesh in 1956 and later, in 2000, part of the Bastar District of Chhattisgarh State (*Wikipedia*).

<sup>14</sup> Elwin, *The Tribal World*, *cit.*, pp. 160-161.

tion was paid to the Murias for their most typical institution, the *ghotul*.<sup>15</sup> This was a village dormitory where the relationship between the boys and girls was approved and recognised, even though submitted to rigid different rules, either of fidelity in the couple, or, on the contrary, because any kind of lasting attachment between the opposite sexes was forbidden. In both cases, positive consequences were observed for the lessons of cleanliness, discipline, and hard work that were imparted to children and would remain with them during their lives.<sup>16</sup>

In Orissa Elwin especially studied some tribes, amongst which were the Kuttia Konds. They were very poor, charming and loyal friends, timid and yet, surprisingly enough (at least in the eyes of modern Western culture), traditionally committed to the celebration of Meriah sacrifice. This was the practice of human victims offered to the Earth Goddess in order to fertilise the soil, which the Government had put down long before; but, still in 1944, its restoration was by them greatly longed for, and reluctantly replaced with the buffalo killing in place of human beings.<sup>17</sup>

Another Orissan tribe, the Bondos, were studied between December 1943 and 1947.<sup>18</sup> This was a small group of people, comparatively unaffected by the progress of civilization, rather inhospitable, bad tempered, and unwilling to offer any sort of help to foreign visitors who would venture to reach their highland inaccessible country where the homicide rate was the highest in India. And yet Verrier managed to make friends with many of them, and was able to appreciate their way of life which was marked by courage, freedom, independence, and industry.

He amusingly described the failure of a musical gramophone entertaining which, having been elsewhere in great demand, he expected to be successful there as well! However,

<sup>15</sup> V. Elwin, *The Muria and their Ghotul*, Bombay, Oxford University Press, 1947.

<sup>16</sup> Elwin, *The Tribal World*, *cit.*, pp. 162-170.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 177-179.

<sup>18</sup> V. Elwin, *Bondo Highlander*, Bombay, Oxford University Press, 1950.

the presentation's outcome was most unsuccessful as the simple public of the forest was frightened by what it imagined the sound-box could contain. Indeed, the sudden appearance of a sort of Pandora's box in a remote 'uncivilised' Bondo village was something most dangerous to minds accustomed to a world haunted by malignant spirits which could prove very harmful if not properly appeased.

A remarkable and interesting feature of this culture consisted in a sort of educational ceremony that was devised to keep control over one's bad temper, so characteristic of "excessive" Bondos. To the loud beating of drums, in succession, couples of little boys armed with long switches were encouraged to beat each other as hard as they could. However, when they had enough, they would respectfully salute and embrace one another, giving way to the next turn. When all the couples had finished their exercise, a priest would give them a special cake to mark the reciprocal pardon and would admonish them never to beat anyone in anger, never to make anybody angry, always to treat one's fellow as a brother. This was a practice meant to develop self-control and calm down tensions, by means of the memory of a painful experience, as the boys would grow up from their childhood to being young men.<sup>19</sup>

Another group that Verrier Elwin studied in Orissa for seven years was the section of Saoras living in the hill villages above Gunupur.<sup>20</sup> They had remained untouched by external influences so to present a unique advantageous observatory of what their tribal life had continued to be for hundreds of years. In fact, they did not like visitors as they were believed to be potential carriers of the spiritual infection caused, like an actual disease, by nefarious invisible agents coming from the outside world. Indeed, they had even established a regular tariff in terms of sacrifices to be offered in order to purify their villages from the magical defilement that foreigners like Forest Officers or Sub-Inspectors of Police could bring into them.

<sup>19</sup> Elwin, *The Tribal World*, *cit.*, pp. 180-188.

<sup>20</sup> V. Elwin, *The Religion of an Indian Tribe*, Bombay, Oxford University Press, 1955.

They were most able in building up the hillsides, for a thousand feet, cultivated terraces of soil only three feet wide, rising one above the other, perfectly aligned, designed to keep the water without any waste and check all erosion. Sometimes a stone wall fifteen feet high was made to hold up the whole ridge of terraces planned and carried out with surprising engineering expertise.

This manual skill was accompanied by an extraordinarily potential imagination of their mind in creating subtle convictions that characterised their religious world. They believed that beyond the visible world there was another realm of reality, the Underworld, which was peopled by spirits whose activities could interfere at every moment with the existence of human beings. The Ghosts' life was analogous to, and as miserable as, that of humans even though in a rather gloomy natural scenario and on a smaller scale; it was believed that they would die again, but, if properly cremated (that which underlines the role of religion in this culture), they faded away forever from the hardships of existence.

However, the rulers of this Underworld led a much better life and were keen on contacts with the living; they, both male and female, even looked for partners in the visible world. They appeared in dreams to their candidate companions and begged for their consent to marriage. This especially happened after puberty to some girls who were wooed by these insistent lovers, lived in a turmoil for some time, and at last got married through a complex and costly rite which, once again, testifies to the importance of religion and its essential function to solve problems in this society.

After such a mystic marriage these chosen girls entertained a permanent relationship with their ghost-husbands; they believed they could have even children from them, and enjoyed their guidance as tutelary spirits. The girl thus became a special priestess who, with the assistance of her unseen husband, could carry out the work of divination, cure of the sick, solace in grief or anxiety to the benefit of every person of her tribe who needed her help. Males too could go through similar experiences after which they became, and were socially recog-

nised as, most valued medicine-men who would generously and earnestly work to the advantage of their tribe.<sup>21</sup>

The presentation of the tribes to which Verrier Elwin devoted his passionate research needs not draw our attention any longer as this is not the right place for a detailed and exhaustive examination. We only wanted to give an idea about the tribal world where he spent a large part of his life through a small sample of it. This has allowed us to prove how these cultures—in the past wrongly and unjustly called ‘primitive’—, were organised in such a way as to provide the appropriate mental and religious categories that responded to their necessities for survival, until external influences upset their way of life and destroyed their natural environment. All of this strictly corresponds to the ideals and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi.

### *Story of Death in a Tribal Culture*

We take the liberty of giving one last example about how the end of life, the most dramatic problem of human existence, was dealt with, explained, and resolved in one of these tribal cultures. The coming of death into the world is variously dealt with in several myths from different cultures that Elwin recorded in some of his books.

Death was a stranger in the old world and a few stories tell us how he first came, not to make men sad but to console them and lift from them the burden of having to live too long.<sup>22</sup>

We here refer to the story—which is rather a foundation myth—, given in the culture of the Singphos, a Buddhist small population living in the area which used to be called the North-East Frontier of India (“a wild and mountainous tract in the

<sup>21</sup> *The Tribal World, cit.*, pp. 188-194.

<sup>22</sup> V. Elwin, *When the World Was Young. Folk-tales from India's Hills and Forests*, Delhi, The Publication Division, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Government of India, 1961, Preface.

Assam Himalayas”), where the Author served as Adviser for Tribal Affairs, at the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA).

The myth starts with the description of what life was at the establishment of the world.

At the beginning people did not die and did not know how to weep. They grew very old and as they got older and older their misery increased. They could not walk, they had very little to eat and there was no joy or comfort in their lives.

Then something happened by chance. A squirrel was killed by a kite; a man called Singra-Phang-Magam saw it and was astonished for he had never seen a dead creature. Thus he asked the Moon and the Stars to come and see, saying that a man had died. They went but angrily replied that that was not a man but only an animal. The man, in his turn, asked them again why the squirrel had died and why men would not die in the same way.

The Moon and the Stars asked, “Do men also want to die?” “Certainly they do,” he said. “As one grows old, life becomes intolerable.”

The Moon, the Stars and all the spirits assured that if men would eat the squirrel’s flesh, they all would die.

Singra-Phang-Magam cut the body up into tiny pieces and distributed it to all the men and women in the world, and as a result death came to them and they learnt how to weep.

The conclusion is easy: “death came to man, not as a curse, but as a blessing.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, it was the first man himself who chose this end of things for human life. And this is not enough, as we are informed about what comes next.

But to the hill people death is not the end. The soul lives on, in a village not unlike the villages of the earth, and in time he is joined by the souls of those he loved in life. The soul continues to be one of the family: the living put out

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81.

food for him: he appears to them in dreams. Many of the hill people believe that he returns to earth in another form.<sup>24</sup>

### *Philanthropology*

Verrier Elwin was, to a certain extent, the founder of an original approach to Anthropology, which he called “Philanthropology,” a new word he minted that joins the conventional name of an area of social research with the attitude of mind of a philanthropist, who promotes the welfare of people whose culture he wants to study. He wrote that

there is nothing whatever hostile to scientific inquiry in having an intense and affectionate interest in the people one studies, in desiring their progress and welfare and in regarding them as human beings rather than as laboratory specimens. [...]. For me anthropology did not mean ‘field work:’ it meant my whole life.<sup>25</sup>

One could oppose such a perspective of investigation in so much as it might influence the observer and, therefore, bias the results of his/her research. But this was not Elwin’s case as he was very careful to maintain a detached point of view towards the object of his anthropological analysis, even though his desire to help the tribes he was studying was his main concern and strongest motivation.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>25</sup> Elwin, *The Tribal World*, *cit.*, pp. 141-142.

<sup>26</sup> Bhabagrahi Misra, *Verrier Elwin. A Pioneer Indian Anthropologist*, London, Asia Publishing House, 1973, pp. 92-101. This Author recognises Elwin’s “life-long devotion to tribal research” and “the vital knowledge about the tribes” that he provided, but seems to frown on “his heterogeneous conceptual approach and eclectic methods in the field and in his analyses,” even though “strictly within the provenance of data of a particular culture area.” (p. 93). The judgement on Verrier Elwin’s work given in the Foreword to this book by a Professor of the Department of Anthropology, Harvard University, Cambridge, was, on the whole, rather disparaging, so that it should not detain us here any longer. However, Elwin was well aware of this type of criticism which, after all, he would not mind too much. As he said, “in India at the present

My method of translation was to be very simple and to be careful not to add any new images to the original. [...]. It is very important that the anthropologist should come down from his perch and, as far as he possibly can, become what G.K. Chesterton once called 'the invisible man.'

That is, one who disappears, goes completely ignored, and after all does not count, like what happens in one of Father Brown detective stories—where the murderer was the postman whom the witnesses had forgot due to his habitual and unnoticed presence at the scene of the crime.<sup>27</sup> This is, in fact, what happened to him when visiting a Baiga village: no one, as usual, would take heed to him as he was considered 'one of theirs.'<sup>28</sup>

Another interesting feature of Elwin's personality was his love for poetry.

Ever since I left Oxford poetry has been my inseparable companion. [...]. Like Keats, I cannot exist without Eternal Poetry to fill the day.<sup>29</sup>

And what is peculiar of his method was the application of this attitude to his work of anthropological research. Let us him speak for himself.

time, where, [...], the tribal people are being very rapidly changed and merged into ordinary society, I believe that we should put every possible anthropologist and sociologist into the work of guiding development and training its agents. This need not mean any lowering of the standards of research, still less a bias towards any particular theory." (Elwin, *The Tribal World, cit.*, pp. 142-143). A balanced judgement on Verrier Elwin's work was given, from the very beginning of his activity, by one of the most famous Indian anthropologists, Sarat Chandra Roy, who, in his Foreword to *The Agaria*, wrote that "Mr Verrier Elwin had published this monograph written in the light of intimate personal knowledge, deep sympathy and first-hand investigation conducted scientifically. [...]. Indian ethnology is fortunate in securing the whole-hearted [...] services of a consummate scholar and a sturdy champion of the poor and the oppressed in Mr Verrier Elwin, whose name is now a household word among the aborigines of the Central Provinces." (pp. VII, XIII).

<sup>27</sup> Elwin, *The Tribal World, cit.*, pp. 144, 150.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

The chief problem of the student of man is to find his way underneath the surface; he has to 'dig' people. Poetry is the revealer, the unveiler; [...]. And I soon found it, for among these gentle and romantic tribal people, poetry jumps out at you. It is there everywhere, in their eyes, on their lips, even in some of their actions. And so now poetry became, from something external to be admired, part of me, a personal possession, and whatever I have done in the name of poetry comes from the work I have done with my tribal poet-friends./ I found the people talking poetry.<sup>30</sup>

We can conclude the description of the impact of the tribal world on Verrier Elwin's life, once again with his personal reflection:

The tribes were such an important part of my life and brought so much interest and pleasure into it that without them, [...], my story would be incomplete. [...]. It is the tribes who have been my life and that is why I have had to put them in its record.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, the titles of 'The Forest Friend' and 'The Father of Indian Tribals,' which his work earned him, seems to be well justified and rightly deserved.

#### *Public Tribute to an Indian Humanist*

Verrier Elwin wrote many scientific monographs and a great many articles destined to the general reader<sup>32</sup> that collect customs, beliefs, art, and myths of a great many tribal cultures which would now be forgotten and lost for ever but for his patient and loving care.<sup>33</sup> He also documented his field work with over ten thousand black and white photographs taken

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>32</sup> A Bibliography of his writings is given in V. Elwin, *Philanthropologist. Selected Writings*. ed. Nari Rustomji, North-Eastern Hill University Publications, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 371-379.

<sup>33</sup> A List of the Tribes studied by him is given in Misra, *op. cit.*, pp. 147-148.

between the years 1930s and early 1960s, which constitute a unique, precious testimony to Indian ethnological heritage.

He was conferred the Indian citizenship in 1954, being the first foreigner ever to receive such a great honour. In the same year, Jawaharlal Nehru appointed him as Adviser for Tribal Affairs to the Administration of the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA). His suggestions in carrying out this task were published in a volume, *A Philosophy for NEFA*, Shillong, North-East Frontier Agency, 1964. A witness to his success in offering his experience to the improving the life conditions of the tribes he had studied in that area was given in most positive way by Christian von Fürer-Haimendorf, one of the most renowned anthropologists of the tribal populations and cultures of the Indian Subcontinent.<sup>34</sup>

In 1961 Verrier Elwin was awarded the Padma Bhushan, one of the greatest honours conferred by the President of the Republic of India “to scientists, doctors, philosophers, musicians, men of letters, leading athletes, artists, social workers and a carefully restricted number of officials and administrators.”<sup>35</sup>

In consequence of his contribution to the cause of Indian Independence he is considered one of the Makers of Modern India.<sup>36</sup>

### *Bapu of His People*

On the occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Mahatma’s birthday, in the perspective of the Programme, ‘150 Years of Celebrating the Mahatma,’ launched by the Government of India and carried out in Italy by the Embassy of India in Rome, ISMEO – The International Association for Mediterranean and Oriental Studies,<sup>37</sup> has planned a fresh publication of two Vol-

<sup>34</sup> Misra, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-101.

<sup>35</sup> Elwin, *The Tribal World, cit.*, pp. 251-253.

<sup>36</sup> Guha, *op. cit.* See also, by the same author, *Savaging the Civilized. Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India*, Gurgaon. Haryana, Penguin Books India, 2016<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>37</sup> This Institution, which operates in continuity with the one established by Prof. Giuseppe Tucci in 1933, is well aware of the magisterial lesson and



Mahatma Gandhi on a walk together with Verrier Elwin, Sabarmati Ashram, Ahmedabad, 1931. Courtesy of Mr Ashok Elwin.

umes of writings on Gandhi by Verrier Elwin. A few Editor's Notes have been added in footnotes when this has been judged helpful to a better understanding of the context and past circumstances by today's readers.

The first, *Gandhi nel 150° anniversario della nascita*, was printed in February 2020; the second, *Gandhiji, Bapu of His People*, is the present one. It contains two essays of Dr Verrier Elwin which were, respectively, published in 1932 and 1956. The former was to accompany a set of drawings in pen pencil and brush concerning Mahatma Gandhi, whose life and teachings were illustrated by a famous Indian painter of those days, Kanu Desai; however, as we were not able to ascertain who was the

the precious cultural heritage handed down by this Master of Oriental studies, amongst which India has enjoyed the greatest prominence.



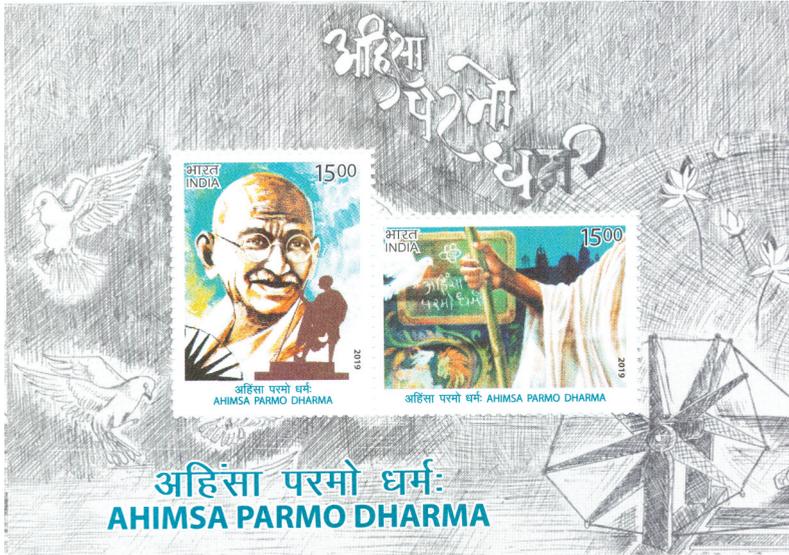
Mahatma Gandhi after his fast, talking with Verrier Elwin, 1932. Courtesy of Mr Ashok Elwin.

holder of the copyright of those pictures, we have preferred to reprint only the text of Verrier Elwin.

The latter, which lends its title to our book here, contains an essay by the same Author that was particularly designed for use by those, in the hills of North-Eastern India, who might have, until that time, been “cut off from the currents of national life.” It was printed, with a Foreword by Jairamdas Doulatram, Governor of Assam, in Shillong, at the Assam Govt. Press, in 1956.

Both of them give a very interesting picture of Bapu, “the beautiful and tender name that his friends and children had for him—Bapu, the father of his people.” Here Mahatma Gandhi and his activities are seen by a foreigner, belonging to the Western culture, who had the privilege of observing the Mahatma closely, living for some time in his Ashram, and being often entrusted by him with messages for the British people, whom Verrier Elwin would contact to let them know the situation that was going on in India under Gandhi’s guidance in the struggle for Home Rule.

Thus, “this Master of the art of living,” appears to us face-to-face, so to say, as a public leader, guiding India to Independence “with the only weapons he ever used, the weapons of love, truth and forgiveness.” He taught that “Politics cannot be



Indian philatelic issue on the occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Mahatma's birthday (a gift from Prof. R. Pandit and Dr Sh. Raghuram).

divorced from religion;” insisted that “In the dictionary of Satyagraha there is no enemy,” so that “A Satyagrahi may cause suffering to himself, but never to others;” continuously stressed the fundamental importance of self-purification.

At the same time, Bapu continued, even in the simplest things of his private everyday life, to offer the example to follow. He was very careful not to waste anything; he believed in doing things for oneself and not depending on others, which resulted in the economic principle of a spinning-wheel in every home, and a weaving-mill in every village. He was fond of playing with children, and “delighted in their company, as he delighted in all the simple joys—birds, flowers, animals, the whole of nature.”

Finally, the Volume is accompanied by an Appendix of the Editor, which underlines the importance of Gandhi for contemporary world's society. Indeed, a great many of the Mahatma's

principles which formed his ‘philosophy of life’ are still to be construed as a light for all governments and people of good will everywhere on earth. Suffice it here to remember his call for “abolishing poverty, with all its attendant forms of indignities,” as well as others of his teachings on very important matters such as a sustainable development, careful attention to environment, protection of ethnic minorities, encouragement of self-sustaining communities.

Most heartfelt thanks are due to Mr Ashok Elwin for his consent to the publication of this Book and, together with his wife Lesitta and their daughters Verrina and Jessica, for the kind hospitality I enjoyed in their house in Shillong, where we discussed the possibility of some further initiatives as a tribute of honour to the memory of Verrier Elwin. I had the opportunity of hearing about him when he was a little child by reading his father’s *Autobiography* over forty years ago.<sup>38</sup> Little did I know then that I would one day meet him in Shillong: it has been a sort of ‘tryst with my destiny.’

Sincere thanks are also due to the President of ISMEO, Prof. Adriano Rossi, and the entire Board of the Association for their approval to participate in the Programme ‘150 Years of Celebrating the Mahatma Gandhi.’ The publication, in the prestigious Series ‘Il Novissimo Ramusio,’ of the present Volume, which follows the one in Italian that I have mentioned above, constitutes perhaps the most important, but not the only one, of our efforts towards this purpose.

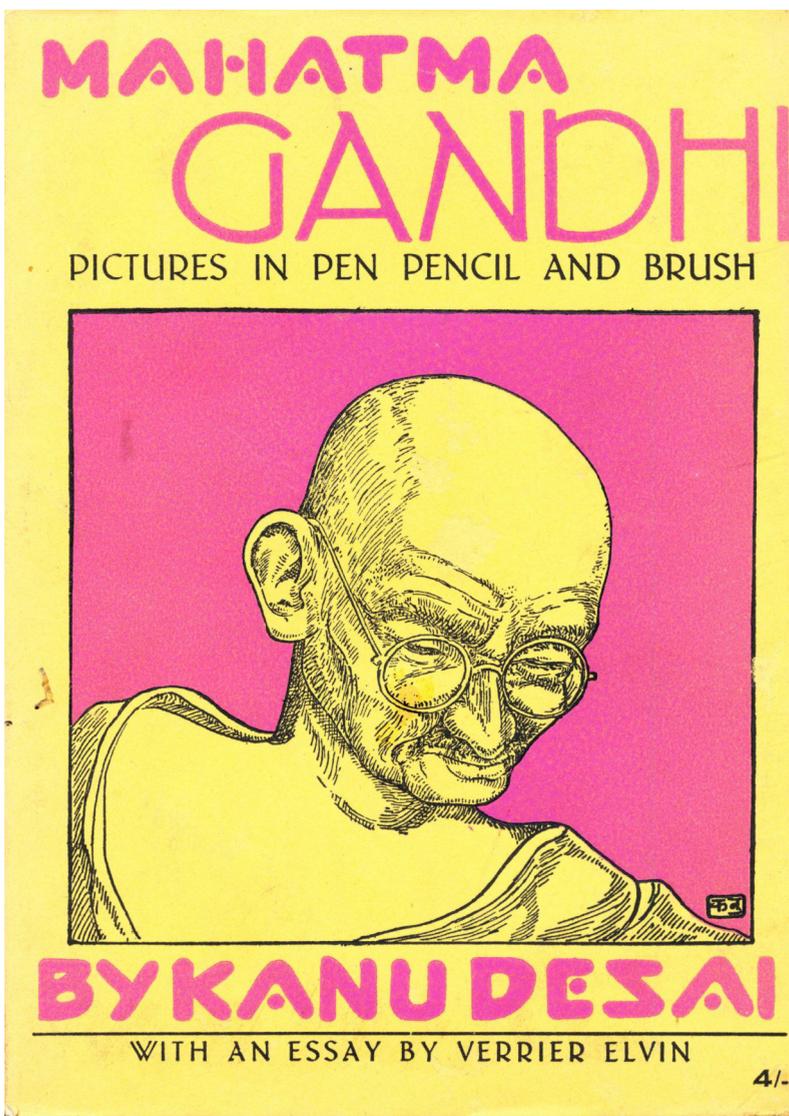
I would also like to thank Dr Beniamino Melasecchi, who is the Art Director of the ISMEO Publications, and his Editorial Staff, Dr Marco Baldi, Archaeologist, Dr Priscilla Vitolo, Archaeologist, and Ms Laura Varriale, Secretary Accountant, for their invaluable contribution to the publication of the Volume.

<sup>38</sup> Elwin, *The Tribal World*, *cit.*, pp. 304-313. This book was given to me by Dr Anna Marie Gade, who served in World Health Organization in India for many years; she retired and settled in Rome afterwards. I maintain a fond memory of her friendship and generosity.



TWO TEXTS BY  
VERRIER ELWIN





Original Front Cover of the Volume. Personal Copy of Verrier Elwin.  
Courtesy of Mr Ashok Elwin.