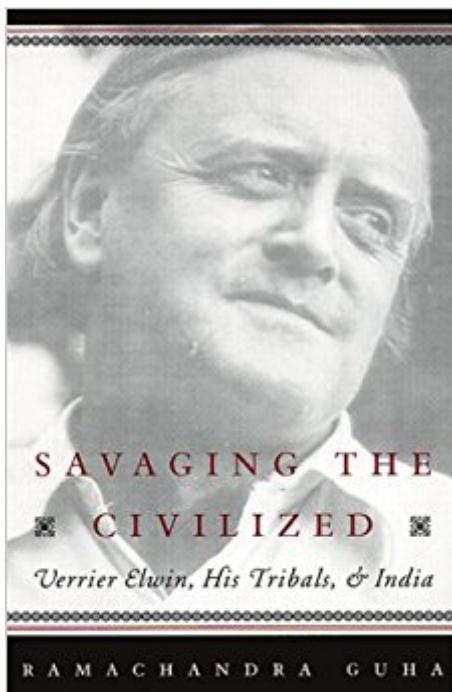


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Savaging The Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, And India



Synopsis

Verrier Elwin (1902-1964) was unquestionably the most colorful and influential non-official Englishman to live and work in twentieth-century India. A prolific writer, Elwin's ethnographic studies and popular works on India's tribal customs, art, myth and folklore continue to generate controversy. Described by his contemporaries as a cross between Albert Schweitzer and Paul Gauguin, Elwin was a man of contradictions, at times taking on the role of evangelist, social worker, political activist, poet, government worker, and more. He rubbed elbows with the elite of both Britain and India, yet found himself equally at home among the impoverished and destitute. Intensely political, the Oxford-trained scholar tirelessly defended the rights of the indigenous and, despite the deep religious influences of St. Francis and Mahatma Gandhi on his early career, staunchly opposed Hindu and Christian puritans in the debate over the future of India's tribals. Although he was ordained as an Anglican priest, Elwin was married twice to tribal women and enthusiastically (and publicly) extolled the tribals' practice of free sex. Later, as prime minister Nehru's friend and advisor in independent India, his compelling defense of tribal hedonism made him at once hugely influential, extremely controversial, and the polemical focal point of heated discussions on tribal policy and economic development. *Savaging the Civilized* is both biography and history, an exploration through Elwin's life of some of the great debates of the twentieth century: the future of development, cultural assimilation versus cultural difference, the political practice of postcolonial as opposed to colonial governments, and the moral practice of writers and intellectuals.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is a very well-written and sympathetic biography of a great human being who struggled through many of his human impulses yet he remained true to himself till the end, the courage to live with enormous integrity. The author has taken pains to give us glimpses of an another world within India, and what possibly motivated (and continues to motivate) the citizens of that world. A world which even the "greats" of India's freedom movement did not care to empathise with. The book is all the more important as it tells us of the work of a man who respected the tribals of India, literally lived like them, and not as an outsider, and sang and danced with them. And that at a time when tribal life style in India is either being show cased or relegated to the background by the dominant middle class culture. The author's style is engaging, without ever being patronising, and the prose is very readable without ever being difficult. A brilliant tour de force. Chinu

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. A fine study of the "philanthropologist" Verrier Elwin, who went from Oxford cleric to tribal scholar/activist, living among various groups of 'aboriginal' Indians and taking up their causes. Elwin was the first Englishman to gain Indian citizenship after independence, but constantly wrote against those in power (at a state or a national level) who attempted to destroy tribal ways of life. Extremely interesting discussion of the delicate negotiation of a suitable rhetoric in the overheated debates around such issues. Deftly illuminates the contradictions of nationalism and the postcolonial state, where hegemonic identity politics attempts to dominate those on the margins, all in the name of 'liberation'. Important and NECESSARY corrective to simple assumptions about what postcoloniality involves. I recommend it highly. A good read!

Dr Elwin has indeed been very brave in his presentation of the hill tribes of India, and their lifestyle which is completely at odds to our traditional Western culture. And not only our Western culture, but that of the rest of the world.

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