

From Narrative Imagination to Narrative Reinhabitation : A Study in Bioregional Imagination

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Abstract

In this paper I would critically examine the basic tenets of bioregionalism in the context of Verrier Elwin's tryst with the Gonds. For this purpose I would consider Elwin's autobiography The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin. This would address the issue of the sense of place that is mediated and propagated on the one hand and the sense of place attained through "learning to live-in-place" and the fundamental shift in perception on the other hand. This very process of 'reinhabitation' also entails decolonisation through a process of interrogation and introspection, as David A. Greenwood would have it(Rangarajan,68). As the project of Imperialism had been cemented and consolidated with the civilising mission of the Christian missionaries, religion becomes a tool that orients us in the discourse of colonialism. It is through the discourse of bioregionalism that the dominant, homogenized monoculture could be countered and the binary of the Centre and the periphery in the Western logic could be dismantled.

Keyword: Bioregionalism, reinhabitation, narrative reinhabitation, tribal discourse

Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha in their book *This Fissured Land* considered the colonisation of the Indian forests as the watershed moment which resulted a change in the socio-cultural fabric. The community of forest-dwellers were the ones directly impacted by their forest policies. Also, the British considered the tribals as savage who needed to be civilised in the first place. To serve this purpose, they had sent Christian missionaries to the land of the natives.

Christian missionaries had at its core deep rooted religious supremacy and had been a tool for domination

as well. Also, providing a spiritual cement to the basic structure of dominion through the spread of their religion and its doctrines. As Max Muller declared, "It would cease to exist if it disregarded the parting words of its founder, 'Go ye, and therefore teach all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the father and the Son and of the Holy Ghost; teaching them to observe all things I have commended, and lo, I am with you always, even on to the end of the world"(Pachpore, 49).

If Christ was the 'light' of the world and therefore, the norm and His followers, the messengers of 'light', anything that appeared different or foreign could be labelled as 'darkness', while its followers were deemed as 'barbarians' that needed to be civilised and purged of its darkness. As Sir Richard Temple in his speech delivered to the Baptist Missionary Society in London in April 1833 stated, "...every Christian is duty bound to spread the religion; that the heaviest responsibility in this regard had fallen upon the British- that Buddhism and Hinduism are dying and dead; that the tribals ought to be made the special focus of the exertions of the missionary and in the moral responsibilities before God and man, India was a country which all other Christians in Britain were bound to enlighten with Eternal Truth"(Qtd. in "Christian Missionary Activities in India").

Although the missionaries brought along educational reforms, the natives were brought to contempt their own culture. Consequently, they produced a class of Indians who would be their mirror image in attitudes and thought processes. As Vivekanand said, "The child is taken to school and the first thing he learns is that his father is a fool, the second thing that his grandfather is a lunatic, the third thing that all his teachers are hypocrites, the fourth that all the sacred books are lies. By the time he is sixteen he is a mass of negation, lifeless and boneless..."(Qtd. in "Christian Missionary Activities in India").

This culminated into the internalisation of the idea that the West is inherently superior and the East as culturally inferior and primitive through misrepresentations and prejudices. As Edward W. Said puts it, "the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences"(Purchase,58). It is this 'construction' of knowledge about the East from actually not knowing the place that the narrative imagination and representations are harping on. This leads us to identify the gap between the sense of place that is mediated, shared and propagated through "sets of meanings produced in films, literature, advertising, and other forms of mediation", to quote T. Cresswell, and the sense of place gained through experiences of both the physical terrain and that of consciousness as well.

It is, therefore, through bioregional imagination, that one can reimagine the way we relate to the place that is ecologically and culturally oriented and not just politically motivated. As Kirkpatrick Sale in his book *Dwellers in the Land : The Bioregional Vision* proclaimed, "...the crucial and perhaps only and all-encompassing task is to understand place...the cultures of the people, of the populations native to the land and of those who have grown up with it, the human social economic arrangements shaped by and adapted to the geomorphic ones, in both urban and rural settings..."(*The Bioregional Imagination*, pp.4-5).

The immediate lacuna in the colonial discourse of the natives was about their culture's association with and deep entrenchment in nature, that is quite contrary to the Western logic of the binary of nature and culture. Similarly, the religion of the Gonds and the associated myths showcases a deep-rooted relationship with nature. Even the clans are named after either a tree, animal or a bird. For instance, the names of the clans ended with the syllable "aam" which meant a tree in the Gondi language. Such nomenclature not only reflects their attachment to the land of their own, but also exudes a sense of identity through meaning-making on a lived landscape. For e.g., the name of the clan called "kangali" represents a tree of the Betul hills in Madhya Pradesh. The flora and fauna also bore totemic significance which conjoined the tribal ways of life with the conservation practices as well("Seven brotherhoods and the love of trees, animals and birds"). Emile

Durkheim considered the totemic principle as one through which a community represents itself. The relationship established with nature through such totems comprising of the flora and fauna of a particular region, manifests the bioregional consciousness where the association of nature and culture is expressed through values, rituals, myths and land-based stories.

However, a community dwelling in the forests can no longer be marooned without getting affected by the events at the national or the global levels. The "ordinary persons adopt strategies and tactics that enable them to reclaim autonomy from the all-pervasive forces of economics, politics, and culture in general"(De Certeau,213). The narrative of the victims and the victimizer accorded through the ecological registers could also be revisited and an interaction between modernity and traditions could be established. It is through Elwin's ambulatory narration that such interaction is made possible. Language, memories and stories map the workings in their daily lives and can also act as "tactics" to make do the lack of power.

The retrospective narration brings to the fore the fundamental shift in perception that bioregionalism has brought to bear upon Elwin's consciousness and the hidden irony in the chapter- title "Angel Infancy".(Elwin,77). The title is heavy with Christian connotation of a pre-lapsarian state of innocence and child-like bliss. But the retrospective narration along with an introspective mode reflects upon the state of higher innocence which according to Blake is also the state of salvation through experience. However, the salvation and freedom that Elwin seeks, is acquired in the tribal ways of life that is quite in contrast both to institutionalised Christianity and the orientalist Christianity that the missionaries seek to promote.

Elwin draws a parallel between the performance to celebrate the birthday of King Herod with the "tribal dances". This is the manifestation of reimagining the very binary of self and other. As G. N. Devy states, "...a branch of Orientalism in Europe had emerged in the form of anthropology, which could perhaps more appropriately be termed 'savageology'. The tenets of savageology were applied to Indian 'tribes', and came to be seen necessarily be primitive"(Qtd. in "Problematizing Verrier Elwin's Tribal World",pp.48).

Looking back, Elwin is able to identify the tribal dances as not necessarily primitive.

Imperial notions reigned supreme over his consciousness, as Elwin felt troubled by " 'some life of men unblest' ", as it had "troubled the Scholar Gipsy and driven him into the wilds"(88). It is his narrative imagination, one that is shaped by his reading of the literature of wilderness; "plunging into an unknown world", a "self-imposed exile" that would enable him to "study endlessly varied human beings along untrodden ways"(Elwin,89). The romanticized narration of the natives, informed by the Wordsworthian ideas of the "peace of that gentle countryside"(Elwin, 83) and a sense of place gained through the imperial ideas nurtured by the "uncles with conventional Imperialist ideas..."(Elwin, 79). Elwin is inhabiting a terrain of consciousness. It is through 'reinhabitation' that he would undergo a change of perception that would make him acknowledge other religions as well as ways of life not akin to one's own.

However, life at the Sabarmati Ashram was quite akin to that of life being a missionary – "taking vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience"(Elwin, 98). People of different religion, but following similar set of norms of restraint and inhibitions. Elwin moves to the central Provinces to "do something for a tribe which is almost neglected both by national workers and by missionaries..."(Elwin, 99). Interestingly, he and Shamrao had proposed a plan that was in keeping with the basic tenets of bioregional reinhabitation of learning to live in the place and be a part and participant in the natural ecosystem.

"Our idea was that we would live together in a small ashram in a Gond village...We would not, however, do any missionary work or preaching, and we would not aim at any kind of conversion. Our ashram would be open to people of any faith or of none"(Elwin,99).

Similarly, Silko's *Ceremony* showcases a blend of the white and the Native culture. It is Betonie who realises the pertinence of such an amalgamation to cure Tayo of his ailments, as "The ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift..."(Qtd. in "Using the Land to Heal: A Warrior's Journey in Leslie Marmon Silko's Novel Ceremony). In a symbolic vein, therefore, it could be

inferred that the death of the four Europeans out of the last five that stayed in the Gond village of Karanjia, signifies the not withstanding nature of the exclusivity of the European culture. Also, the near exclusive rights of the forest-dwellers on its resources was a thing of the past in an age of legalised land policies and Government undertakings.

However, the ecological silencing brought about by the colonial encroachment and the government policies of land reclamation left the Gonds impoverished not only materially, but "there came a poverty of culture"(Elwin,112). What remained was "only a shadow of what must once have been. The Gonds have few arts or crafts, they do not weave and only rarely carve in wood... Their language...is now spoken by less than half their people"(Elwin,112). The erosion of land under the tribal control also led to the erasure of culture. Consequently, the ecological degradation is also the degradation of culture. It is here that Elwin's "reinhabitation" gains significance as according to Berg and Dasmann the labour of "learning to live-in-place" has to be "in an area that has been disrupted and injured through past exploitation"(Qtd. in *The Bioregional Imagination*, pp.104).

Since, mind is "an ecological function, mirroring the concrete, ineludible interrelatedness between the self and the environment"(Iovino,104). Therefore, mind becomes the intermediate place making the interaction between the ecology of living being and the ecology of ideas possible, as has been propounded by the epistemologist Gregory Bateson(Iovino, 104). Simultaneously, every place has its own "ecology of ideas" surrounding it. These ideas are propagated through the stories, myths, rituals, memories associated with that place. Thus, place-imagination requires us to "imagine with a place" according to philosopher Gaston Bachelard(Iovino, 105).

It is, therefore, "narrative reinhabitation" - to borrow Serenella Iovino's term – that Verrier Elwin seeks to undertake : "a cultural-educational practice that consists of restoring the ecological imagination of place by working with place-based stories. Visualizing the ecological connection of people and place through place-based stories is a way to remember a dismembered unity, to enliven our cultural and

ecological potentialities – to reanimate the world.” (Iovino,106)

Elwin begins by building a settlement that “looked exactly like part of the village which lay around and below it.” However, the process is not plain emulation, but was an attempt “to demonstrate what a village might be like.” The Gonds could take back a lesson in cleanliness and ventilation(Elwin,114).

Such place-imagination also involves place-making. What was earlier a shared “sense of place” is now a lived and experienced one endowing it with his own cultural meanings and values. The notion of controlling, naming and organising the wilderness is prevalent at the core of the British ideology influenced by the Enlightenment philosophy. One of the outcomes of this organising principle was the creation of gardens. As Michael Adas has noted, “control over nature made possible by Western Science and Technology proved that European modes of thought and social organizations corresponded much more closely to the underlying realities of the universe than did those of any people or society, past or present”(Qtd. in “Colonial Gardens and the Validation of Empire in Imperial India”). Elwin, too had drawn gardens round the chapel courtyard “in memory of St. Francis’s wish”, but he was mindful of the fact that the tribal people were fond of flowers and he had always done what he could to encourage them, taking “an exclusive interest in the tribes”(Elwin, 114).

As Katerina Prajznerova in her essay titled “Women Farmers’ Dream of Home” associates the idea of gardening with nurturing, Elwin’s labour too could be associated with nurturing the whole community. The gardens and organisations bore the principles of stewardship and upheld the purpose of educating and rousing “the people from their apathy”: it was “built in Gond style” – kitchen, dining-room and store-house, vegetable-garden, museum, school and hostel. However, the civilisational establishments did not go beyond the school as “the hill became wild and thickly wooded”, “beyond which no one might go without permission”. Civilisation lying at the “centre” and wilderness located overwhelmingly at the periphery(Elwin, 115).

Since nature and culture are intimately intertwined, cultural degradation was another form of environmental

degradation. An instance of this took place in Mandla, where a party of reformers went about their purpose of eradicating everything about the Gond culture that “caused them to be despised by their Hindu neighbours”(Elwin, 118).

“The great Karma dance, the one surviving instrument of Gond culture in that area, must stop. Men and women must not sing the ‘immoral’ Dadaria (the beautiful forest-songs) together. Pigs and chickens, the only tax-free domestic animals, must be destroyed and an already insufficient diet be still further impoverished. The Gonds must become teetotal. Women should be put in purdah. The rules of untouchability must be strictly observed”(Elwin, 118).

Verrier Elwin’s narration of the abovementioned incident clearly projects his bioregional imagination recognising the unique culture of a place, where he is able to differentiate between reform movements and the narratives of homogenization imposed upon the tribals in the name of reform movements. It also counters Ghurye’s proclamation of the tribals as only “backward Hindus” who must be assimilated in the mainstream Hinduism. As for Elwin, “Gond poetry is simple and symbolic, free of all literary conventions and allusions. It is a poetry of earth and sky, of forest, hill and river, of the changing seasons and the varied passions of men, a poetry of love, naked and unashamed, unchecked by any inhibition or restraint”(Elwin, 112).. The bulk of Gond art and literature primarily documents their rootedness and the depth of their attachment to nature. The Karma dance, on the other hand, symbolised “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”(Elwin, 112).

The Gond’s perception and imagination was not strait-jacketed by the notions of “civilization” and was “completely natural and informal”(Elwin, 122). Nature is not only represented and symbolised in the Gond art but is also reflected in the lack of symmetry and straight lines. The imaginary conception of a Hindu deity might scandalise orthodox perception but reveals their unique power of imagination “unchecked by any inhibition or restraint”(Elwin, 112). Such communities born in the very lap of nature exudes a “strong atmosphere of affection” (Elwin, 122)in which the hierarchical structures are done away with :

"...we had let civilization down by being too accessible and thus making it more difficult for them to maintain their own barriers of superiority"(Elwin, 123).

Elwin had been critiqued for propagating the theory of Isolation. Elwin's communion with the local tribal communities have inculcated in him a "new kind of relationship with people"(Elwin, 124). It is in this reinstating of one's relationship with nature that one can "escape from the normal individualism, the possessiveness and jealousies of sophisticated friendships into something broader and more universal"(Elwin, 124). Therefore, the bottom-up theory of bioregionalism is brought to the fore, where local lores lead us to attain a consciousness that is universal. Also, Elwin's so-called 'isolationism' could also be seen as a celebration of the uniqueness of a local community that is quite opposed to the homogenized monoculture imposed by the nation-state.

Moreover, bioregionalism is also concerned with the terrain of consciousness, that is concerned with one's perception of the place one is living in. Such place-based attachment induces spiritual awakening where the self is dissolved in all its egoistic forms and is able to see the larger welfare of the community. As J. Ronald Engel states about the wilderness encounter in his article "Earth Spirituality is a Many Splendored Thing!" :

"...wilderness encounter, it is radically dialectical, presenting a powerful negation of the self followed by an even more powerful affirmation through an identification with the ultimate source and purpose of existence."

Forests have traditionally been associated with the unknown, unconscious and not guided by restraints and inhibitions. Bruno Bettelheim in his book *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning And Importance of Fairy Tales* says :

"...the near impenetrable forest in which we get lost...if we have lost the framework which gave structure to our past life and must now find our way to become ourselves, and have entered this wilderness with an as yet undeveloped personality, when we succeed in finding our way out we shall emerge with a much more highly developed humanity"(Qtd. in "The Fairytale Forest- a Source of Symbolism")

This is the self-realisation wherein the self releases itself from self-centredness and emerges into a "highly developed humanity", shedding the former structures of religion, imperialism that had earlier lent meaning. Such a state is akin to spiritualism that Elwin himself defines as his version of religion "as the quest of the soul for spiritual realities"(Elwin, 110).

The sense of place that grows within Elwin due to the place-attachment is also the seat of his transformation as a result of the many "symbolic incidents"(Elwin, 127) he encounters in the wilderness. For instance, "one night, while a sorceress in a hut nearby made the darkness uncanny with her conjurations, I dreamt that I was in a great cave, in utter darkness, and that Jammasum (the Saora god of death) had come as a vast Presence, inexorable and grim, to carry off the boy. I was trying frantically to get some light...I woke with these words in my mind, 'Love is the true weapon, love is the dress, love is my gold'"(Elwin,126).

This impenetrable darkness of the realm of the unknown and the unconscious brings about a transformation of the consciousness. This newly gained consummate sense of the self realises the spiritual connect with every other being : "...after giving part of my bedding to the boy, I was actually warmer than I had been before..." (Elwin, 126).

The spiritual connect established could be experienced for humanity at large as well : " That evening had come the news of the UNO debate on Korea and the threat to use the atom bomb- hence love as the true weapon"(Elwin, 126).

The state of being lost in the wilderness and the freedom gained thereby is unique in its being anchored on a much higher plane. It is therefore, that Elwin "After several years of painful struggle about the relations of Church and State on one side...own theological beliefs on the other, everything...naturally fell away... was free"(Elwin, 111).

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