

Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, **Life among Indian tribes: the autobiography of an anthropologist**, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1990.

Reviewed in **Royal Asiatic Society Journal**.

Professor Haimendorf has set himself an impossible task, namely to describe one of the richest and most varied academic careers of the twentieth century. He was born in Vienna in 1909 and trained in anthropology by Schebesta, Frobenius and Heine Geldern. He received a D.Phil in 1931 and after attending the Malinowski seminar in London went to work in Assam. Between 1936 and his retirement as Professor of Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies he undertook some 80 months of anthropological fieldwork, spread between three entirely different culture areas; Assam, Hyderabad and upland Nepal. In each area he learnt the languages and mastered the culture of between three and six societies. He has published ten ethnographic monographs, as well as several other volumes of essays and theoretical works which drew heavily on his fieldwork. It is difficult to think of any other European anthropologists who could rival his 3650 pages of published ethnography. He also built up what was in his time the largest Department of Anthropology in Britain.

The published work is only the surface. As well as the field-notes and diaries, which he kept, and which are quite extraordinarily meticulous and detailed, he is one of the few anthropologists of the great inter-war generation in Britain to realise the importance of visual documentation. His collection of black and white photographs (only a few of which, sadly, can be reproduced, in his autobiography) extend to over ten thousand separate photographs, capturing memorably many aspects of tribal culture now lost. He is also the most prolific of British ethnographic film-makers, starting to film in the 1940s, and shooting over one hundred hours of 16mm film.

The autobiography provides clues to some of the qualities which make him unique. There is his curiosity; he is clearly immensely interested in people, in exploring, in wanting to know and understand and then to move on. There is his aesthetic ability and appreciation of beauty, which lies behind his photography and his delight in the beautiful peoples with whom he worked. There is his photographic memory combined with self-discipline which fill his notebooks and diaries with thousands of pages of vivid and insightful comment. There is his lack of racial, class or other prejudice, and his obvious sympathy for tribal peoples. There is his intelligence. The immediate prizes go to those who engage in abstract theory. While he put forward some exciting new ideas, particularly on morality and religion, his main interest in understanding and describing how societies work. Good fieldwork and writing require a different but equally valid form of intelligence which he manifests in profusion. His great ability to make friends and to manage human relationships, especially in different situations, earned him the trust of both Europeans and his many non-European co-workers and colleagues. Above there was his wife Betty, co-worker, organiser of his expeditions, inspiration and herself a notable ethnographer. This autobiography, with long excerpts from her diaries and a moving account of her death in India, is a tribute to her.

The book devotes chapters to the upbringing in Vienna, the anthropological training and a brief

Copyright: Alan Macfarlane 2002

account of work among the Nagas; to the period with the hunter-gatherer Chencus; the Reddis of the Bison Hills; the Raj Gonds of Adilabad; the Apa Tanis of Assam; advisory work for the Nizam of Hyderabad, in which he did much temporarily to alleviate the difficulties of the land-deprived tribal peoples; the Sherpas of Nepal. It is simply and modestly written, becoming especially evocative in the accounts of the Reddis and of the exploration north of the Apa Tanis. It is very useful as a way of connecting the different parts of his life. It is sad that there was not more room for introspection and reflection, for accounts of other parts of his life which are alluded to in a sentence or two (e.g. work in western Nepal, building up the London department), for longer quotations from his own diaries, yet in his eightieth year Professor Haimendorf published three books, of which this is one. So we can hope for more insights into a time when tribal worlds which have now disappeared still existed and Professor Haimendorf had the sense, energy and ability to record for posterity a little of what is now lost. When many smaller peaks have faded from his view, his work and life will stand out as one of the major anthropological contributions of all time.