

# Journal of Adivasi and Indigenous Studies

**Prof. Richard Hugh Grove Memorial Volume**

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August 2020, Vol. X, No. 2

ISSN 2394-5524

(A bi-annual peer-reviewed online journal posted on Academia.edu)

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**Remembering**  
**Richard Hugh Grove**  
**Scholar Par Excellence and Humanist**



**(1955–2020)**

# How Do the Humans See Nature?

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The systemic and consistent abuse of nature by humans has in the recent times been subject of animated public discussions around the globe. Most credible public media platforms have hosted passionate debates around the concern. Basic questions were raised. Why do we want, or need, to save nature at all? What explains these new ecologies of urgent public conversations about nature and the environment?

There are two major impulses behind them, broadly speaking. First, the humans are finally beginning to see the prospect of their extinction as a clear and present/impending danger. They know now that they have never paid much attention to the well-being of nature. They know too that after a point, nature cannot suffer abuses and that it then hits back with a vengeance. The latest round of 'Save the Nature' campaigns therefore does not betray an urge to save nature for its own sake. It is motivated by the objective of human beings looking to save themselves. Secondly, nature for the human species has for long been an abstract idea. The common sense perception of nature has often appeared as a utopian romance, all aspects of which are benign, peaceful or harmonious. It appears to the human brain as images of a quiet river bank, for instance, or a field with undulating green grasses or as the leaves of a tree swaying to the rhythms of a gentle breeze.

Richard Hughes Groves, who passed away on 25 June 2020, was among the earliest to offer an insight into this particular, utopian, dynamic between nature and human beings. He was sixty-four. Grove, the co-founder of the journal *Environment and History*, and the Center for World Environment History at the University of Sussex, left behind his basic thesis in *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Eden and The Origin of Environmentalism 1600-1860*, and numerous other publications. His life and career exemplified a distinct perspective with which to approach nature and environment. *Green Imperialism*, published by Cambridge University Press in 1995, probably ushered in a whole new method of studying environmental history.

It is not as if competent histories of nature and environment did not exist earlier. George Parkins Mars with his book *Man and Nature* probably pioneered this field of study as early as 1864. Several distinguished historians have since explored the domain with distinct perspectives. The French Annales School since the mid twentieth century in particular presented a radical new approach to studying man in nature or environment. Fernand Braudel, for instance, published his magnum opus around the Mediterranean Sea and the civilization it sired. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie later explored in depth possible connections between crises in the climate and food scarcity in his *Times of Feast, Times of Famine*. By the sixties, yet another new approach influenced studies of the relationship between man and

nature. Scholars were now increasingly interested in the ways in which indiscriminate application of modern technology appeared to ravage nature. Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring*, which exemplified this approach, took the world by storm and became a milestone.

What Grove brought to the study of the changing equations between human beings and civilization on the one hand and nature and environment on the other was unique yet. He did not write a history of the dynamic relationship between man and nature. The history that he did write was one of environmentalism, or of how human beings would imagine nature in the abstract. He went looking, into various histories, for insights into an abstract utopia called nature as a state of harmonious equilibrium.

Grove proceeded to the archives in order to make sense of the evolution of the human response to environmental degradation in Anthropocene, but tapped as much on the fast disappearing body of indigenous knowledge systems. He wrote, in the introduction of *Green Imperialism*, that 'this book does not fit neatly into any single historiography'. That is probably not entirely accurate. Keith Thomas had published in 1983 *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800*. There Thomas made an attempt to reconstruct an earlier disposition in the British society towards preserving and protecting nature. Grove appeared to take that project further ahead. While Thomas had limited his study within the core of the empire, as it were, Grove widened its horizons to the periphery of the empire, that is, to the colonies.

*Green Imperialism* begins with interrogating the human quest for Eden, an imaginary utopian land of plenty and harmony. Grove argued that a search for this imaginary Eden too lay at the heart of the many exploratory voyages that radiated out of Europe. These would in time launch a globalized empire around commerce, and the quest for Eden would be underplayed in later accounts. Early modern Britain and other European countries had seen some terrible times. There appeared one existential crisis after another in the form of several natural disasters, famine, plague and the immense pressures on resources unleashed by the industrial revolution. Between them, they amounted to an existential crisis and indirectly fueled the aspiration to discover and conserve an Eden. It was as if the environment in Europe had already become so degraded that the Eden of Europeans' dreams could not be homed in Europe anymore and had necessarily to be held outside it. A powerful impulse appeared among the Europeans, against this context, to know, understand and conserve nature.

What were the major dimensions of the popular ideas on nature in the major European countries once they acquired colonies? Grove focused in particular on ideas in regard to colonial India, Africa and the Caribbean islands. Conventional historians of environment delight in seeking out economic or capitalist logic behind the impulse to conserve the environment in the colonies. Grove would not be led along that garden path. In his analysis, those islands appeared as experimental laboratories, where landslides, natural degradation and movements looking to raise awareness about conservation went hand in hand. He would argue, for instance, that the plantation of botanical gardens in these colonies or enforced changes in agricultural practices were not an outcome solely of aggressive designs of

colonization. He believed they were all products of a constitutive tension between institutionalized European knowledge on the one hand and multiple indigenous understandings of nature on the other, to begin with, and then, once they agreed to work together, of their various permutations and combinations. How these particular moments of tension were in turn reflected in contemporary literature or music and vice versa has been a recurring motif in Grove's work. He cites a number of instances in European literature between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries as illustrations of the ways in which the exploratory ideas on nature and cumulative knowledge of a bunch of amateur enthusiasts, served by means of literature, eventually struck a chord with the society as a whole. This insight, that exploratory ideas of some mavericks circulating as stories and legends captivate millions over time, has not dated at all, and in all likelihood never will.

In the contemporary world, the distance between city based institutionalized education and country centric indigenous knowledge has been growing like never before. Grove had called for an attenuation of this distance, as a means to both understanding nature and saving it from degradation. More importantly, he made it clear that the ideas of those who live at the heart of civilization on how to understand and save nature profoundly rely on the relationships with nature of those who have to eke out livelihoods outside those civilizing circles.

Note: The original version of this short essay, *Manush Prakritike Ki Bhaba Dekhe* in Bengali, was published in Ananda Bazaar Patrika on 11 July 2010. Argha Manna is thankful to Dr. Anirban Bandyopadhyay for his generous helps and suggestions while writing the translated and modified version.

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