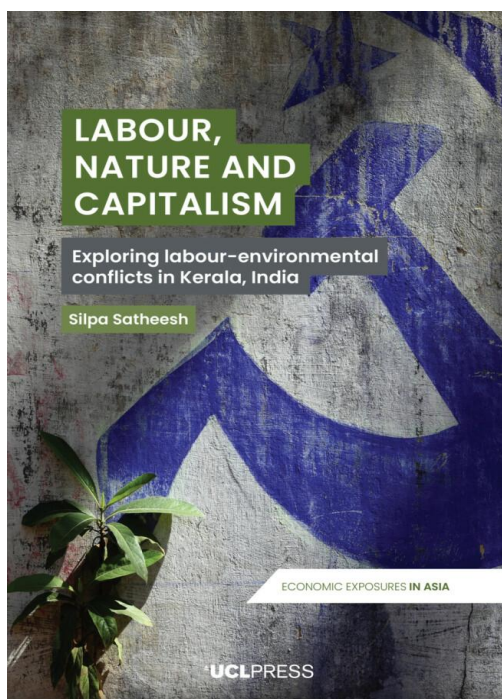


BOOK REVIEW

Environmental Justice and the Working Class: Labour, Nature, and the Contradictions of Capitalism

Adithya Kumar *

Silpa Satheesh. 2025. *Labour, Nature and Capitalism: Exploring Labour-environmental Conflicts in Kerala, India*. University College of London Press. 252. ISBN (online): 9781800088054.



The tension between pro-environmental movements and development initiatives has shaped public debates since industrialization (Drews *et al.* 2019). In emerging economies such as India, this conflict is especially significant, given the pursuit of rapid economic growth and the country's continued dependence on energy-intensive development (Pappas and Chalvatzis 2017). Labour movements—often supported by industry and political actors—frequently oppose civil society-led environmental movements that seek to address pollution, resource depletion, and

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ecological vulnerability. While environmental movements in the Global North gained prominence through campaigns such as Just Stop Oil and the Silent Spring movement, those in the Global South are often initiated and sustained by local communities. Corporate and governmental involvement generally emerges later. Another defining feature is their limited visibility, as they rarely receive sustained media or institutional attention. Consequently, many such movements disappear before their concerns are addressed, while others continue without wider societal support. Only a few enter school textbooks or become subjects of sustained academic enquiry.

A similar pattern is reflected in the Eloor–Edayar region of Ernakulam district in Kerala, where green movements coexist with counter-movements supported by labour organizations and corporations. These struggles receive little public recognition and have attracted limited scholarly attention. In *Labour, Nature and Capitalism: Exploring Labour–Environmental Conflicts in Kerala, India*, Silpa Satheesh documents environmental movements and the tensions between them and labour-led counter-movements. As the author notes, the book does not seek to determine which movement is more necessary or successful; rather, it explores the dynamics of labour–environment conflicts in an industrial region in a rapidly developing country. The book consists of eight chapters and an epilogue explaining how the Periyar River became central to the research. Each chapter combines theoretical, empirical, and methodological concerns, while integrating field narratives with a nuanced discussion of existing literature. Chapter-end discussions aid comprehension, and the language remains clear and accessible.

The introductory chapter outlines the region’s history, industrialization, and the emergence of green movements and their counter-movements. It situates labour–environment conflicts within the broader contexts of the world and the Global South, highlighting the limited scholarly attention given to similar movements. The second chapter details the methodology—a multi-method qualitative approach that includes interviews, document analysis, and both theory-driven and field-based frameworks. The author’s engagement with subjectivity, positionality, postcolonial perspectives, and decolonizing research practices strengthens the study’s methodological rigour. Drawing on interviews, the author captures local communities’ emotional and economic ties to the Periyar River. The book examines how industrial growth, while improving infrastructure and amenities, also produces severe environmental degradation, especially river pollution. The documentation of protests—including a human chain organized along the river—and the role of inland fisher workers demonstrates how local economies and social life remain rooted in ecological systems. Through oral

histories and document analysis, the book traces the trajectory of environmental movements in the region and proposes a periodization of their development.

The book also examines the unequal power dynamics between grassroots environmental movements and corporate-backed counter-movements. Community-led initiatives often struggle for resources, while corporate-backed movements benefit from institutional and political support. The author shows how corporations use economic and political influence to suppress dissent among workers, state actors, and regulatory bodies. Importantly, the book challenges simplistic notions of a protest's success, arguing that the scale of participation should not be equated with effectiveness. A major contribution of the work is its analysis of how class identity shapes both environmental movements and their opposition, revealing tensions within the working class itself. Trade unions and labour organizations frequently align with industrial interests, portraying environmental activism as “anti-developmental” or “anti-national”, whereas green movements prioritize long-term ecological sustainability. The author links these differences to broader ideological debates, including communist and pro-capitalist discourse within the state. The observation that “a clear divide exists between the unions and the environmental movement in their approaches” (p. 149) highlights the fragmentation of working-class politics. Environmental activism is often delegitimized through narratives that portray activists as extremists, foreign-influenced actors, or affiliates of insurgent groups such as Naxalites and Maoists. Such framing demonstrates how ideological narratives are mobilized to weaken environmental resistance. In the concluding chapter, the author synthesizes these themes, arguing that conflicts between green movements and their counter-movements arise from complex interactions between power, money, and politics, particularly in working-class contexts. Throughout the book, the author explores how individuals and communities negotiate the tension between environmental protection and economic survival. Both industrial expansion and ecological preservation demand attention, and the book effectively captures this dilemma. It succeeds in showing how class-centred movements in the Global South shape labour–environment conflicts and underscores the importance of considering lived experiences to understand these dynamics.

However, the book has limitations. Its strong focus on the Eloor–Edayar region provides depth but limits engagement with similar movements elsewhere in Kerala, a state with a long history of labour and environmental struggles. A comparative perspective could have strengthened the analysis, particularly given Kerala's strong leftist political tradition. The absence of

discussions on other working-class-driven movements restricts the scope of the study and limits the broader applicability of its findings. Despite these limitations, the book's strengths are considerable. Its rich field anecdotes ground the narrative in legitimate experiences, while the integration of empirical evidence and theory remains effective and accessible. Also, the multi-method research design adds depth and credibility. The book will suit a wide range of readers, from students to professionals and activists who have a keen interest in delving deep into ecological issues in the Global South and social movements wrought by the working class. For academics, the book serves as an example of how to integrate empirical and theoretical insights within a strong methodological framework. Overall, *Labour, Nature and Capitalism* offers a nuanced analysis of development, class politics, governance, and environmental conflict, making a valuable contribution to the study of labour–environment relations in the Global South.

Data Availability Statement: This is a book review, which does not have any original primary data included in the work.

Ethics Statement: It does not involve human participants, animal subjects, or original data collection, and therefore did not require ethical approval.

Conflict of Interest Statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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