Book Review

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Roy, T., & Raman, K. R. (2024). Kerala, 1956 to the present: India's miracle state. Cambridge University Press.

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Kerala, 1956 to the Present: India's Miracle State by Tirthankar Roy and K. Ravi Raman examines Kerala's economic change in the context of economic history and development studies. The work by Tirthankar Roy and K. Ravi Raman is uncommon in its academic depth and policy acumen. The authors challenge the "Kerala Model," which has emphasised high social development despite low income, by emphasising a dramatic economic turnaround since the 1990s. They claim that Kerala's per capita income rose above the national average by 2022, ending stagnation. They argue that these changes were caused by global economic integration, particularly labour migration and remittance flows, rather than welfare-oriented measures.

The book's central thesis is that Kerala's "miracle" is a rediscovery of comparative advantage driven by a literate workforce, a globally connected diaspora, and a political system that has adapted to market-led growth and leftist governance. The story reinterprets Kerala's history by emphasising that its breakthrough was rapid revenue growth in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, rather than its health and education successes.

The authors argue that the "development without growth" approach dis-

guised fiscal weaknesses and ignored private capital and global links. Instead, a Marxist-led political framework enabled economic dynamism during a "capitalist resurgence". This transformation was driven by the shift from commodity-based integration—based on the export of spices and natural resources—to "human integration," where labour migration became Kerala's main link to the global economy. In this view, remittances underpin the state's economy, shaping consumption, labour markets, and investment.

Its thematic organisation shows Kerala's evolution via various yet interconnected stages, supporting this claim. Literacy and public health systems were established in Malabar, Travancore, and Cochin before independence. Next, it covers the 1970s and 1980s economic "retreat," marked by declining agricultural output, capital flight, and restrictions on socialist economic policy. The next chapters discuss Gulf migration, demographic shifts, and private-sector service-sector growth as factors in the resurgence. Later portions discuss leftist political organisations and new environmental issues, including unregulated growth. The last discussion emphasises the state's future, particularly the unrealised potential of higher education as a knowledge-based driver of growth.

Several analytical frameworks enhance the writers' explanation. The "New Kerala Model" challenges the socialism-capitalism binary by combining communist political leadership with robust private-sector growth. The "reservation wage paradox" describes how remittance-induced wage hikes raise local unemployment while drawing migrant labour from other Indian states. The "U-shaped trajectory" shows Kerala's economic history as a downturn followed by a rise and investment boom. Additionally, "political eco-spa-

tiality" helps explain the environmental effects of increasing urbanisation and land-use change, notably in terms of catastrophe vulnerability. The authors may combine economic, social, and environmental factors into one analytical narrative using these frameworks.

The book uses a thematic rather than a chronological approach to examine key drivers such as migration, private investment, and environmental change. The evidence base is comprehensive and multidimensional, using census data, National Sample Survey results, and state-level planning records. Historical analysis shows that Kerala's developmental advantages, such as literacy and public health, precede the contemporary state and communist politics. Missionary activity, competitive social reform movements, and princely state fiscal capacities influenced these. The study's legitimacy and depth are enhanced by empirical evidence and theoretical innovation, and the authors' professional qualifications support their interpretations.

The book's U-shaped evolution of Kerala from early advantage to mid-century stagnation to post-1990s recovery provides its explanation. The writers' ability to reconcile Marxist government with market-driven economic progress is a strength. The Kerala Left has changed from anti-capitalist to pragmatically engaging with the private sector, they claim. The state now has the fiscal means to meet its welfare obligations thanks to this adaptation. The authors also note structural issues, particularly in higher education, where institutional stagnation has created a mismatch between educational outputs and labour-market demands. They also note environmental "risks capes," tying remittance-driven building and tourism to natural catastrophe susceptibility.

The book is strong in its inventiveness and willingness to challenge established narratives. It offers a new perspective on Kerala's development by focusing on income growth and structural transformation rather than social indicators. Economic history becomes more interdisciplinary when sociology, political philosophy, and environmental studies are incorporated. However, limits exist. The emphasis on market-led development may downplay the state's role in social stability. These gaps include the long-term productive impact of remittances and the uneven distributional effects of growth. The U-shaped framework is analytically powerful but may simplify Kerala's development processes.

The book is important for the study of regional economic history in India. It reframes Kerala as an instance of dynamic economic adaptability rather than static social achievement, challenging previous studies. It is relevant to current debates on capitalism and leftist politics, migration and development, and the environmental impacts of rapid growth. It offers scholars, politicians, and students a sophisticated framework for understanding how a region might harness global integration while balancing fairness, growth, and sustainability. The book reframes Kerala as a complex success story shaped by historical legacies, global connections, and institutional change.

(Navas M Khadar, Research Scholar at School of International Relations and Politics, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala, navasmkhadarmgu@gmail.com)

(II)

Satheesh, S. (2025). *Labour, nature and capitalism: Exploring labour-environmental conflicts in Kerala, India*. UCL Press.

The book offers a deep, conceptually complex look at social movements, political economy, and environmental justice. Satheesh challenges the Western-centric paradigm that views labour-environmental tensions as a "blue-green" conflict between working-class trade unions and middle-class environmentalists with postmaterialist values by studying Kerala's industrial belt. Instead, Satheesh presents a compelling case study of "red-red conflicts," where the trade unions and grassroots environmental movement are mostly working-class leftists.

The tale takes place in Kerala's major industrial belt, Eloor-Edayar, one of India's most polluted. The mid-1930s state-led modernisation of the region's islands transformed it from "primitive" agriculture and fishing traditions to a hub of over 247 chemical businesses. Satheesh skilfully reconstructs the "production of a crisis" using oral accounts. Participants recall the River Periyar as clean as tears," where fish could be caught in a basket minutes before dinner.

Industrial effluents make the river a "toxic hotspot," causing it to flow in various colours on either side of the Pathalam bridge. The Periyar Malineekarana Virudha Samithi (PMVS) was founded after massive fish kills and industrial smog so thick that vehicles needed fog lamps in the morning, disrupting residents' "quotidian" lives.

Satheesh fundamentally critiques "generative" class theories that presume class interests govern political consciousness. Environmentalism is typically seen as middle-class in the Global North. While Satheesh calls her work "environmentalism of the poor," she shows that environmental battles in postcolonial India are often livelihood concerns.

Daily-wage and contract workers in Eloor lead the PMVS, which embraces environmental preservation as part of class struggle. They say a "class-conscious worker" must safeguard the community's environment, not only industries. The author shows that the "jobs versus environment" myth is ideological rather than class-based by stressing the unions' and environmentalists' working-class roots.

Satheesh labels the "nexus" between the state, industrial capital, and institutionalised trade unions "crony capitalism" in the book's most disquieting and informative part. She uses hybrid ethnography to show how local industry co-opted union leadership to silence resistance.

The book shows a huge resource gap between the movements. The PMVS is a "resource-poor movement," crowdfunding and losing office space owing to rent default. The Standing Council of Trade Unions (SCTU) has strong industry support. This capital enables unions to organise "paid protests," during which participants are given food, spirits, and cash incentives (about Rs. 1,500 or $21) to march on behalf of industry concerns. Satheesh claims that this financial monopoly permits the industry-union connection to "manufacture consent" for environmental degradation by unevenly dividing the movement.

Satheesh shows the diversity of worker interests, complicating the "working class" idea. In Eloor, factory workers want job security and bonuses, while inland fishers and farmworkers are ruined by river pollution.

The labour unions represent just their card-carrying members and ignore the problems of unorganised fishers and migrant "guest workers". In contrast, the green movement defines the working class as all workers. Kerala's left-wing politics has split into "real leftists" and "leftists who support capitalism" due to this "class compromise" between labour and capital.

Drawing on rigorous research into "frame-disputes," the book shows how movements fight ontological battles over reality. The SCTU claims that industrial effluents could never reach drinking water pumping stations due to the river's eastward flow, which green groups label "socially organised denial".

By presenting "environmental excellence" medals to the top polluters, unions, and the state Pollution Control Board (PCB) participate in "greenwashing". When enormous fish kills occur, the union-state nexus blames "algal blooms" or "urban sewage," never industries. Satheesh also reveals unions' aggressive delegitimization of environmentalists. Actives are called "pseudo-environmentalists," "anti-nationalists," and "extremists". Invoking nationalist rhetoric and charging that green groups are "funded by foreign agents" like Greenpeace to harm domestic industry, the SCTU intimidates bystanders and demobilises environmental movement support.

The author uses a "postcolonial ethnography" to balance "system" (macro-structural forces) and "social" (individual agency). She contemplates her

identity as a native speaker and "insider-outsider" whose childhood memories of the discoloured Meenachil River sparked her research on ecological devastation.

The work urgently demands sociological attention to postcolonial contexts and movements. Satheesh claims that social movement theory has ignored capitalism's long-term impact on collective action by excluding the experiences of the Global South. In her epilogue, Satheesh turns the River Periyar into an "actor" with rights and agency. The river's "many shades" disprove the unions' "impossibility thesis" and establish the catastrophe.

Labour, Nature, and Capitalism is vital for environmental labour, social movement, and development academics. This sobering analysis shows how the "hegemonic coalition" of state, capital, and unions can squash democratic dissent. Satheesh recounts the Eloor people's half-century campaign against "rabid development" as a sophisticated, ongoing fight for environmental justice and the right to existence.

The book shows that the "Kerala Model" of development must be reread through the eyes of marginalised people like fishers, farmworkers, and local greens who refuse to let their river die for a "class compromise" that benefits only accumulation.

(Jijina T V, Master in Politics (Public Policy and Governance), Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala, jijinaganga8@gmail.com)